

Brief November 2011

UK Minerals Forum Working Group 2 Planning Skills

The UK Minerals Forum, hosted by the CBI Minerals Group, draws together key stakeholders to raise awareness of issues and identify potential solutions in the sustainable supply of indigenous UK minerals. The Planning Skills Working Group, chaired by David Brewer, Director General CoalPro, was convened to identify the scale of mineral planning skills shortages and to propose solutions.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The key objectives of the group were defined by the UK Minerals Forum as follows:
 - Identify the scale of the skills shortages both in Mineral Planning Authorities (MPAs) and the industry
 - Determine what mineral planning courses are available
 - Provide a report on the main facts and figures on the scale of the problem to generate useful metrics
 - Propose to UKMF solutions to the extent that problems are identified.
- 1.2 The result of the group's research and analysis, set out below, indicates that a significant problem already exists. This is manifesting itself in increasing delays to the preparation of minerals development frameworks and in dealing with planning applications for mineral operations. It is beyond the capacity of the group to measure the cost to the industry, to the wider economy and to society in conventional terms, but it is clearly in no-one's interests.
- 1.3 In current circumstances where MPAs face severe budgetary and staffing constraints over the next four years, the problem can only get worse. If it is not addressed, it will be increasingly difficult to ensure an adequate supply of minerals to meet the needs of society and the economy, and communities will face further blight as it proves impossible to deal with minerals planning applications expeditiously.
- 1.4 Mineral planning differs from planning for many other types of development. It has a different spatial dimension in that minerals can only be extracted where they are found. Mineral operations can also have a relatively high impact on the environment and communities. Mineral planning thus requires a unique set of skills.

2 Research and analysis

Numbers of mineral planning staff

- 2.1 The group has conducted a sample survey of mineral planning staff in MPAs in England and Wales. Whilst complete returns were not received, the survey identified just over 100 professional staff, excluding support staff and technicians. Not all posts are filled, or likely to be filled in current circumstances. By extension, and bearing in mind that those authorities who have not responded may have limited minerals planning requirements (eg some of the metropolitan authorities), it can be assumed that there is likely to be of the order of 150 professional staff working on aspects of mineral planning (though not all of them full-time) in MPAs in England and Wales.
- 2.2 In Scotland, a survey within the minerals industry identified perhaps just ten specialist mineral planners with up to 20 other staff working on minerals planning to some degree. In Northern Ireland, there is a central team which handles mineral planning issues for the whole province, comprising ten posts with only seven currently occupied.
- 2.3 Overall, it seems reasonable to conclude that there are perhaps 200 professional-grade staff in MPAs in the UK as a whole who are involved to a significant degree with minerals planning issues, including development management, minerals frameworks and enforcement and monitoring. However, it is essential to recognise that these 200 staff do not represent full-time equivalent posts. The majority of the individuals involved are likely to be deployed only part-time to minerals issues, and will also be working on other planning matters dealt with by MPAs, notably waste. In the English counties, separate minerals and waste teams are increasingly being merged with staff dealing with the authority's own applications. A number of authorities, for example in Central and North Wales, operate a shared service. While the number of full-time equivalents would therefore be lower, perhaps in the range of 100 to 150, the potential needs of individual professionals for skills and knowledge in mineral planning are not diminished just because they may not be working on it full time.
- 2.4 The group has also identified that there has been a net movement away from MPAs to the private sector of at least 3:1 in recent years. It is also known that the senior cadre of experienced mineral planners is reaching the end of their careers, a process now being accelerated by the present round of job cuts and redundancies/early retirements. Replacement at any level has proved difficult and can only be exacerbated in current circumstances.
- 2.5 It should be emphasised that some MPAs, particularly those where the minerals industry forms an important part of the local economy, remain comparatively well resourced. Properly planned and managed, inter-disciplinary teams and cross-boundary shared services represent an appropriate and sensible response. However, against the declining overall availability of staff with suitable expertise and experience, maintaining capabilities in some areas can only be at the expense of others.
- 2.6 In industry, in some respects the position is even less clear as many companies make extensive use of consultants, including an increasing number of individuals. Indeed this is also a developing feature of the minerals planning work of MPAs. However, from the knowledge of working group members, there seems to be about 50 specialist mineral planners directly employed in the minerals industry, mostly with the major companies with perhaps a further 50 or so in the consultancies, though again, as in local government, not necessarily working exclusively on mineral planning. In both cases, these professionals will be augmented by support staff employed on a range of functions.
- 2.7 Across the UK our best estimate is therefore that there may be, in total, of the order of 250 professionals working to some extent on mineral planning in local authorities, the mineral industries and consultancies. However, as experienced staff retire, leave or move on, this creates a need for in-career introductory training in mineral planning for the replacements new to this work, even though they may have a relevant professional background (not always as planners).
- Empirical evidence of a shortage of staff with mineral planning skills and experience**
- 2.8 Notwithstanding the available information on numbers, it has been known for some time that there is a problem. It invariably takes months, and in some cases years, between an application being submitted and a planning committee decision, even to the extent that occasionally the time taken to reach a decision exceeds the time it would take to work the site.
- 2.9 Many MPAs also find themselves in great difficulty not just in dealing with applications but in preparing development frameworks, including mineral safeguarding areas, on any reasonable timescale. Seven years on from the reforms in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act only a handful of new-style minerals development documents have been approved and are in force in England.
- 2.10 Not all of these difficulties are due to a shortage of staff resources. Delays occur, for example, in the inter-relationships with statutory consultees in preparing and evaluating an increasing range of environmental assessments and in the public consultation process. It is apparent that dealing with a complex mineral planning application requires significant project management expertise as well as planning skills. The increasing use of consultants adds to the management problem, and in MPAs, this is being exacerbated as the senior cadre of experienced minerals planners is gradually lost to the profession.
- 2.11 The planning system has to address other types of major projects such as large housing and industrial developments. It is clearly capable of doing so. However, planning matters related to such developments are dealt with at district (or unitary) level whereas in two-tier local government areas mineral planning matters, because

