

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 13 August 2024

by Jane Smith MA MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 28 August 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/Z/24/3336993

Land at Thames House, Portman Road, Reading RG30 1EA

- The appeal is made under Regulation 17 of the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) Regulations 2007 (as amended) against a refusal to grant express consent.
 - The appeal is made by Alight Media against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 231101.
 - The advertisement proposed is described as 'new pair of illuminated 48-sheet digital advertisement displays'.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) Regulations 2007 (the Regulations) require that applications for the display of advertisements are considered in terms of amenity and public safety, taking into account the provisions of the development plan insofar as they are material and any other relevant factors.
3. The reason for refusal did not allege any harm in relation to public safety and the evidence indicates that any such concerns could be addressed through imposition of suitable conditions. Therefore, the main issue is the effect of the proposed advertisement on amenity.

Reasons

4. The appeal site is part of a grassed area in front of a substantial commercial building, within an employment area along the north side of Portman Road. There are also some commercial uses on the south side of the road, including a smaller industrial estate and a large retail store. However, directly opposite the appeal site is a low-rise residential area, behind a belt of trees and soft landscaping.
5. While large commercial buildings are a prominent feature of the street scene, particularly on the north side of the road, the trees and soft landscaping are also important and distinctive characteristics. The grassed building frontages and planted highway verges are generous in size and include areas of public open space. They introduce a significant amount of

open, green space into the roadside environment, in front of the commercial buildings and as a buffer between the road and the housing to the south.

6. There is a wide variety of commercial signage along the north side of the road, including some large and/or illuminated signs. However, these almost exclusively relate to the business premises to which they are attached. Neither traditional poster hoardings nor their modern digital equivalents are currently a feature of this section of Portman Road.
7. The proposed display would be conspicuously located in an open, straight stretch of the road, straddling almost the whole width of the grassed area in front of Thames House. While its scale is typical of this form of advertising, the display area would nevertheless be very substantial. The proposal would further increase the amount and range of advertising, over and above the existing signs advertising specific businesses. The double-sided display would prevent the blank rear of the display unit being exposed to view, but there would nevertheless be a materially increased level of street clutter.
8. While the trees would screen views from many of the nearby dwellings and from the children's playground, the areas of public open space also incorporate a linear walking route within the landscaped area along the southern road frontage. The proposed display would be widely conspicuous from that perspective, as well as from the carriageway and the pavement opposite. By virtue of its scale and prominent position, it would jar with the softer, landscaped elements of the roadside environment. Even if conditions were imposed to regulate the level of illumination and changing images, the display would be eye-catching, since that is its inherent purpose. Notwithstanding the existing illuminated signs, and the level of illumination from the existing street lighting, the display would be visually intrusive by reason of its scale, siting and changing, illuminated displays.
9. National planning practice guidance alludes to poster hoardings being more acceptable where there are large commercial buildings and main highways. Indeed, digital displays are increasingly common along busy arterial roads. However, in this particular street scene, the trees and soft landscaping are distinctive and important features. The surroundings are neither exclusively commercial nor dominated by highway infrastructure. Furthermore, the Council refers to its strategy for retaining and reinforcing tree planting in this 'treed corridor', indicating an aspiration to mitigate, rather than increase, the existing level of urban street clutter.
10. No heritage assets would be affected, and the site is not within an Area of Special Control, but there would nevertheless be harm to visual amenity. Any operational advantages of the digital format over traditional paper and paste hoardings are not relevant, since there is no such hoarding within this stretch of Portman Road at present. Both the examples given of similar scale digital displays elsewhere in the Borough are attached to existing structures, in more intensively built-up surroundings, without a similar level of landscaping. Therefore, they are not comparable and do not provide justification for a similar installation in a location with different visual characteristics. While well-designed advertisement displays can provide positive visual interest in the right urban context, in this particular case the harm arising from increased visual clutter would outweigh any such benefits.

11. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the proposed advertisement would have a harmful effect on amenity.
12. In accordance with the Regulations, I have taken into account the provisions of the development plan, so far as they are relevant. Policy EN13 of the Reading Borough Local Plan 2019 (RBLP), which is referred to in the reason for refusal, relates to development affecting major landscape features and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which is not relevant. However, Policies OU4 and CC7 in the RBLP include requirements relating to amenity, which amongst other things state that advertisements should respect their surroundings and setting and avoid a proliferation of advertisements that detrimentally affects visual amenity. Furthermore, Policy EN7 requires that proposals which would undermine the quality of areas of adjacent public open space should be avoided.
13. In the Framework, paragraph 141 highlights that the quality and character of places can suffer when advertisements are poorly sited and designed. Given that I have concluded that the proposal would harm amenity, it conflicts with this aspect of the Framework and relevant aspects of the development plan policies as outlined above.

Other Matters

14. The appellant has made other arguments in support of the proposal, including that the display of advertisements generates economic benefit, that the site could be used for display of public information and that the installation would be removable when no longer required. However, matters not relating to amenity and public safety fall outside the scope of this appeal, as defined in the Regulations. As such, these potential benefits do not provide justification for allowing a proposal which would be harmful to amenity, for the reasons set out above.

Conclusion

15. For the reasons given above the appeal should be dismissed.

Jane Smith

INSPECTOR