

4.0 FUTURE AREAS OF AGGREGATES EXTRACTION

- 4.1 To meet the identified shortfall in permitted reserves substantial additional areas of land will need new planning permissions.
- 4.2 In considering which areas might be suitable for future extraction, the Mineral Planning Authority has to be satisfied about the viability of the potential resource and the environmental consequences of extraction. Environmental nuisance from the production and distribution of minerals cannot be totally avoided, but every reasonable effort must be made to minimise adverse effects.
- 4.3 Sand and gravel deposits are widespread in Cambridgeshire. However, not all sand and gravel deposits contain sufficient volumes of saleable aggregates to justify extraction, and not all areas containing saleable material could be permitted because of overriding planning reasons. There are few, if any, locations where aggregate extraction could be undertaken without generating planning objections. Accordingly it is necessary to look carefully at all areas known to contain sand and gravel and to balance the weight of planning objections against the need to provide opportunities for gravel extraction.
- 4.4 An appraisal has been undertaken to assist in striking this balance, and to assist in deciding where, and if, sand and gravel extraction should be undertaken during the Plan period. The broad methodology is set out in **Appendix 3**.
- 4.5 The appraisal involved gathering together the available information on the distribution of sand and gravel to map the locations of known resources. These locations were then assessed against national and local policies. Agricultural land quality was used to identify primary and secondary resource areas; strategic conservation factors were then applied to leave residual potential resource areas. This analysis eliminated those Areas of Best Landscape designated in statutory Local Plans and also indicated those remaining areas of Grade 3 land which coincided with potential resource. Subsequent stages involved the appraisal of the residual areas against various planning factors in parallel with a more detailed assessment of resource factors. On this basis, initial areas of search were identified, which were then reappraised before inclusion in the Draft Plan.
- 4.6 Following consultation, representations on the Draft Plan's site proposals were formally considered and amendments incorporated as appropriate. In addition, new site proposals arising from representations were also considered. Generally, these new sites were not preferred to those areas already proposed.
- 4.7 **Agriculture** is a major factor in a County in which 97% of land is classified as Grade 3 and above, of which 70% is of Grade 1 or Grade 2. Until recently national policy in the form of DoE Circular 75/76 (now withdrawn), together with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) powers of objection, had major influence on the location of sand and gravel workings. Traditionally, therefore, extraction has taken place along the river valleys on inferior, yet relatively good agricultural land on which full reinstatement has not always been possible. This resulted in an intensity of gravel workings in certain areas and an excess of water areas.

- 4.8 Concurrent with changing attitudes on agricultural production, attitudes towards the countryside in general are also being revised. In Cambridgeshire this is particularly relevant in terms of the landscape and nature conservation value of the remaining riverside meadows.
- 4.9 The change in emphasis in national agricultural policy culminated in the withdrawal of Circular 75/76 and its replacement with Circular 16/87.
- 4.10 These changes came too late to be incorporated in the submitted Structure Plan and similarly too late to affect the original methodology for the planning appraisal. This means that preliminary efforts to identify potential resource areas strictly on the basis of agricultural land classification may be seen as over restrictive. In practice this was not the case due to the limited availability of unconstrained Grade 3 land. Current policy summarised in MPG6, paragraph 18 suggests that whilst the most versatile land should continue to be protected from irreversible loss, greater consideration must be given to the countryside for its own sake rather than simply in terms of productivity. Thus the issue of restoration assumes even greater importance.
- 4.11 **Restoration and Afteruse** are major issues. Current agricultural policy moves away from maximising productivity and requires a broader view to be taken of rural areas. This includes increased emphasis on both environmental and economic measures. Indeed improvement of the rural economy, increased diversification and a reduction in agricultural land may be seen as weakening the case for restoring mineral workings to agricultural afteruse. In the national context this argument may be justified. In Cambridgeshire, the extent of high quality land is unique. National policy is set out in MPG7, paragraphs 53 - 72. To avoid the irreversible loss of high grade agricultural land, planning permission, if appropriate on other planning grounds, will only be granted if high quality restoration of the original land's physical characteristics is proposed and is feasible. Alternative afteruses, involving irreversible losses of good agricultural land, will only be contemplated where a specific need can be demonstrated. Such proposals will be considered on their merits.
- 4.12 **The current Structure Plan** was approved, with modifications, by the Secretary of State in March 1989.
- 4.13 The minerals policies of the structure plan are set out in **Appendix 1**.
- 4.14 Statutory constraints such as the location of major gas and oil pipelines and any underground electricity cables will be considered at the time an application for planning permission for abstraction of minerals is made. With regard to overhead electricity lines, whilst there will be similar problems of support for towers, there will also be a need to maintain statutory electrical clearances to the conductors from any abstraction plant and equipment.