of the wider, cross-border implications, are reserved to county (or unitary) authorities (as is waste). This restricts the extent to which a wider inter-disciplinary approach can be taken and limits the ability to develop expertise in house.

Mineral planning courses

- 2.12 Mineral planning as such is not taught in the pre-career formal courses at the university planning schools and it is rare for students to take a minerals topic as an elective option for special study. In practice, the skills and knowledge required to be effective in mineral planning are acquired by established professionals ‘on the job’ after they move into this area of work. This was never ideal, but the problem is getting worse as the rate of exit of more experienced and senior staff accelerates. That leaves a gap in collective memory and experience and puts those new to the work increasingly at a disadvantage.
- 2.13 The group has identified only two academic institutions that either offer or have the potential to offer specific, in-career training in the relevant skills and knowledge for established professionals moving into mineral planning work for the first time. The University of the West of England (UWE) has for some time offered a three-day course entitled ‘Beginning in mineral planning’. While it is marketed nationally, in practice most demand has come from southern England and Wales. Anglia Ruskin University has delivered a number of tailored one-day ‘on demand’ courses for individual local authorities mainly in East Anglia entitled ‘Minerals planning essentials’ as well as a minerals component in a combined three-day introduction to waste and mineral planning.
- 2.14 The UWE course has been run successfully for a number of years with an average of 10-12 attendees. Because of budgetary constraints faced by local authorities, there was insufficient interest for the course to be run in 2010. There was limited interest for the 2011 course and, while it ran despite numbers being below the financial break-even point, internal budgetary pressures mean that this cannot be repeated. Its continued availability is therefore at risk.
- 2.15 There is also an optional minerals planning module being offered within a new distance learning minerals surveying MSc course by Northumbria University. However, the first such course has not yet been completed. While its teaching and qualifications model may provide an additional ‘new entrant’ source in future, it aims to train minerals surveyors and is not designed to provide in-career training for new holders of mineral planning posts.
- 2.16 The group is aware of the work done at Leeds University with MIRO funding in the early 2000s on CPD training modules for use by mineral planners, regulators, operators and consultants in the aggregates industry. That included short course material as well as more advanced academic modules. In the event, this work was not taken forward, apparently for reasons of cost and uncertain demand, though the material could still be useful for others to develop and apply.

