



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 23 September 2021

by R Morgan BSc (Hons) MCD MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 22 October 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/R0660/W/21/3274056

Hallmark Hotel Manchester Airport, Stanley Road, Handforth, SK9 3LD

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a failure to give notice within the prescribed period of a decision on an application for planning permission
 - The appeal is made by S. Manchester Airport Opco Limited against Cheshire East Council.
 - The application Ref 19/4834M, is dated 17 October 2019.
 - The development proposed is reconfiguration of existing car park to deliver more efficient layout and extension of car park to south east to provide 178 additional car parking spaces.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed and planning permission is refused.

Main Issues

2. Although it did not determine the application, the Council has provided an assessment of the proposal and has indicated the grounds on which it would have refused the application. Based on the evidence provided, the main issues are:
 - whether the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt, including the effect on openness;
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, with particular regard to trees;
 - whether sufficient information has been provided to assess the effect of the proposal on protected species;
 - whether the access and parking arrangements would be satisfactory; and
 - If the development is inappropriate, whether the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify it.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

3. The site is within the Green Belt. National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) identifies that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. It goes on to state

that inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. This approach is reiterated in Policy PG 3 of the Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy 2017 (Local Plan).

4. The Framework sets out types of development that may not be inappropriate in the Green Belt. Paragraph 149 relates to the construction of new buildings, so does not apply to the proposed car park extension. However, paragraph 150b), which provides for engineering operations where they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it, is relevant to the appeal scheme.
5. The proposed development would increase parking provision for the hotel through the reconfiguration of the existing car park layout and by making use of an existing area of grassed amenity space to the west of the site for parking. In addition, an area of undeveloped land to the east of the site, which is currently outside of the operational area of the hotel, would also be used as a car park.
6. The new car parking areas would be formed of hardstanding and grasscrete. This surfacing would be flat, and so would not in itself affect openness. However, the proposal is likely to involve a significant number of vehicles parking on the site on a daily basis, the presence of which would have a visual impact.
7. The proposed car park to the east of the hotel site is heavily vegetated with young woodland and scattered scrub. There are many mature trees around the edges of the site, including a line of tall conifers along the southern boundary. The site is contained by the A555 (Manchester Airport Relief Road); the long rear gardens of residential properties fronting onto Stanley Road and an area of hardstanding which appears to be used for outdoor storage. However, views into and across the site from the surrounding area are severely restricted by the extensive vegetation. As a result, the site appears as an area of greenery beyond which the surrounding land uses are not readily visible.
8. A significant amount of the existing vegetation on the site would need to be cleared to create the proposed car park, and the plans show very little new planting as part of the scheme. Existing trees and hedgerows around the edge of the land to the east of the hotel could provide screening to help mitigate the visual impact of parked vehicles from the surrounding land uses, but from the information provided it is unclear whether or not the boundary vegetation would be retained, so the extent to which the proposed car park would be screened is unknown.
9. Parked vehicles on the site would be seen from within the hotel site itself and may also be visible from the adjacent gardens and other land uses. This parking of vehicles in an area which is currently undeveloped would have a visual impact, which would result in some, albeit modest, loss of openness.
10. The smaller area of proposed parking to the west of the site is currently grassed amenity space with mature trees and hedgerow around the boundary. Again it is unclear which, if any, of the surrounding vegetation would be retained. However, the site clearly forms part of the existing hotel grounds, and is viewed in the context of the existing car park and the infrastructure associated with the road junction just beyond the site. Given its location within

the existing site, the use of this area for parking would not cause harm to the openness of the Green Belt.

11. The purposes of Green Belt include assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. The area of proposed car park to the west of the site is part of the existing hotel grounds and is therefore not countryside. The land to the east is bounded by the hotel itself; the A555; residential gardens and an existing area of hardstanding. As the site is already somewhat detached from the wider countryside, the proposal would not result in unacceptable encroachment.
12. The proposal would not conflict with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt, but use of the land to the east of the site for parking would fail to preserve the openness of the Green Belt. As such, the proposal would not meet the exceptions set out in Local Plan Policy PG 3 and Framework paragraph 150b). It would therefore constitute inappropriate development.

