



Circular from the  
Department of the Environment  
2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3EB

18 August 1992

## MOTORWAY SERVICE AREAS

1. This Circular advises on the particular considerations that local planning authorities should address in determining planning applications for new Motorway Service Areas (MSAs) and in drawing up relevant development plan policies. This follows public consultation on the Department of Transport's proposals to deregulate the provision of MSAs, published in February 1992, and consideration of comments on the draft planning guidance annexed to that document. It is the intention to incorporate this advice within PPG13 when that guidance note is next revised.

2. The Government is committed to improving the service offered to motorway users through an increase in the availability and choice of MSAs. At the same time, the Government proposes to end reliance on compulsory purchase and instead to look to developers to acquire and assemble their own sites and themselves to apply for planning permission.

3. Responses to the Department of Transport's consultation paper of February 1992 indicated a clear preference for retaining certain minimum standards at MSAs. The Department of Transport will set out these basic requirements. These will be less prescriptive than the conditions previously provided in MSA operator leases. They will be limited to securing provisions that might not otherwise be made, namely:

- adequate quantities of free short-term parking for all types of vehicle; free toilets; fuel; and a picnic area, all available 24 hours a day every day of the year;
- all facilities to be accessible to disabled people; and
- no sale or consumption of alcohol on the site.

Beyond that, it will be for operators to decide what services to offer in the light of demand.

4. The level of provision of basic services and the specified hours during which they are to be offered will be secured by means of an agreement between the Department of Transport and the operator in return for signing of the MSA from and, where appropriate, access to the motorway. It will not therefore be necessary to duplicate the terms of these agreements with conditions attached to planning permissions.

5. It will also be a condition for signing that no rear access should be provided to local roads, other than for deliveries or use by MSA or emergency personnel. MSAs should serve only the needs of motorway users and should not include features which may cause the service area to become a destination

in its own right. The use by others of facilities including parking would be to the detriment of motorway users and could—if it led to motorway users being turned away—interfere with the safe flow of traffic.

6. The introduction of more frequent MSAs offers developers opportunities to propose relatively modest service areas requiring a smaller land take and less environmental intrusion. Planning authorities should however bear in mind that the availability of non-revenue-earning facilities such as toilets, parking and picnic sites depends upon the commercial viability of other services. It will be important to avoid imposing restrictive conditions on planning permissions unless there are legitimate land use, highway safety or traffic management justifications.

7. The intention is to move towards a mix of existing and new MSAs, some of which may be smaller and offer fewer facilities compared with recent Government schemes. The Government considers that the minimum gap between any two MSAs should normally be 15 miles. This does not mean that the Government positively recommends provision of MSAs at 15-mile intervals but that the need for a new facility nearer than about 15 miles to an existing one would not normally be sufficient to outweigh objections on road safety and traffic management grounds.

8. The Government does not have in mind any maximum interval beyond which there would be any presumption for the siting of an MSA. The precise number and frequency will depend on private sector responses to market pressures tempered by normal planning considerations. There is no change in the normal operation of the land use planning process including national planning policy guidance.

9. In determining planning applications for new MSAs however, authorities will be expected to take into account the needs of motorway users, bearing in mind the proximity of existing signed MSAs, whether on the motorway or at junctions. This consideration may or may not outweigh other material considerations. Each proposal must be examined on its merits, in relation to the designation of the proposal site and to development plans.

10. In Green Belts, there is a general presumption against inappropriate development. In line with PPG2, approval should not be given for an MSA within a Green Belt except in very special circumstances. One of the material considerations which could justify such an exception however could be the lack of any signed MSAs. The greater the interval between the proposed site and any existing facility the more weight should be placed on the needs of motorway users.

11. PPG7 on the Countryside and the Rural Economy is relevant to MSAs in the countryside. The guiding principle for general development in the wider countryside is that it should benefit the rural economy and maintain or enhance the environment. In the case of motorway service areas, the needs of motorists must also be taken into account. But all new development, including MSAs, in rural areas should be sensitively related to existing settlement patterns and to the historic, wildlife and landscape resources and to the landscape quality of the area. Building in the open countryside, away from existing settlements or from areas allocated for development in development plans, should be strictly controlled. MSA sites should be unobtrusive in the landscape.

12. In areas statutorily designated for their historic, wildlife or landscape qualities, policies give even greater priority to restraint. PPG7 provides full guidance on development in National Parks and in Arcas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Major development should not take place in the National Parks save in exceptional circumstances. Applications for such developments, which would include MSAs, must be subject to the most rigorous examination. In AONBs, development plan policies and development control decisions should favour conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape. It would normally be inconsistent with the aims of designation to permit the siting of major commercial development, including MSAs, in these areas. Proven national interest and lack of alternative sites might justify an exception, but only if those considerations were held to outweigh any adverse environmental consequences, which will inevitably be of particular importance in such areas. In all cases, the environmental effects of new proposals, including MSAs, will be a major consideration, although it will also be appropriate to have regard to the economic and social well-being of the area.

13. Advice on development affecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other designations of importance to nature conservation is given in PPG7 and DOE Circulars 27/87 and 1/92. The advice gives guidance on the weight that should be given to nature conservation. Particular emphasis is attached to certain designations of international significance.

14. In view of the strategic importance of MSAs, structure plans and Part I of unitary development plans (UDPs) should address the need for MSAs within the plan area, thereby assisting the preparation of appropriate policies in local plans and Part IIs of UDPs. Guidance should be given in local plans and UDP Part IIs on areas likely to be suitable or unsuitable for the location of MSAs. Co-operation between neighbouring authorities will be required, especially in areas where suitable locations may be scarce, if realistic provision for motorists is to be made and if developers are to be guided to areas that do least damage to the landscape. These policies can include areas contiguous with motorways or, where these are not generally suitable, other areas such as those adjacent to motorway intersections which can serve motorway users with appropriate signing.

15. In considering issues affecting the motorway itself, traffic flow and safety considerations are of great importance and good visibility is essential. Any access provided direct to a motorway would need to conform fully to Department of Transport standards. At all MSAs, particular attention would need to be taken to avoid the risk of congestion or slowing on the main carriageway.

16. Careful consideration should be given to the scale and massing of the development within its setting. MSAs should be designed so as to minimise their impact on the surrounding area whether in terms of visual intrusion, noise or vehicle emissions.

17. Enquiries about this Circular may be addressed to PDC3 Division, Department of the Environment, Room C13/15, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3EB (Tel. 071-276 3864).

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