

Mineral Planning

Concern grows over aggregates

8 February 2018, by Trefor Evans, Be the First to Comment

There is a crisis is looming for the managed aggregate supply system, says Trefor Evans, who warns lack of government funding could have a detrimental effect on the delivery of housing and infrastructure plans



Serious implications for housing plans. Photo: 123RF/Duncan Andison

For the past 40 years the minerals extractive industry has operated under a managed aggregate supply system (MASS). It has been overseen by various government

bodies and is stewarded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The system operates through the aggregate working parties (AWPs) which consist of stakeholders including, but not limited to, local government, national government organisations, planning officers and industry representatives.

The British Aggregates Association (BAA) has been involved in all the AWP's meetings since its inception in 2000 and represents the SME sectors of the minerals extractive industry with members operating over 300 sites across the UK. Scotland has a separate planning system and Wales has two regional AWP's, north and south, that have funding going forward. But this article is concerned primarily with England.

Funding issues

In November 2017, there was a national co-ordinating group (NCG) meeting held in London to discuss the future of MASS with the DCLG. Funding for the AWP's is currently unsecured after March 2018 and there is as yet no confirmation of it continuing past this date. The universal views of all attending this meeting was that not continuing the AWP's system would have disastrous effects on the supplies of minerals going forward.

The BAA through Peter Lemon of Middleton Aggregates was robust in his defence of the system warning the DCLG that failure to continue would inevitably result in major shortages, particularly of sand and gravel in England. That would result in an inability to provide the government's housing and infrastructure programme and the increase in materials costs to everyone. Peter pointed out that as the government consumes 54% of all minerals in England it would massively affect the budget for new infrastructure and housing programmes.

In 2012, the DCLG published guidance on the managed aggregate supply system and although this document is no longer considered current much of what it says is relevant. It stated at the time: "For 35 years unbalances in the supply and demand (of aggregates) have been met through the MASS." This is now 40 years of continued monitoring and management which has led to an adequate supply of materials to the industry. But there has been a disturbing trend that has seen replenishment for sand and gravel drop to 20%. There are various reasons for this but it was confirmed by representatives from some of the major and SME organisations at the NCG meeting that uncertainty in the MASS system means that speculating on new applications at this time is not an attractive proposition.

It is vital for industry and government bodies – including minerals planners – to have a clear view of what is required in terms of provision and the likelihood of applications being granted owing to the high costs involved in submitting a suitable planning application. Most members on a planning committee will be negative towards granting a quarry application, so it is vital to have the support for a project from the minerals planning officer. While the application has to be of a solid, environmentally sound nature, the MASS will provide proof of need and therefore the proposition to

grant.

Without the work of the AWP's there would be far less reason for an authority to look favourably on an application. Several BAA members have said already they would now not pursue new permissions if DCLG were to cut funding for MASS as the chances of failure will be hugely increased. Ironically in the 2012 DCLG guidance it states: "Since quarries take years to plan and bring into production, the MASS has provided the mechanism to deliver long-term planning for the supply of aggregate." The work of the AWP's is vital because it provides for an adequate supply of minerals. The AWP's are also involved in planning process considerations and some of these are becoming of increasing concern.

Safeguarding resources

Safeguarding of sites in terms of mineral resources as yet unworked and continuation of railheads and wharfs for the import of minerals are major issues. The propensity to grant permissions for housing and infrastructure on vital reserves and transport connections has to be counteracted by the MASS system. This is of particular concern in the north west and Greater Manchester and in Greater London where there is inherently little indigenous supply of material and import is required from the rest of the country. There are only finite supplies of minerals and it is a danger to remove these from the future landbank by granting permissions to build on them. There are other concerns on landbanks being shelved owing to the relationships, particularly in the hard-rock environment between actual landbank and productive capacity. AWP's take this into account and can put forward judgements based on real-life situations.

Where materials are provided for as areas of search or preferred areas in local plans, some of this will never be worked as the land owners are not interested in selling the rights for extraction. This needs to be monitored by the AWP's to provide flexibility on allocation. Moreton Cullimore of BAA member Cullimores has flagged up the dangers of relying on older data and the need to continue to update situations regarding potential sites.

The BAA is lobbying government to retain funding for the MASS from DCLG and is determined to do anything in its power to emphasise the real dangers of not continuing. It can only be hoped government makes the connection between delivery of its housing and infrastructure plans and the supplies of materials to achieve this before it is too late.

Trefor Evans is an officer at the British Aggregates Association

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