Character and appearance

13. There are a significant number of mature trees and hedgerows around the site which provide a green, parkland setting to the hotel, as well as providing screening from surrounding roads. The extensive vegetation contributes positively to the character of the site itself and the surrounding area, as well as having value for biodiversity and carbon sequestration.
14. A Preliminary Arboricultural Assessment (PAA) has been undertaken as part of the proposals, which identifies the locations and conditions of the trees on the site. However, as stated paragraph 1.3.1 of the PAA, this report alone is not intended to be sufficient to support a full planning application. It does not take account of the proposed development, so does not identify the impact of the proposal on trees. Furthermore, the contents of the September 2019 report are only valid for one year, and so are now out of date.
15. From the PAA it is clear that many of the trees on the site are in good condition, with a number of category A and B trees, some of which are in groups. Collectively, the trees on site have high amenity value, and many are worthy of retention. However, an Arboricultural Impact Assessment has not been provided, and it is not clear from the submitted plans which of the trees and hedgerows on the site would be retained and which removed. The soft landscaping plans show minimal planting within the new areas of car parking, and the treatment of boundary trees and hedgerows is unknown. No attempt has been made to identify root protection zones to protect any retained trees.
16. Paragraph 131 of the Framework requires that existing trees be retained wherever possible, but on the basis of the information before me, it appears that the scheme could result in a significant loss of trees and vegetation, with associated harm to the character of the area and local biodiversity.
17. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I conclude that the proposal would cause harm to the character and appearance of the area, with particular regard to trees. It fails to comply with Local Plan Policies SE4 and SE5 which seek to protect trees and hedgerows and conserve landscape character. There is also conflict with Policy H9 of the Handforth Neighbourhood Plan 2018 (NP), which seeks to preserve hedgerows and trees which make a significant contribution to the amenity, biodiversity and landscape character of the surrounding area, and

NP Policy H11, which promotes high quality design that protects and enhances the unique identity of the area where it is located.

Protected species

18. The preliminary ecological appraisal submitted as part of the proposals identified a mature beech tree on the site (ref G54) as having moderate suitability for roosting bats, and a mature oak with a cavity (ref T9) as having low potential.
19. Information as to which trees on site are to be retained has not been provided, but from the submitted plans it appears that tree G54 would be some distance from the proposed works and so would be unlikely to be affected. However, tree T9 is located in an area of the existing car park on the western side of the site which would be subject to realignment. This tree is not shown as being retained on the submitted plan, so I assume that it would need to be felled as part of the proposals.
20. The ecological appraisal recommends that if oak tree T9 cannot be retained then it should be subjected to precautionary felling techniques by a licenced bat worker, but no further surveys are identified as being required in relation to this tree.
21. On the basis of the submitted plans, which show that tree G54 would be unlikely to be affected by the proposals, I am satisfied that no further survey work would be required. If the development were otherwise acceptable, appropriate mitigation and compensation measures, recommended within the ecological appraisal, could be put in place to ensure that the proposal would not cause harm to protected species. As such, the proposal would comply with Policy SE 3 which protects biodiversity and geodiversity, including protected species.

Parking and access

22. The existing hotel and leisure facilities at the site are not proposed to be expanded as part of this appeal, but the provision of 178 extra parking spaces could facilitate their more intensive use and is therefore likely to result in additional traffic movements. A transport statement has been provided as part of the proposals, but this does not quantify the likely additional trips or assess the effect of these movements on the local highway network, including cross border movements in neighbouring Stockport. As such, it does not meet the requirements of Local Plan Policy CO4, which requires transport assessments to demonstrate that the capacity and efficiency of the highway network will not be severely affected as a result of the development.
23. Owing to issues relating to the ongoing health pandemic, the hotel was not fully open at the time of my visit, so the car park was almost empty. However, according to the appellant the business is popular and successful, and under normal circumstances there is a high demand for parking spaces. Although the hotel is accessible by a range of transport modes, the car park is often full, resulting in adhoc parking, which can lead to operational and safety concerns. A parking survey was undertaken on Saturday 3 August 2019 as part of the Transport Statement, and shows that parking occupancy did not fall below 78% throughout the day, with a peak occupancy of 106%.

