



# Appeal Decision

Hearing held on 7 July 2009  
Site visit made on 7 July 2009

**by Robin Jacques** MSc BSc(Hons Arch)  
RIBA FRSA

**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State  
for Communities and Local Government**

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**Decision date:  
18 August 2009**

## Appeal Ref: APP/W0340/A/09/2098901

Land adjoining Mortimer Railway Station, Reading RG7

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council against the decision of West Berkshire District Council.
- The application Ref 08/01464/FUL, dated 2 July 2008, was refused by notice dated 30 September 2008.
- The development proposed is provision of car parking for 100 cars to serve Mortimer Station.

## Decision

1. I dismiss the appeal.

## Main issues

2. I consider that the main issues in this case are: the effect of the proposal on highway conditions, with particular reference to road safety; the effect on the character and appearance of the countryside and the setting of the village, including the effect on trees, and; the effect on the aims and objectives of policies to promote travel by means other than the private car in the interests of sustainability.

## Reasons

### *Planning policy*

3. The Council's reasons for refusal include reference to policies of the Berkshire Structure Plan 1991-2006. This no longer forms part of the Development Plan, having now been superseded by The South East Plan – Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East (RSS). At the Hearing, the Council drew attention to relevant RSS Policies, particularly T4: Parking, C4: Landscape and Countryside management, CC1: Sustainable Development, and CC6: Sustainable Communities and Character of the Environment.
4. The Council's reason for refusal No 5 refers to Policy Trans 2 of the West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991-2006 Saved Policies 2007 (LP). This policy has not been saved, and at the hearing saved Policy Trans 1 was referred to by the main parties. I have dealt with the appeal on the basis of the current planning policy framework, including the RSS.

### *The effect on highway conditions, with particular reference to road safety*

5. The railway station is on the edge of the village, in a transitional setting where existing development to the south-east of the railway line is limited to a widely

spaced row of houses on Station Road. There is an attractive small Grade II\* listed station building on the north-west side of the railway, with a car park for use by passengers of about 51 spaces including one disabled bay. There is a smaller waiting room on the south-east side platform, and a passenger footbridge crosses between them.

6. Under the proposal, a new car park for 100 cars would be provided on the south-east side of the railway, using the corner of a field currently in agricultural use. A pedestrian ramp would provide access from the proposed car park to the platform. The new vehicular entrance would be at the south-east end of the new car park, where there is an existing field gate.
7. The Council's highways statement indicates that visibility splays of 64 metres would be required to the north west and 59 metres to the south east of the proposed entrance, with an 'X' distance of 2.4 metres. This is based on the results of a traffic speed survey carried out in 2007 by West Berkshire Council's Traffic Management Team. This showed that although the road is subject to a 30mph speed limit, average speeds were 33.4 and 32.1 mph, and 85<sup>th</sup> percentile speeds were 39 and 37mph, for vehicles travelling north west and south east respectively. As I saw on my site visit, due to the bend in the road, visibility to the south-east is achievable with little trimming required to the roadside hedgerow. However, substantial reduction or removal of a significant length of the hedge would be needed to the north-west. I share the Council's view that the required visibility sight lines could be achieved, if the loss of the majority of the hedgerow fronting the site was otherwise acceptable.
8. The highways statement indicates that the hump-backed road bridge on Station Road is about 80 metres north-west of the proposed site entrance, which limits forward visibility from approaching vehicles until they are near the crest of the bridge. Based on the measured vehicle speeds, the highways officer considered that there would be room for 4 cars to wait on the road to turn right into the proposed car park, and still provide the required distance for a vehicle to stop, based on guidance in the Manual for Streets (MfS). On this basis, he did not object to the proposal on highway safety grounds.
9. However, in written representations and at the hearing local residents expressed concerns at the actual speeds experienced on the road, and the density of traffic flow particularly in the morning and evening rush hours. A local minibus driver, who frequently attends a house roughly opposite the proposed access, attests to a high traffic flow and back-up of 4 to 5 vehicles occurring on the mornings when he has to reverse into the private driveway. Whilst this evidence is anecdotal, I have given it some weight as relevant local experience of the current prevailing road conditions.
10. In my view, the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile speeds referred to above are at the limit of the stopping sight distance (SSD) advised in the MfS. It points out that longer SSDs may be appropriate by reference to other guidance relating to the road network, rather than the lightly used residential streets which are the focus of the MfS. I also consider that the significant gradient of the road descending from the hump-backed bridge would adversely affect stopping distance. I am satisfied, therefore, that there is a strong risk that there could be a queue of cars waiting to enter the car park in the morning peak travel period, lengthened

by a back-up of cars due to traffic flow, that would reduce the SSD to an unacceptable level. In my view, therefore, the effect of the proposed entrance on highway conditions would pose an unacceptable risk to road safety.

