

Greater Manchester Minerals Plan

Examination in Public

Matter 1 The Spatial Strategy

Issue: Whether the spatial strategy accurately reflects the geology of Greater Manchester and the balance of environmental considerations.

In particular:

- *What is the Spatial Strategy which is referred to in Policy 4?*
- *Why were Areas of Search chosen over Allocations or Preferred Areas?*
- *Were economic factors taken into account in discarding resources from the Areas of Search?*
- *Were planning and environmental criteria taken into account in assessing the Areas of Search, and if so, were some more heavily weighted than others?*

MPA Comment

Introduction

1. The points I wish to make about the Areas of Search (AoS) are similar in nature to those applying to the Mineral Safeguarding Areas (MSAs) since the latter were derived from the former. I will also concentrate on sand and gravel since that is area of provision about which there seems some urgency and where the plan seems most at fault. However, my comments could equally apply to other mineral AoS.
2. In addition, my background may be helpful to the inquiry. I hold degrees in geology and geography and in mineral surveying; I am a corporate member of the RTPI and RICS; I have 14 years' experience of mineral planning at both local and regional level in local government, and was for 12 years in the industry, rising to Regional Estates Manager for Lafarge Aggregates for the north of England and North Wales, which included the area of Greater Manchester. I have been in consultancy for 10 years and my clients include the aggregates 'majors' and the MPA.

What is the Spatial Strategy which is referred to in Policy 4?

2. The Spatial Strategy is described in paras 4.43 – 4.56 of the plan. This starts with the geology of the area and reduces the area available for consideration for mineral development by omitting constrained areas (amenity and environmental), inaccessible areas (transport connections and alternative transport modes) and areas remote from markets, whilst favouring land requiring restoration.

3. The plan (Appendix 1) describes a sieve based approach using 16 'absolute' constraints (e.g. urban areas and environmental designations) and three second level constraints - grade 3a land, woodland and river valleys.
4. Then a 250 metre buffer was applied to protect residential amenity. Green Belt land was specifically allowed to remain.
5. Finally, a further 11 constraints were applied to eliminate small outliers of mineral, areas of landscape value, existing mineral and waste operations, utility areas, cemeteries, playing fields, etc. Areas containing roads, canals and railways were 'washed over'.
6. This is a very impressive list of constraints but the methodology is not without criticism.

Why were Areas of Search chosen over Allocations or Preferred Areas?

7. According to the plan and subsequent representations (paras 4.35, 5.11 and App1 para 1.7) AoS have been chosen because despite a call for sites, no acceptable Specific Sites or Preferred Areas have been provided by the industry. This is a continuation of an earlier approach in a previous plan dating from 1989. We are not sure why this is so. The authorities claim it is because the industry says they are not interested in Greater Manchester because of poor quality resources. Yet there are still working sites with reserves beyond the minimum landbank level being produced at rates consistently higher than the apportionment. We therefore wonder whether a more encouraging planning regime might elicit more interest.

Were economic factors taken into account in discarding resources from the Areas of Search?

8. There was some account taken of economic factors relating to judgements made about small outliers of mineral and buffers against development in particular. However, arguably this did not go far enough. I don't know whether the industry was consulted over the minimum size for exploitable deposits, but in a similar exercise in West Yorkshire, the BGS interviewed senior aggregates industry geologists for information on industry preferences (*West Yorkshire sand and gravel resources: Investigating the potential for an increased sub-regional apportionment*, BGS 2009) to determine the realism of a proposed apportionment.
9. The geology of West Yorkshire differs in some respects from the Greater Manchester situation but the nature of the deposits is similar enough to invite comparison. The report concluded that the nature of the mineral present in the sub-region (with lignite contamination in the Aire and Calder valleys but cleaner gravels in the Wharf valley) means that specialist plant is needed in

most places to process the material which in turn requires large reserves of at least 1.0-1.5 Mt in order to make new operations viable covering between 10 ha and 25 ha (deposits varying from 2.5 m to 6 m in thickness). Many deposits are fragmented by development and infrastructure and large workable deposits unconstrained by land use and amenity considerations are few and far between. In addition, while there are probably widespread deposits in the Wharfe valley landscape and access constraints discourage the industry from applying. The situation in West Yorkshire can therefore be summarised as declining prospects for sand and gravel extraction due to a lack of accessible deposits of a suitable size and a restrictive planning regime, a situation that is not far removed from this area.

