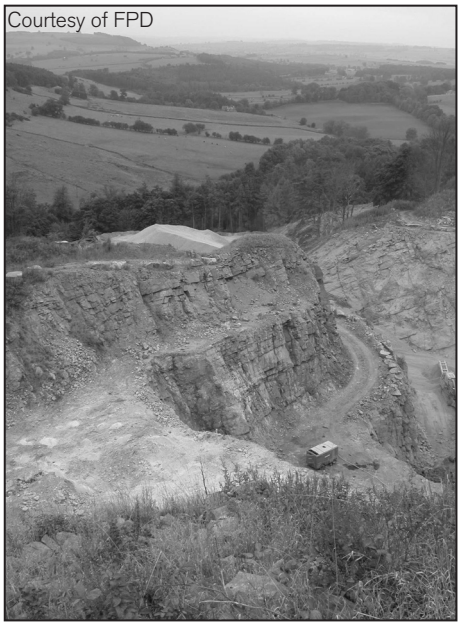
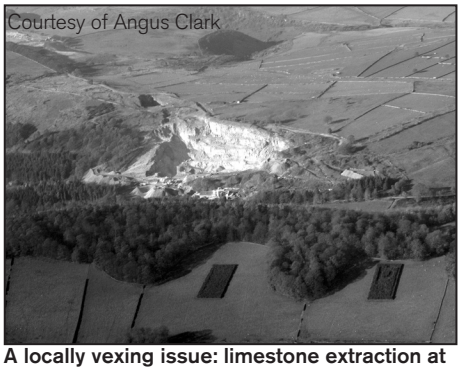
The UK National Minerals Forum - a green perspective

Ruth Chambers, Deputy Chief Executive at the Council for National Parks, and Andy Tickle, Head of Planning at CPRE South Yorkshire - both participants in the UK National Minerals Forum - comment on progress so far and prospects for consensus over the long term future of UK minerals supply

The UK National Minerals Forum (UK NMF) has had a lengthy gestation period. Conceived at the inaugural Living with Minerals (LWM) conference in June 2004, formally christened at LWM2 in November 2006 (see **Mineral Planning 108**), it is now striving for precocious maturity - aiming to conclude its views in time for LWM3 in November 2008. Given the scope of its ambition - four working groups covering issues as wide as security of supply; mineral extraction in National Parks and AONBs; carbon and proximity of supply; and cumulative impact of regulation - this will be an uphill task. However there is no lack of will, effort or expertise among the key stakeholders taking part and this bodes well. Chaired largely by independent, respected figures, so far it has the confidence of non-industry participants - drawn widely from key government departments and agencies plus interested NGOs, chiefly CNP and CPRE.


Courtesy of FPD


Courtesy of Angus Clark

A locally vexing issue: limestone extraction at Backdale Quarry in the Peak District

UK minerals BF (Before Forum) - a brief history!

Mineral extraction has become increasingly controversial over the past decades, especially since 'the environment' became a buzz word. For the wider public 'quarry' became a 'dirty' word - a synonym for landscape damage and outraged communities. In reality, concerns date back further when 'amenity' rather than 'the environment' was the byword. Government reports such as Stevens and Verney laid the foundations of current policies culminating in MPS1, conveniently launched at LWM2.

In recent times, green groups' menu of concerns have focused on three staple issues: shifting away from crude 'predict and provide' to a positive 'plan, monitor, manage'; prioritising prudent use, including recycling; and improved protection and enhancement of wildlife and countryside. Other issues on the a la carte menu included landbanks, dormant permissions (especially in National Parks) and designated areas and species (see the 'Ten Tests' put forward by twelve major countryside, wildlife and marine NGOs in January 2001).

To be fair, looking at the Ten Tests now - in the wake of MPS1 and other developments in the planning system (e.g. SEA testing of minerals plans) - there have been many positive steps forward and the attitude of the minerals industry as a whole has been positive and 'can-do' on practical issues such as biodiversity and archaeology. Whilst clearly there will always be local issues that vex local authorities, communities and operators alike, it seems to speak volumes that there is a common level of dialogue and trust already apparent between all stakeholders at the UK NMF. Whether that dialogue is as strong and as positive at the end of the process remains to be seen but we hope so. There are many challenges to be met but the foremost include…

Security of supply

The idea of terra incognita beyond 2042 and the current downward projectory of reserves and permissions (for a number of key mineral sectors) is understandably exercising the minds of the industry but needs to be seen in perspective. Historically there has been (and continues to be for some minerals) strong over-provision. For example Derbyshire (not counting the Peak District National Park area) currently has total permitted reserves of 1013.3Mt, a potential landbank of over 100 years.