11. I recognise the Parish Council's (PC's) view that the relationship with the road bridge would be better than that prevailing in the opposite direction for the existing station vehicular access. However, as I saw, the site access road provides for queuing off the highway before the car park entrance. In any case, in itself, current conditions do not justify the introduction of new sub-standard development.
12. The new car park would still leave a returning disabled traveller on the opposite side of the track to that from which they departed. Notwithstanding the slope, it may be that Station Road would provide an accessible pedestrian route for someone in a wheelchair, and this was welcomed at the hearing by a wheelchair user. However, Station Road is relatively narrow and has no footpath over the bridge. I share the Council's view that the restricted visibility caused by the hump-backed bridge would be significantly hazardous for those in a wheelchair, and others such as those with children, who may wish or need to avoid the station footbridge.
13. I acknowledge the view of the PC's access auditor that the new car park would provide useful access to the Basingstoke platform for those being dropped off or collected, providing greater convenience for both legs of a rail journey. Whilst the proposed layout does not identify a drop-off zone or mini bus stop, no doubt such an adjustment could be made. However, in my view, the proposal would be likely to create an increase in pedestrian use of the road by people who would be particularly at risk, and this reinforces my objection to the effect of the proposed vehicular entrance. I conclude that the proposal would be unacceptably hazardous to road safety, contrary to the aims and objectives of national and local policies, including LP Policy OVS2.

*The effect on the character and appearance of the countryside and the setting of the village, including the effect on trees*

14. It is not in dispute that the proposed site is outside the village development boundary. It lies on higher ground than the railway line and platform, and the boundary with the station is marked by a row of mature horse chestnut trees on railway land, and an oak tree within the corner of the appeal site. The station buildings date from 1848 and were designed by I K Brunel. I understand that it is one of the least altered of Brunel's wayside stations.
15. The parking area would be about 82 metres long by 31.2 metres wide according to the submitted plan. An 'ecoblock' surface finish is proposed, infilled with grass, but the Council questions its suitability, and the landscape assessment points out that it can be eroded by heavy use. Notwithstanding this, when the car park is in use, the landscape impact would be primarily dominated by parked cars. It is not in dispute that there would need to be some associated paraphernalia such as access barriers, signage, and the need for some lighting for safety and security.
16. Under the first main issue, I refer to the effect of achieving the visibility splay on the substantial indigenous hedge along the highway. Although not shown as

part of the proposed scheme, the main parties agreed at the hearing that the proposed layout could accommodate a new hedge allowing the necessary sight line. However, interested parties refer to a history of vandalism at the existing station car park, and its use as a gathering place and target for unruly and anti-social behaviour. They point out that this has resulted, amongst other things, in the repeated destruction of the car park's ticket machine, which is no longer available. Whilst such problems can occur in any public facility, the proposed car park would be more isolated, and it seems to me that a screening hedge would significantly obstruct public surveillance of the parking area. Therefore, in my view, a condition requiring replacement of the existing hedge could not be relied upon to provide similar landscape value in the long term.

17. The PC has indicated that it would accept the substitution of a proposed bund by a new hedge between the parking area and the field. However, this would not screen the parking area from public viewpoints, which would be otherwise unrelieved by any landscaping or planting proposals. To my mind, the proposal would introduce an intrusive, large-scale urbanising element in the countryside, and would be particularly obtrusive in the setting of the village on the approach from the south-east.
18. The proposal includes an access ramp from the car park to the adjacent platform, which is shown only diagrammatically on the submitted plans. It would pass between the horse chestnut trees and would need to bridge a difference in level of about 2 metres in height. Notwithstanding existing railway paraphernalia on the platform, I see no reason why such a ramp could not be installed, subject to the submission of details for later approval. Whilst this would require some raising of the low canopy of two trees, and construction in such a way as to protect their root area, I consider that this could be achieved without significant harm to the trees, or their contribution to the quality of the landscape. However, this is not sufficient to outweigh the harm that I have found to the rural landscape by the impact of the car park itself.
19. At the hearing, interested parties drew my attention to a number of alternative sites on the north-western side of the railway line, and I looked at several of these at their request. The appellant indicated that such sites would be neither available nor satisfactory for a variety of reasons. Amongst these, I saw that a private parking compound on a light industrial site adjacent to the station provides some additional parking on a commercial basis, although I am told by the Council that its planning status is currently subject to consideration. Whilst this is a brownfield site, I have no substantial evidence that it, or any other site referred to, would provide the desired number of parking spaces, or meet relevant planning policies, and I have considered the appeal proposal on its own merits. I conclude, for the reasons given above, that the proposal would be unacceptably harmful to the character and appearance of the countryside and the setting of the village, contrary to LP Policies OVS1, ENV1, ENV18 and national policies, including PPS7.

