CHAPTER 11 MINERAL EXTRACTION

Introduction

Mineral extraction is a necessary activity but rarely a welcome one. Control over mineral planning is the responsibility of the council, who are designated as the 'Mineral Planning Authority' (MPA) in succession to the former county council.

MPAs are responsible for all matters relating to minerals planning, including both the formulation of policy and its implementation through the development control process. MPAs have a legal duty to produce a Minerals Local Plan to set out their policies on future mineral extraction and related topics. The 'Replacement Minerals Local Plan for Berkshire' (RMLP), covering the whole of the county, was prepared by the former county council and adopted in November 1995.

Following the abolition of the county council, the six unitary authorities in Berkshire now work together through the Joint Strategic Planning Committee to ensure a consistent and co-ordinated approach to minerals policy issues. Work to review the RMLP is currently being undertaken under the auspices of the Joint Committee. Each of the unitary authorities deals on its own with the implementation of minerals policies within its boundaries (e.g. making decisions on planning applications for mineral extraction).

This section of the report outlines the legislative framework and guidance, provides information on the mineral resources within Reading's boundaries, and gives details of some of the minerals issues that could affect the town in the near future.

Contents

Legislation and Guidance

Legislation

The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 provides the main statutory basis for planning for minerals. It includes the principal legislation governing the control of minerals development, as well as the obligation for MPAs to prepare a Minerals Local Plan. Legislation requiring MPAs to review longstanding planning permissions for mineral extraction, to ensure that they are kept up to modern standards, is included in the Planning & Compensation Act 1991 and the Environment Act 1995.

National Guidance

- **Minerals Planning Guidance notes (MPGs)**

The DETR and its predecessor the DoE produce 'Minerals Planning Guidance Notes' (MPGs) to help MPAs in the preparation of Minerals Local Plans and in dealing with planning

applications for mineral extraction and site restoration. Two MPGs are of particular importance in establishing the background for detailed minerals planning:

MPG1 - General Considerations and the Development Plan System (1996)

This sets out the government's policy on minerals planning generally, and provides advice to MPAs and the minerals industry on the operation of the planning system with regard to minerals.

MPG6 - Guidelines for Aggregates Provision in England (1994)

This provides forecasts of future demand for aggregates at national and regional level, for which provision is expected to be made in development plans. It also addresses the need to maintain an adequate supply of material to the construction industry taking into account social, economic and environmental costs. A new edition, which will eventually replace that issued in 1994, is currently in preparation.

Government advice stresses the need to adopt a sustainable approach to minerals planning, notes the importance of mineral extraction to the national economy, and advises on the need to prevent the wasteful use of minerals and the sterilisation of accessible mineral reserves.

Regional Guidance

- **Aggregates Apportionment – The sub-regional apportionment of the regional sand and gravel requirements in MPG 6 (1995)**

MPG 6 provides a figure for each region for aggregates provision over the period to 2006. For the South East it is the responsibility of SERPLAN to break this advice down to county level, for incorporation as appropriate in Minerals Local Plans. The above report lists individual county requirements agreed by the MPAs of the region through SERPLAN in 1994. There is a 'global' figure for Berkshire as a whole (the county area is expected to make provision for production of 2.3mt/year), but there are no figures for the individual unitary authorities in Berkshire.

- **Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (1994)**

This sets out the main provisions of MPG 6 as they apply to the South East and provides guidance to local planning authorities, in a regional context, on the provision to be made for aggregates in development plans. It is currently being reviewed (see next two items).

- **A Sustainable Development Strategy for the South East (1998)**

This document, produced by SERPLAN, puts forward an overall strategy for the development of the region, and will lead to the publication by government of revised regional planning guidance. It contains policies to local authorities on provision for aggregates, and advocates government support for measures to reduce primary aggregates use through recycling and greater efficiency of aggregates use.

- **A Sustainable Development Strategy for the South East – Panel Report (1999)**

Following the public examination of SERPLAN's proposed strategy, the examination panel made various recommendations regarding the role of regional advice in planning for minerals. In particular, the panel considered that regional advice should provide direction on the spatial aspects of future regional apportionments, and should inform future versions of MPG6 on environmental considerations and constraints. The panel also considered that regional advice should indicate the need to develop alternative sources of aggregates, and that the use of recycled aggregates should be promoted through local plan policies prepared in partnership

with industry. It is expected that these conclusions will be reflected in the next version of the DETR's Regional Planning Guidance for the South East.