10. We would therefore have preferred the AoS to have been subject to a further sieving by size of deposit (assumptions can be made about potential yield) for new operations. This would have involved judgments about the many smaller and less accessible AoS.
11. I intend to illustrate my point by a few examples using the sand and gravel AoS. However, the task is not been made easy by the small scale plans of the AoS in the plan. Map 2 is at a scale of 185,000:1 which makes it difficult to identify areas with any degree of accuracy. However, I've managed to do this by comparing Map 2 with the MSA maps 11-20, which are about three times as large and then comparing that with Google Maps online.
12. For example, in Trafford there are three small AoS shown along the M60 corridor. The most westerly one lies south of the A6144 west of the Ashton-on-Mersey Golf Club and may be about 40 ha. However, it is triangular in shape and contains the parish church of St Martin and its churchyard plus the Golf Club house complex and part of the course itself. The access appears to be through residential areas. There is a field to the north of the church which might be capable of working but this is probably about 10 ha. If standoffs to the road and other uses are taken into account, plus the poor access, it is most doubtful in my view that any operator would look at this site seriously.
13. The second AoS appears to lie just south of the M60 half way between junctions 7 and 8 but may be misplaced since nothing is shown in this position on the MSA map. There is an area of MSA lying under junction 8 of the M60 about 900 m east of the previous site and if this is the AoS it is mostly sterilised by the motorway leaving a small field south of the carriageway barely 100 m across. It too is unviable.

14. The last area lies a further 3 km to the east just by junction 6 of the motorway. It is part of a much larger area of MSA extending along the north side of the carriageway to the district boundary. I was not able to determine the size of the site but it is tiny and is part of another Golf Club – Sale GC. Again, not a viable proposition.
15. I could go on but it would be tedious to do so. From even my cursory examination using the plan maps and Google Maps, I have confirmed that the small AoS are likely to be unviable and it is more likely that the only real prospect of serious industry interest will be in the larger AoS in Bury, Oldham and Rochdale (assuming the current levels of constraints). The rest is just a waste of time. The impression is that had more work been done in making judgements about viability, either from maps with industry involvement or in marginal cases by visits on site, the AoS methodology would have been much more useful. (I also ought to emphasise that although many of these areas would not qualify as realistic AoS they should still be considered for MSA status).
16. In conclusion, I believe the AoS need to be subject to a much more rigorous analysis of viability before being adopted. They should also be shown on much larger scale maps to facilitate identification.

Were planning and environmental criteria taken into account in assessing the Areas of Search, and if so, were some more heavily weighted than others?

17. The list of constraints used in the methodology is impressive but taken together eliminates a very large area of resource. I believe some of the absolute constraints have been applied too rigorously, particularly in the light of a diminished number of viable AoS coming from the existing methodology.
18. For example, an unreasonable approach is taken to the protection of sites designated under the Birds and Habitats Directives. Whilst the basis for this might be the statutory test for the need for Appropriate Assessment, when mineral development is assessed it can often prove to be sustainable, particularly if the effects, though significant, are nevertheless positive. If the current approach is maintained it prevents consideration of extraction of some significant mineral resources that are in, or even in the proximity of, SACs or SPAs.
19. A further example is that of the status of Best and Most Versatile land (BMV). The policy context for the protection of such land is PPS7, where paras 28 & 29 make it clear that BMV must be taken into account alongside other sustainability issues. Development of BMV should be avoided where possible in preference to poorer quality land, but it is for the LPA to decide

'whether best and most versatile agricultural land can be developed, having carefully weighed the options in the light of competent advice'.