Given that over-provision is still the predominant position, we are now within a window of opportunity to take stock, leave behind 'predict and provide' and move over to a more flexible, environmental capacity-led system. This has begun in terms of SEA testing in some Government regions and local authorities and should spread quickly. However there are wider questions to be asked about the managed aggregate supply system ('MASS').

Happily, a raft of DCLG sponsored research projects being undertaken variously by BGS, Green Balance, Capita Symonds, National Stone Centre and the Centre for Economics and Business Research will come to conclusions on the future of MASS and other key topics and these will feed into the UKNMF process in early summer.

The other crucial issue, not envisaged by the likes of Verney, is the position of UK minerals supply within an increasingly globalised market and where the major operators are also foreign owned. This throws into strong relief economic and environmental issues about 'UK plc' and the pros and

cons of UK extraction versus holes in other, unspecified parts of the world and the associated carbon costs of imported materials. For many minerals, long distance sea movement would be uneconomic. But for high value, low volume minerals - say fluorspar - one bulk carrier load of less than 100,000t could obviate all vein mineral extraction in the Peak District National Park but destroy parts of the UK chemicals industry. Environmental and economic common sense would push us in the direction of self-sufficiency but we need to be convinced that need is real and backed by a truly sustainable planning system.

With the best will in the world, we are not even close to this yet nor will the Planning Bill deliver it for minerals. That's not to say that some very solid improvements could be made. However recent attempts to 'improve' the planning system do not seem to have achieved their aim (faster policy adoption and decisions) and have not met with much acclaim either. A move to 'Barkerise' mineral planning would fill many with fear, justified or not.

Protecting our landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage

There are substantive issues in this area, especially relating to DCLG research - due out shortly - on supply scenarios outside National Parks and AONBs. Recent policy development for designated landscapes has been to shift extraction away from them, either through the continuation of the 'major development' test in MPS1 or specific RSS policies, e.g. in Yorkshire and Humber and the East Midlands. Two National Parks in particular - the Peak District and the Yorkshire Dales - continue to bear a heavy load of their region's crushed rock supply, largely due to the legacy of permissions that were granted before or during the early years of National Park designation.

We have never campaigned for this to cease overnight but we are pressing for the consequences of the progressive move away from extraction in these areas to be considered sooner rather than later and be properly planned for - rather than waiting for the final years of some of the older permissions which would run until 2042. The UK NMF will hopefully provide a focused opportunity for discussing this key issue.

It is also relevant to explore how the role of protected landscapes might change in the future, given the growing pressures on life in modern society and the need to escape from these and the part that these areas will play in helping the government tackle the changing climate and social fabric. The importance of their role as carbon sinks (for example in peaty uplands) or as exemplars of sustainable living or green lungs within our increasingly crowded island is likely to increase. The implications of carbon reduction will also be considerable with rail-linked quarries likely to become of increasing importance.

We also hope that the UK NMF's work will lead to some positive discussion on dormant permissions in National Parks. As we near the tenth anniversary of the ground-breaking QPA Four Point Plan for National Parks, is it not time for a second round of key relinquishments? Could we in England learn from developments in Wales where a more pro-active approach is being taken, including the prohibition order route?

Finally, although very similar issues to those above face nationally and internationally designated nature conservation sites, archaeology has sometimes suffered the 'Cinderella' syndrome (at least in terms of parity with landscape and biodiversity). The new English Heritage policy on Mineral Extraction and the Historic Environment underscores the tripartite need to conserve historic mining sites, protect archaeological resources from quarrying impacts yet maintain supplies of natural building and roofing stone. In some respects, the latter is also a pressing security of supply issue.


Courtesy of Pat Payne English Heritage

Maintaining supplies of indigenous building and roofing stone is a key concern: restoration work at Apethorpe Hall, Northants

Carbon and minerals

Compared with issues such as security of supply and national parks, this is a vast, new and very challenging area in which we can perhaps only expect - by LWM3 - some good foundations to be laid for the future. But concerted and rapid action will be needed if national climate change targets are to be met. A consistent 'buy-in' by all mineral sub-sectors, building on established UK carbon schemes is a feasible aim, with the relevant trade associations and large companies leading on action, including monitoring and sharing best practice, especially with smaller sectors and companies.

Unscrambling the cumulative impact of legislation

This is the final area of UK NMF work and an issue principally of concern to industry. Although many companies would complain about over-regulation (especially in relation to EU directives), better management of complex transposition impacts is a thorny challenge given the multitude of agencies, Government departments and sometimes conflicting policy objectives. Whilst an environmental perspective would be unlikely to support de-regulation, time and resource wasted on unnecessary bureaucracy clearly detracts from 'core business', whether that be producing the minerals that society needs or doing our best for biodiversity, landscapes and cultural heritage.

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