Local Policy and Initiatives

- **Berkshire Structure Plan 1991-2006 (1995)**

The plan sets the context for development in the former Berkshire area. On the subject of minerals, the plan includes policies on the factors which should be taken into account in the determination of planning applications and the identification of Preferred Areas.

- **Replacement Minerals Local Plan for Berkshire (1995)**

The plan sets out detailed policies and identifies Preferred Areas for future minerals extraction. It was produced and adopted by the former county council, though Reading and other local authorities in Berkshire were involved throughout its preparation. Despite the abolition of the county council, the RMLP continues to provide the formal statutory policy background for minerals planning in Reading.

- **Review of the Replacement Minerals Local Plan**

A review of the RMLP, to 'roll it forward' beyond its present end-date of 2001, was started in 1998. An Issues Report was published in 1999, and it is hoped to complete the review before the end of 2001. The review will not re-examine the basic approach or principles of the RMLP, but will concentrate on updating the present plan to a new end-date of 2006.

Extent of Minerals

The main minerals produced in Reading (and throughout Berkshire) are sand and gravel. These minerals are used in the construction industry, chiefly for making concrete or for use as 'fill' (e.g. to shape or build up ground levels). Minerals used in construction are referred to as 'aggregate minerals ' or just 'aggregates'; other aggregates (not found in Berkshire) include hard rock such as crushed limestone or granite, or 'secondary aggregates' such as the spoil from slate or china clay workings.

Berkshire has been a significant producer of sand and gravel for many years. They are chiefly found along the lines of past or present river valleys, where they were deposited during the last Ice Age. Reading lies on a very large area of sand and gravel deposits, which outside of its boundaries spreads westwards along the Kennet Valley towards (and beyond) Newbury, southwards and eastwards along the Loddon Valley, and northwards into areas of Oxfordshire near the Thames, such as at Lower Caversham and Sonning Eye.

The 'valley gravel' is the most recent and, for commercial purposes, the best quality deposit. The 'plateau gravel' consists of geologically slightly older deposits which contain more clay and other impurities, and are therefore of less immediate commercial attraction.

Volumes Produced

The distribution of aggregate minerals across the country is determined by geological factors. It therefore does not match patterns of demand, which generally reflect patterns of population distribution. The result is that no county or individual MPA is, or is expected to be, self-contained in terms of aggregates demand and supply.

Over the years, production of sand and gravel in Berkshire has varied, reflecting the scale of construction activity in or near the county, general economic conditions, and the availability of supplies from further afield. The highest recorded production figure for the county was over 5 million tonnes (mt), in 1971 – around the time of construction of the M4, at a time of substantial

housebuilding, and before it became possible to import aggregates into the county by rail. During the 1980s production in Berkshire was generally around 2.5mt/year, but with the changed economic circumstances production in the 1990s it has been closer to, and often below, 1.5 mt/year.

To protect commercial confidentiality, it is not possible to give figures of sand and gravel production year-by-year within the Reading boundary. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the section of the Kennet Valley covering Reading and Theale (including all the then-current extraction sites in the Borough) produced around a quarter of all the sand and gravel extracted in Berkshire, although much of this came from sites in the Burghfield/Theale area in Newbury District (now West Berkshire).

There are now no mineral reserves remaining at any of the sites in Reading where extraction has been permitted in the past. Unless and until any new planning permissions are given, future production from within Reading will be nil.

Volumes Consumed

Again, it is not possible to give figures of aggregates consumption for Reading alone. In this case, this is not because the statistics are confidential, but because it is not practicable to gather information at what to date has been district authority level.

The latest information available indicates that Berkshire currently consumes about 20% more aggregates each year than it produces. The main imported material is crushed limestone, brought by rail via depots such as those at Theale (about 8km west of the centre of Reading).

Because of the limited sources of aggregates within Reading, and the relatively high level of construction activity that naturally takes place within a large built-up area, it is likely that aggregates consumption in Reading in recent years has been proportionately very much higher than production – certainly much higher than the 20% figure that applies to Berkshire as a whole.

Now that there are no permitted reserves remaining in Reading, all of its future aggregates needs will have to be 'imported' from elsewhere, unless and until any further planning permissions are given for mineral extraction.

Permitted Reserves

For many years, the only active mineral working within the Reading boundary has been that at Smallmead. Extraction here was first permitted in 1957, and various extensions have been allowed since then – the most recent in 1993. The last of the mineral reserves within this permitted area were extracted in 1997. As already stated, there are therefore now no permitted but unworked mineral reserves within Reading.