*The effect on the aims and objectives of policies to promote travel by means other than the private car in the interests of sustainability.*

20. The PC indicates that the Stratfield Mortimer Parish Plan, produced in 2004, included the results of a questionnaire in which, amongst other things, 47% of

people said that they would use the train more if there was reliable mini bus service to the station and 38% if there was more station parking. Since that time, the PC has initiated a minibus service between the station and the village, with grant-aid support from the District Council, which runs from Monday to Friday to link passengers with the main commuter trains. At the hearing, the PC indicated that the minibus gets crowded, and the Council's highways officer indicates that the service has seen a 30% increase in users since it started about 5 years ago, and a 15% increase in 2008 over 2007.

21. The Stratfield Mortimer Village Design Statement (VDS) was prepared with public consultation, and was adopted by the district Council as supplementary planning guidance in 2007. This identified local amenities as including a bus service to Reading, and the locally subsidised minibus service to Mortimer Station at peak times. However, it also referred to the station parking as having become inadequate for the existing population of the village.
22. The PC has support for the number of parking spaces proposed from the Station Contracts Manager of First Great Western (FGW), who indicates that the existing parking is already at 100% capacity and estimates a need for at least a further 100 spaces to encourage passenger growth at Mortimer. Amongst other things, he observes that Mortimer acts as a hub station for the surrounding area (Burghfield, Silchester etc). Comparison is made with Kemble station which acts as a hub for the Cirencester/Tetbury area. FGW and the appellant also refer to the potential use of Mortimer station in relation to travel to Madejski Stadium, and the reduction of congestion at Junction 11 of the M4. In my view, these objectives go significantly beyond any increase in parking that may be indicated by the results of the village consultations.
23. The RSS supports proposals to increase car parking at railway stations, particularly at stations associated with regional hubs. It indicates that the provision of parking at rail stations, where appropriate, should provide a level of accessibility by private car that is consistent with the overall balance of the transport system at the local level. Representations from the neighbouring Beech Hill Parish Council indicate support for some increase in parking, but some members consider the appeal proposal not suitable, and lacking a full assessment. The Council's highways officer and some interested parties are concerned that the proposed large car park is likely to increase trip generation within Mortimer, attract users from outside, and add significantly to traffic movements on local roads, becoming a park and ride facility in itself.
24. PPG13 refers to the potential for railway stations to act as park and ride sites for destinations outside the immediate locality. However, it notes that at main line stations parking provision may discourage travellers from using local bus services to connect to longer distance services. It advises that such schemes should be subject to robust assessment, including consideration of alternative sites, the impact on local amenity, and travel impacts, including traffic reduction and generation. However, the Council considers that the application has not adequately demonstrated justification for the proposed 100 additional spaces, or the level of parking that may be required to accommodate the needs of the village. Interested parties point out that developments under way only 3 miles away at M4 Junction 11 include a park and ride facility. Whether or not Mortimer should be treated as a regional hub, in my view, the appellant's

submissions fall unacceptably short of meeting the thrust of the advice of PPG13 that such schemes should be developed as an integral part of the planning and transport strategy for the area, within the regional transport and planning context.

25. I recognise the fears that increased parking would undermine the use of the minibus. I consider that other factors such as ecological awareness, price, and demand from people without access to a car, amongst other things, would continue to play some part in sustaining its use. I note that some secure cycle storage bins are provided at the station, and at the hearing the PC agreed to the Council's proposed condition requiring the submission of details of further secure cycle parking and storage within the site. However, whilst these measures complement the provision of parking, they do not justify the amount proposed.

26. I have considered the benefits of increased parking provision at the station, which would link travellers with the national rail network to Reading, Basingstoke and beyond, and enable the undertaking of significantly longer journeys that may otherwise be made by car. The Council's policies recognise that it is necessary to provide for some development in the rural area to sustain balanced rural communities. However, for the reasons given above, I am not satisfied that the proposed level of parking would contribute positively to the promotion of sustainable travel choices in the area, or accord with the aims and objectives of national, regional and local policies to promote travel by means other than the private car, including LP Policies OVS1 and TRANS1.

### **Other matters**

27. I have considered conditions suggested by the Council, and others discussed at the hearing, but none would overcome the objections that I have found. I have considered the refusal at appeal on 5 November 2007 to permit the use of a field in Mortimer as a church car park (APP/W0340/A/07/2046205). In my view that proposal involved substantially different issues. No other matter raised is sufficient to outweigh my findings on the main issues. I conclude, therefore, that the appeal should be dismissed.

*Robin Jacques*

INSPECTOR

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED AT THE HEARING

- 1 Policies T4, C4, CC1 and CC6 from The South East Plan – Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East.
- 2 Timetable for the Mortimer Link bus service