24. In order to ensure that there will be sufficient parking spaces, the hotel has needed to restrict or stagger functions or other services, which impacts on the successful running of the business. Parking charges have been put in place to limit use of the car park in association with other land uses in the area, but demand for parking associated with uses at the hotel is still high.
25. The hotel contains 88 bedrooms, and on this basis the existing level of around 232 parking spaces already significantly exceeds the recommended standard of one space per bedroom, as set out in Table C.1 of Appendix C of the Local Plan. However, footnote 106 of Table C.1 notes that when using the recommended parking standards for hotels, floorspace for associated facilities should be calculated separately. In this case, the hotel also provides a leisure club, spa facility and restaurant, with function/conference rooms which can hold up to 500 people. The need for parking at the site is clearly higher than the recommended standard for hotels set out in Table C.1, but no assessment has been made of the overall parking requirement for the site which takes account of the facilities provided. Without this, it is difficult to ascertain an appropriate level of car parking for the site.
26. Notwithstanding that, the proposal to provide a further 178 spaces represents a very significant level of increase over and above the current provision. The need for so many additional spaces has not been explained in relation to the facilities at the site, but it is clear from the evidence provided that demand for parking is due in no small part to the 'park and fly' service which the hotel operates. As part of this package, guests who stay at the hotel for one or more nights can leave their cars in the hotel car park for 7 or 15 days, with transfers to and from the airport provided by minibus.
27. The popularity of the 'park and fly' scheme amongst guests is understandable, and it no doubt has associated financial benefits for the hotel business, but it has the potential to greatly increase the demand for on-site parking. The transport statement suggests that, at the time of the parking survey, 160 parking spaces were being used by 'park and fly' guests, which is a very significant proportion of the total number of spaces available, particularly given that the hotel was not fully occupied at the time.
28. The 'park and fly' scheme clearly has the potential to take up a very large number of the parking spaces for long periods, during which time they would be unavailable for use by customers of the hotel's other facilities. No information has been provided to explain how the extended car park would be managed, to ensure that sufficient spaces would be retained for visitors of the site's other facilities, as well as providing for hotel guests and the 'park and fly' package. Without a parking strategy for the site, it is unclear whether even with the additional spaces proposed, the existing parking pressures would be resolved, or whether the suggested economic benefits arising from greater use of the function and other facilities would be realised.
29. The proposed additional spaces would result in harm to the Green Belt and to the character of the area. Demand for additional spaces is clearly generated by the 'park and fly' package, but there may be other ways to provide this service without causing the harm I have identified. No information has been submitted regarding any other options which may be available, such as alternative arrangements for guest's vehicles to be parked at other, existing airport car parks in the vicinity.

30. The appellant has suggested that the 'park and fly' scheme has benefits for the local highway network, but this depends on multiple guests being transported to and from the airport together, which may not always be the case. Similarly, I have no evidence that other parking facilities serving the airport are under pressure to the extent that additional capacity such as that proposed is required. I therefore give little weight to these suggestions.
31. In the absence of a more detailed transport statement for the site, it has not been demonstrated that the proposed access and parking arrangements would be satisfactory. The information provided does not satisfy the requirements of Local Plan Policy CO4 in relation to the potential impact of additional journeys on the local highway network. Furthermore, without a strategy for managing parking, it is unclear whether sufficient space would be provided to enable all parking and loading to take place off the street, as required by Saved Policy DC6 of the Macclesfield Borough Local Plan 2004 (MLP).

Other considerations

32. Additional parking spaces at the hotel would result in safety and operational benefits for the business, which is an established tourist facility. The proposal would reduce the risk of losing trade due to a lack of on-site parking, as well as enabling higher occupancy of the hotel, with greater scope for weddings and other functions to take place concurrently. This has the potential to provide wider economic benefits for the local economy, which could include retaining and hiring additional staff. However, the extent of these benefits is unclear and may be limited in extent if a large number of spaces are taken up by the 'park and fly' scheme.

Green Belt balance and conclusion

33. The proposed development would be inappropriate development which would, by definition, cause harm to the Green Belt. The Framework establishes that substantial weight should be given to such harm. The use of land for parking beyond the existing operational area of the hotel would fail to preserve the openness of the Green Belt. There would also be harm and to the character and appearance of the area, particularly the effect on trees.
34. The provision of additional parking at Hallmark Hotel would have economic benefits, to which I give moderate weight. However, questions remain as to why so many additional spaces are needed and how parking at the site would be managed. When taken together, the other considerations do not outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and the character and appearance of the area. As such, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the scheme do not exist.
35. For the reasons given, the appeal is dismissed and planning permission refused.

R Morgan

INSPECTOR