

Area North Committee – 25 January 2012

## 10. Somerset County Council - Minerals Options Paper for Consultation

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Consultation website: *http://www.somersetconsults.org.uk*

### Recommendations

- (1) Members are invited to respond to the consultation
- (2) Note that a formal response from SSDC will be made by the District Executive

### Public Interest

The Minerals Options Paper identifies a number of issues and potential options relating to future minerals development within Somerset. The consultation covers all minerals extracted in Somerset, namely peat, aggregates and building stones. It provides an opportunity for consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including the general public. Feedback from this consultation will inform the preparation of the County Council's Minerals Core Strategy which will run to the year 2028.

The presentation to Area North provides an opportunity for any specific local issues to be raised and local knowledge gathered.

### Main report

This report summarises the key issues and questions within the documents currently out for public consultation.

This consultation has started and runs until 12 Feb 2012.

An appendix is attached with a map showing the locations of current active and dormant quarries in Area North.

There are full details of the consultation, including an on-line questionnaire at:  
<http://www.somersetconsults.org.uk/consult.ti/MineralsOptionsPaper/consultationHome>

A paper copy of the Summary Minerals Options Paper is available at Somerset Libraries, and Somerset District and Borough Council Offices, or upon request.

Minerals policy is important because it defines how the balance between the need for minerals by society and impacts on local communities and the environment affected by minerals extraction will be met. It also highlights where benefits from quarrying can be secured through positive reclamation and how to achieve sustainable minerals provision. It is the basis on which planning decisions are taken when applications are made for additional minerals extraction.

**Purpose:** The Minerals Options Paper and Summary have been drafted for consultation to support development of future minerals policy in Somerset. Several issues and options specific to each of the main mineral types worked in Somerset (aggregates, peat and building stones) and broader issues such as minerals safeguarding and development management policy topics are covered.

**Who are we contacting?** We have sent out letters and emails to parishes, district councils, minerals industry and local interest group representatives to highlight the consultation. We have sent postcards to residents living near quarries and peat digging areas. A press release has gone out. The consultation document is available at [www.somersetconsults.org.uk](http://www.somersetconsults.org.uk) or paper copies can be requested.

**What next?** Following consultation, responses will be considered and will help to inform new policy. A pre-submission Minerals Core Strategy will be written setting out Somerset's minerals policy which will require approval by Somerset Full Council before further consultation takes place.

### **Overview of the issues included in the Minerals Options Paper:**

#### **AGGREGATES**

##### **1. How big should the crushed rock landbank\* be?**

(\*Landbank is the amount of tonnage with consent to be worked.)

Responses from the Aggregate Issues consultation (March-May 2010) varied from 10 years only to 20 years supply to be maintained throughout the plan (i.e. plan period of 15 years plus 20 years beyond). Two scenarios are suggested 15 years only and 15 years for the lifetime of the plan. A further question asks what supply rate should be used: 13.41Mt/yr (Somerset's apportionment proposed by the South West Regional Aggregates Working Party) or 11.7Mt/yr (average annual sales from 1999 to 2009).

##### **2. Exceptions when additional reserves can be permitted despite an excessive landbank**

Current national policy indicates that additional reserves should be considered if there is a demand for aggregates that can't be met by existing reserves.

The consultation asks if there should there be a limit on the quantity of additional reserves that can be permitted where a need that cannot be met from other sources is identified?

##### **3. Maintaining local supply**

Somerset has two large rail-linked quarries with a combined permitted annual output of 14 million tonnes which exceeds the permitted output of all the other aggregates quarries combined. National policy highlights the risk of stifling competition where large landbanks are held within a few sites. Concentration of minerals activity at a few sites would increase impacts around those sites and could result in greater transport distances to market. How should smaller quarries access additional reserves to meet local demand?

One option allows small additions only, representing 15 years or so of supply for smaller sites. An alternative option is proposed whereby all quarries can apply for additional reserves but with a cap on the total reserves held at any one site eg. 25 years worth. Longer term this could result in a lower landbank and provide flexibility for operators to manage their site planning and investment without having to consider timing with respect to the landbank size. With this option there would be no need for a policy relating to Issue 2 above.

#### **4. Dormant and abandoned sites**

Dormant sites (ones which have a planning permission but cannot work without agreed modern working conditions) and abandoned quarry sites can blight local areas. The paper asks consultees to identify which sites are particularly problematic and why. There are three mechanisms identified which could be implemented to improve these sites.