Other Mineral Resources

Most of the sand and gravel deposits in Reading have been built on over the years, and therefore are not available to be extracted. Some other areas – notably the Smallmead area – have already been subject of extensive mineral extraction. The result is that there are now only four main areas within Reading where there are still accessible valley gravel deposits which, in theory at least, are available for extraction. These are at:-

- Green Park (site of Business Park now under construction)
- Little Johns Farm
- Kings Meadow
- Fobney Meadows/Southcote Meadows.

In addition there is a small undeveloped site at Smallmead which has never been the subject of an application for mineral extraction, and where accessible sand and gravel reserves therefore remain in the ground.

Of these five sites, only that at Smallmead is a 'Preferred Area' in the RMLP. The first four are therefore, in policy terms, unacceptable locations in principle for mineral working – chiefly because of their importance to the town as undisturbed open land, or (in the case of Green Park) because it was judged preferable to allow the business park development to proceed without prior removal of the underlying sand and gravel.

The Smallmead Preferred Area is a small site of 8.5 ha, estimated to contain 240,000 tonnes of sand and gravel. This makes it the fourth smallest of the 14 Preferred Areas in the RMLP. The site lies between the previous extraction area at Smallmead and the Green Park site. As with all the Preferred Areas, the RMLP sets out various requirements that must be satisfied before planning permission could be given for extraction from this site, including requirements regarding access, the protection of waterways and water supplies, and the protection of archaeology. The plan also states that in principle it would be preferable to work the site at an early date, to avoiding prolonging disturbance in the Smallmead area, and aims to secure restoration back to agricultural use with substantial tree and shrub planting. The site lies in the flood plain, so the nature of materials used to restore it would have to be very carefully controlled.

Restoration

Most of the former mineral workings in Reading have been, or are in the process of being, restored to some appropriate 'after-use'. Restoration by means of landfilling with waste is continuing at Smallmead. At December 1998, it is estimated that some eight hundred thousand cubic metres of landfill space, or approximately six years' life, remained. Once landfilling has been completed the site will be fully restored, following which a programme of aftercare will be undertaken by the operator.

Rail Depot

One other site-specific provision of the RMLP concerns a site in Reading. This is a provision to safeguard a site at Pingewood, just to the west of the Smallmead Preferred Area, for possible use as a depot for importing aggregates by rail.

It is desirable to safeguard suitable depot sites to ensure long-term potential to increase the importing of aggregates to the area. 'Safeguarding' a site is not the same thing as 'allocating' it for this purpose. It simply means that if a planning application is submitted that would prevent the site being used as a rail depot (such as a proposal for some other form of built development), then before deciding that application the council must weigh the merits of the proposal against the merits of keeping the site available for use as a rail depot. The act of safeguarding a site as a rail depot implies no presumption in favour of its use for this purpose, not least because the environmental acceptability of establishing a depot at the site can only be resolved in the context of a specific planning application.

The Pingewood site is one of four safeguarded rail depot sites in the RMLP. As with the Preferred Areas for mineral extraction, the RMLP sets out various issues that would have to be satisfactorily addressed in any planning application for a rail depot at Pingewood.

To date, no proposals for establishing a rail depot at Pingewood have come forward. Neither have any other applications been made which might prejudice for the long term the site's use as a rail depot.

Main Issues

- Can / should mineral extraction continue within Reading's boundary?
- How will Reading's future aggregates needs be met?
- Can those needs be met without the use of 'primary' aggregates (that is, without aggregates dug straight from the ground)?
- How quickly will existing and former mineral sites in the Borough be restored?
- Will the safeguarded rail depot site at Pingewood be used for this, or any other, purpose?

Key Contact(s)

For further information, please contact Adrian Hunter on 0118-939 0461.

Reference Documents

Berkshire County Council: Replacement Minerals Local Plan for Berkshire Council (adopted 1995), and Alterations to the Plan (1997).

Department of the Environment (1994): Minerals Planning Guidance Note 6: Guidelines for Aggregates Provision in England.

Joint Strategic Planning Unit (April 1999): Review of the Replacement Minerals Local Plan for Berkshire – Issues Report.

SERPLAN (1994): Aggregates apportionment – The sub-regional apportionment of the regional sand and gravel requirement in MPG6.