Conclusions

- 2.17 The group has obtained a reasonably firm view of the overall numbers of mineral planners, although it needs to be recognised that the number of full-time equivalents is somewhat less. Numbers are reducing as authorities in particular streamline their staffing structures in response to the current severe squeeze on public expenditure. There is empirical evidence that MPAs have difficulty in preparing minerals plans and dealing with mineral planning applications which is in large part due to the restricted availability of suitably experienced professional staff.
- 2.18 While these problems of delay in plan-making and decisions on planning applications may not all be due to a shortage of resources, the increasing use of consultants and shared services, and the increasing prevalence of multi-tasking, demonstrates that most MPAs do not have adequate specialist in-house resources. In addition, these features add to the management task.
- 2.19 There are two introductory/‘beginners’ sources of mineral planning training available, one at present operating ‘on demand’ to in-house trainees, the other offered on the open market subject to sufficient interest.

Budgetary and staffing constraints faced by MPAs will have two consequences:

- Staff shortages can only get worse
- The availability of the few courses run by a small handful of academic institutions will at best continue to be intermittent or, at worse, cease.

3 Possible solutions

Develop a specific targeted course

- 3.1 The group has examined the two introductory courses currently or potentially available. Whilst both, to a varying degree, may serve to stimulate interest in mineral planning as a career, or add to the knowledge base of relatively junior staff to the point that they are able to contribute to the mineral planning function, neither is expressly designed to build on an individual’s initial interest or some basic knowledge to a position from which they can, with further in-house experience, provide a significant additional resource in mineral planning teams.
- 3.2 The group has therefore concluded that a more substantial, in-career or mid-career course is, ideally, required. The current financial climate is such that this would probably have to be limited to an intensive five-day course. A more ambitious approach (eg two-week modular) may be desirable but would be costly, would therefore require a very significant subsidy, and would involve more time away from front-line work than employers seem likely to accept. It would therefore be high risk in present circumstances. A five-day course, if successfully launched, would always offer the potential for further development either in length, or in terms of regional delivery. It should include a site visit (as do the existing courses) but also,

importantly, a case study. It could also include wider aspects, such as public perception and the local political situation.

This is the group's core proposal.

- 3.3 There is no possibility of such a course being developed without two elements of subsidy. The academic institutions cannot afford to fund the development in a situation in which there is no certainty that they could recover all, or any, of the cost involved. In the present expenditure climate for in-service training, the risk of that is overwhelming. Equally, they cannot afford to run a course without sufficient guaranteed income at least to cover their costs, as recent experience demonstrates.
- 3.4 With this in mind, the group has had further discussions with the existing providers. They have prepared firm (but still informal 'without commitment') costings on a confidential basis. While the costs are not insignificant in themselves, it is reasonable to claim that they are minimal when compared with the consequences of failing to address the problem.
- 3.5 There is, of course, a fall-back option of just sponsoring (ie subsidising) existing courses to ensure they can continue, but without developing and extending the content in the way the group considers is required to be fully effective, as noted above, in getting those new to mineral planning work up to speed in the necessary knowledge and skills.
- 3.6 It should be noted that MPAs have statutory responsibilities to prepare minerals development plans and deal with minerals planning applications to defined timescales. Addressing the deteriorating planning skills situation should therefore be the responsibility of the public sector. However, given present financial constraints across the whole range of public services, it has to be recognised that the funding required to support the development of, and/or to subsidise the running of short courses in mineral planning is unlikely to be available from the public sector, whether central government, MPAs or academic institutions. Such funding would have to be provided by the industry.

Increase the supply of 'new entrants'

- 3.7 The group has also informally asked whether the planning schools might include reference to minerals (perhaps as an illustrative case study) in their mainstream planning courses, as a means of stimulating students' interest in this area of work at some stage of their careers. One way that this might be done would be to use minerals as an example of large-scale industrial planning, as a way of acquiring valuable experience and transferable skills in the course of a career and thereby stimulating interest in minerals work. However, the indications so far have been that there would be little interest from students, who tend to see minerals planning as an intrinsically unattractive subject and a dead-end career option. Such an initiative would therefore require a formal approach to the planning schools which carefully addressed the need to overcome such negative perceptions.

- 3.8 The Northumbria mineral surveying course, and indeed any other similar offering, could also provide a potential 'new entrant' source. Some four-year university courses include a year 'out' to facilitate early career experience and courses in related disciplines may offer opportunities to provide experience in mineral planning, thus fostering and stimulating interest. But it must be recognised that this would be a higher-cost and longer-term option, and aimed at individuals, with no guarantee that they would end up holding mineral planner posts, rather than at existing professionals new to work in mineral planning.