20. In view of the paucity of viable AoS coming forward (bearing in mind that the AoS may apparently also contain areas of unmapped Grade 3a land and therefore be further diminished in numbers and size) I would have expected the authorities to have looked at the possibility of relaxing their absolute approach to development of BMV land especially in the light of the track record of the industry in minimising loss, beneficiating poorer quality land and providing opportunities for sustainable afteruses. It is not unusual in other parts of the country for such land to be worked for sand and gravel being accepted as long as loss of BMV land is minimised and soils are sustainably retained.
21. A further Category 2 constraint which could be relaxed is River Valleys. However, even with the footnote on page 64 I am not sure of its status. Presumably, river valleys are out but may be considered for mineral working in some circumstances.
22. Other constraints included on a case by case basis included open space and areas of landscape value. The footnote on page 65 indicates that the definition of open space has followed the Annex of PPG17. However, my brief look at the AoS in Trafford found that two of the areas were on golf courses, a use which is listed in the Annex as open space with a public value, so I am not sure how this constraint was applied. In the case of landscape value this presumably did not include designated areas, and no further information is given about the constraint, so comment is difficult.
23. A final constraint which is too restrictive is the 250m buffer from urban areas (App 1 para 1.21) which seems like a roundabout way of imposing buffers without referencing them in policy. The only plan references to buffers are in paras 5.16 and 5.39 which state that they will be considered at the development management stage.
24. The MPA has long campaigned against the imposition of standardised buffer zones for mineral workings. Effects on amenity differ greatly depending on the local topography, degree of ground cover, artificial screening of operations, safeguards built in to processing and mobile plant, depth of working, distance from receptors, prevailing wind direction, and design modifications. A suite of design modifications can and are often made to alleviate the most adverse effects of working. Therefore, since the impact of any one site is specific to its nature, design and location it is an inefficient use of resources and a potential waste of mineral resources to impose standardised buffer zones. The proper place for evaluating the amenity effects of proposals is

when the Environmental Impact assessment is carried out. MPS2 para 28 contains guidance on separation distances for mineral working and advises that mpas “*should require a distance that is effective but reasonable, taking into account:*

- *the nature of the mineral extraction activity (including its duration);*
- *the need to avoid undue sterilisation of mineral resources, location and topography;*
- *the characteristics of the various environmental effects likely to arise; and*
- *the various amelioration measures that can be applied.”*

25. This flexible approach including, I would judge, the ability of the industry to reduce and minimise its environmental burden over time, is at odds with the AoS methodology, which I would argue leads to unnecessary sterilisation of mineral. A standardised buffer of 250 m is not justified and should be left to the consideration of an Environmental Statement.

26. However, it may be argued that it is the purpose of the second part of policy 2 to draw in areas outside the AoS which subsequently become acceptable subject to “*changes in economic viability, demand for minerals, technologies for the extraction or processing of minerals and improvements in data on minerals*” (para 5.19) and therefore that there is no need to take account of the relaxation of constraints. But this argument presupposes that sufficient AoS have been identified to provide for the apportionment and that such changes cannot be identified now. It is my argument that it is far from clear that there is sufficient provision in the AoS (and indeed the authorities seem to confirm this by their statement that there was some doubt that the new sand and gravel apportionments should be accepted) and overly restrictive planning constraints may be part of the problem. I have also pointed out that there is some merit in reviewing the methodology to take into account factors, both economic and environmental, that we can know of now. The proper use of AoS in mineral planning is for broad areas where there is less known of the mineral resource (MPS1 Practice Guide para 41) and not for areas where the other factors quoted by the plan apply. National guidance assumes that environmental factors sufficient to give a reasonable prospect of planning permission have already been identified in AoS.

Conclusion

27. The AoS methodology can be criticised for eliminating significant areas of mineral resource from potential AoS because of the lack of application of economic information on viable deposits and an overly restrictive application of planning constraints. In the case of sand and gravel the result is a few areas at which the industry might look coupled with many much smaller areas, which not only do not meet the criteria for AoS in national guidance but act as a disincentive to the

industry, notwithstanding there is the appearance of some flexibility built into policy 2 for sites outside AoS. I believe this does not meet the test of soundness on grounds of national policy, flexibility and deliverability and that the AoS should be revisited and reviewed in the light of my criticisms.