#### **5. Shortfall in sand and gravel reserves**

Somerset has a shared responsibility for sand and gravel provision with Devon and Cornwall. Devon has met the bulk of the shared sand and gravel apportionment in recent years. However, a shortfall of reserves has been identified post-2019. Devon has identified potential future sites and is keen to maintain a spread of supplies thereby reducing transport impacts. A sand and gravel site at Whiteball straddles the Somerset/Devon border. Two areas with potential for future mineral extraction are identified at Whiteball on the Somerset-side in the existing Somerset Minerals Local Plan. Somerset can continue to contribute to sand and gravel supplies by retaining the areas around Whiteball, reviewing whether there are other potential sites in Somerset, and/or include criteria based policy for new sand and gravel reserves as and when proposals are put forward.

#### **6. Restoration and after-use in the East Mendips**

The consultation asks if the restoration and after-use of quarry sites in the East Mendips, (an area of concentrated minerals activity) should be determined by meeting criteria defined in an agreed long term strategic landscape-scale restoration strategy, or be determined on a site by site basis? An argument is made that reclamation in this area should have a biodiversity focus given the presence of a European designated nature site and the rural nature of the area.

#### **7. Carbon and production of aggregates**

It is in operators interests to reduce energy consumption. However, to encourage focus on a range of carbon-reducing measures operators could be asked to submit a carbon action plan with proposals. Renewable energy schemes could form a part of carbon-reduction measures. Should renewable energy schemes be supported where connected with minerals operations, and if so which? Or should renewable energy schemes be considered separately?

### **PEAT**

#### **8. Establishing a landbank for peat**

Projections for future need for peat are based on the Government's target of zero peat use in England by 2030 to be met through voluntary changes with support from a Task Group. There are some valid concerns about the likelihood of this target being met. Should demand for peat not decline as expected there could be a rise in peat imports if English peat reserves are not maintained. Policy could be developed to retain flexibility to release new reserves if monitoring of peat use and reserves indicate there is a need. At this stage there are sufficient supplies of Somerset peat for the lifetime of the plan (further work is being carried out to confirm this). Current national planning policy proposals set out in the Draft National Planning Policy Framework will ban all future peat permissions. Somerset's Minerals Core Strategy will have to ban peat permissions and retaining flexibility will no longer be an option if this national policy is adopted

#### **9. Sites with potential to impact on "Regulation 63" designated land**

Sites with permission for peat extraction with the potential to negatively impact on the Somerset Levels and Moors Special Protection Area are known as "Regulation 63" sites. Future policy could enable peat reserves in such sites to be "given up" for in return for planning permission elsewhere in a less sensitive location. A new permission would have

to be acceptable under normal planning terms. As discussed in Issue 8 above, if national policy bans all future peat permissions this will not be an option.

#### **10. Reclamation framework for peat**

Comments were made via the Peat Issues Paper consultation (November – December 2009) that the current reclamation framework included in the Minerals Local Plan could be improved. The consultation options are to retain the existing framework; to revise it to reflect changes in the industry and biodiversity ambitions of the Natural Environment White Paper; or to allow a variety of beneficial land uses on a site-by-site basis.

### **BUILDING STONE**

#### **11. Local stone for local demand**

Respondents to the Building Stone Issues Paper consultation (August 2010 – September 2010) raised concerns regarding diversity of building stone supplies and potential impact on maintaining the local character and distinctiveness of the county. Options proposed could assist in increasing the range of building stone types currently supplied, including consideration of additional activities to help improve the economic viability of building stone quarries and affirming the importance of building stones for maintaining the historic environment and character of Somerset.

### **ENERGY MINERALS**

#### **12. Coal, oil and gas**

Provision of energy minerals from on-shore reserves will increase in the future. The Department for Climate Change has issued 3 licences granting exclusive rights for exploration and extraction. Most exploration and all extraction activity will require planning permission. Policies will be developed to cover the key stages of energy-mineral development, and aspects requiring consideration within the planning system.

### **MINERAL SAFEGUARDING AREAS**

#### **13. Safeguarding minerals for future use**

Previous consultation on safeguarding highlighted a lack of understanding regarding the issue. The Minerals Options Paper should help to clarify this. Given the technical nature of this topic it is proposed that we will define the mineral safeguarding areas and mineral consultation areas based on the requirements of Minerals Policy Statement 1, best practice guides and discussions with the minerals industry. Areas identified for safeguarding will be consulted on in detail at the next consultation phase.

### **DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT POLICIES**

#### **14. List of topics to cover**

A list of topics is provided that could be covered. Consultees are asked whether all are relevant, or whether there are additional topics that should be included. National policy is to be slimmed down. A broad list of topics is therefore likely to be needed at a local level.

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