Industry road shows

- 3.9 There has been a joint initiative between the Scottish government and the Mineral Products Association (Scotland) which resulted in four site-based road shows on mineral awareness for planning authorities. These are regarded as having been very successful in improving understanding of the importance of mineral planning and what is involved, and the group sees merit in extending the approach to England and Wales. The industry would need to take this forward within a structured framework and involve DCLG, perhaps in association with rolling out the minerals section of the new National Planning Policy Framework.

Town planners national competency framework

- 3.10 DCLG have initiated the development of a town planners national competency framework and have commissioned TAG Learning Ltd's Management Assessment Portfolios (MAPS) product to develop it. The group has been in contact with MAPS and it became apparent that the work done to date had revealed quite a gap in relation to minerals and waste planning. Under the auspices of the group, MAPS has now had discussions with two senior minerals planners and the Planning Officers Society has been asked to assist. It is obviously essential that a complete framework should include competency in minerals planning, and once developed, this should form an important basis for developing any short course in line with our core proposal.

In House, on-the-job training

- 3.11 The minerals industry possesses or has access to significant mineral planning expertise in order to prepare complex, high-quality minerals planning applications. It is legitimate to ask how the industry is able to develop this whilst MPAs appear to have more difficulty. Whilst the industry does recruit individuals with some existing expertise, including directly from MPAs, much of its capability has been established in house from a range of related disciplines and on-the-job training.

MPAs obviously have greater difficulties here because in large parts of the country, and especially the rural and semi-rural areas where minerals are typically found, mineral planning is reserved to upper tier authorities with a much smaller range of planning matters to deal with and hence a more restricted pool of staff in related disciplines. Nevertheless, a more formal approach to

career development, perhaps including a greater application of the shared service principle with neighbouring authorities, may be possible.

- 3.12 One aspect of this is mentoring. Mentoring is a normal career development process constantly undertaken by organisations, but a structured approach within a more formal application of career development may assist MPAs, particularly those faced with a potential loss in the near future of senior, experienced mineral planners.

Staff exchanges

- 3.13 Staff exchanges between MPAs and the industry offer a dual benefit: greater mutual appreciation and understanding on the one hand and career development on the other. It is an approach that is followed in other parts of the public sector, for example by the Environment Agency. While staff exchanges can be arranged on an ad hoc basis, the Group considers fostering these in a structured way would be beneficial. This would require a systematic approach and practical support from the industry.
- 3.14 Proactive support for training and staff exchanges (v) and (vi) from DCLG would be invaluable and would naturally complement the initiative to develop a National Competency Framework.

4 Delivering the programme

- 4.1 While some of the solutions proposed by the group require specific funding, none of them can be progressed without the input of significant resources in a wider sense. Whilst MPAs can and should make a contribution, supported by DCLG, it has to be recognised that the financial constraints they face over the next few years will inevitably severely limit the extent to which they are able to do so.
- 4.2 For example, the development of a targeted short course would have to be funded by the industry but would also require the establishment of a project board of some kind and the input of additional resources to write a specification, issue and evaluate tenders, arrange an appropriate counterparty, let a contract and monitor it.

- 4.3 It is equally true that the industry would have to be the prime mover in initiating action on the other proposals. A significant resource input would be required. Without it, progress will be minimal.
- 4.4 The industry thus has a choice to make. It could ‘stand on ceremony’ on the basis that MPAs have statutory responsibilities and should resource themselves to fulfil them, in which case further deterioration has to be expected. Litigation to enforce these responsibilities would be possible, but very expensive and highly uncertain in outcome. Alternatively, it could take the initiative, putting in the required resource and, depending on which of the proposals it considers appropriate to pursue, appropriate funding (almost certainly considerably less than the cost of litigation, or an individual appeal), in which case it should reasonably expect a positive response from MPAs, supported by DCLG. Only by doing so can the industry expect progress to be made.
- 4.5 The options can be suitably characterised as ‘shutting up’ or ‘putting up’.

Annex Membership of the working group

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Lester Hicks	Consultant
Ken Hobden	Mineral Products Association
Nick Horsley	Sibelco UK Ltd
Fiona McEvoy	BGS
Catherine Middleton	RTPI
David Palk	Suffolk County Council
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Chloe Wrighton	BGS
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The group was chaired by David Brewer, Confederation of UK Coal Producers

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