

WARWICKSHIRE CC MINERALS PLAN
Commentary on inert fill availability in the West Midlands
Richard Bate, *Green Balance*, 7 March 2018

I have studied the use of inert fill in quarries in the counties surrounding the West Midlands conurbation: Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire (whose MPA also assists Telford & Wrekin), Staffordshire and Warwickshire. The urban authorities were assumed to have no difficulty in treating inert fill at any sites needing this within their boundaries.

The principal supply of inert fill comes from construction, demolition and excavation (CD&E) wastes, with additional supplies from sources such as the wastes of coal-fired power stations (pfa) and rock dust wastes at crushed rock quarries. Power stations are now in decline (creating potential difficulties for infilling at Newbold Quarry, Staffordshire) but strategic data suggest CD&E waste supply appears to be growing.

CD&E wastes are now largely recycled. Depending on the efficiency of the materials recovery facility (MRF) this can be from 70% upwards, but is usually 80-90%. Recycling of CD&E wastes mainly takes place in and close to the large urban areas which supply it. Recycling sites close to the West Midlands conurbation are able to obtain material quite easily, as the combined effects of the Landfill Tax and the Aggregates Levy strongly incentivise recycling. Large demolition sites may bring mobile recycling plant temporarily onto their sites to minimise transportation costs. The principal sites around the West Midlands taking large quantities of inert material appear to be at Ketley Quarry in Dudley, Saredon Quarry in Staffordshire near Wolverhampton, Shire Oak Quarry in Staffordshire near Walsall, Whitemoor Hay Quarry in Staffordshire near Lichfield north of Birmingham, Hereford Quarries near Hereford, and in Warwickshire at Dunton Quarry at Curdworth and Coleshill Quarry both close to Birmingham.

The residuals from the recycling process can be used for backfilling quarries. The effect of growth in recycling has been to cause actual site filling with inert waste to decline. This has the potential to prolong the period of time for which sites requiring inert landfill remain open. Inert material left over for filling has negligible value and can therefore bear little cost of transport distance. Such material is more likely to find its way into farmers' hard-standings nearby or to be spread around the bottom of operational sites than be sent to distant quarries needing backfilling. How far inert fill material can travel depends on the economics of individual companies and their sources, but the 20km distance of Wasperton from Coventry seems to me an optimistic distance. There is, however, one major influence on the market which is now becoming apparent: waste from the line of the HS2 route, which may be able to travel further. I have heard of a somewhat distant site approached to take materials: the relevant factor appears to be that it is very close to a motorway junction.

The need for inert waste for purposes other than quarry backfilling is declining with the progressive phasing out of non-hazardous landfill sites traditionally used for domestic refuse, with non-recyclable materials increasingly being incinerated ('energy from waste'). Landfill sites historically took significant quantities of CD&E waste for cover. The advent of high rates of recycling has resulted in there being no remaining landfill sites left in Herefordshire, for example. Shropshire County Council reports that the decline in demand

for inert materials for landfill sites has caused some skip operators to cease trading. All domestic waste from Worcestershire is now incinerated.

The need for inert fill for quarry backfill is most pressing in two circumstances: where the quarried land was Best and Most Versatile agricultural land (BMV, i.e. Grades 1, 2 and 3a) and is expected to be restored to that agricultural grade; and where land with a high water table needs to be restored to farmland. Only inert material will be acceptable in sites with a high water table, though in areas where groundwater flow is significant in water supply there may be a restriction on any infilling at all due to the risk of polluting materials becoming inadvertently mixed into the inert material.

Mineral Planning Authorities are usually alert to the risk that inert fill may not be available at greater distances from major urban areas in the quantities needed to secure quarry restoration in an acceptable period of time. In these cases MPAs and mineral companies are generally likely to promote restoration and after-uses which do not require inert fill to previous land levels. Shropshire County Council aims to encourage the inert fill available to be used for the restoration of BMV agricultural land and also encourages restoration to lake after-uses (principally nature conservation) in recognition of the shortage of available inert fill. However, no individual sites where this had been done were specifically identified in my search through the region. Staffordshire County Council recognises that inert fill supply could decline in future, so new planning permissions have built-in review mechanisms, typically every two years, to reassess the restoration arrangements in terms of void capacity, rates of backfilling and, if needed, a review of restoration objectives. This had been imposed on an extension to Shire Oak, for example.

I have not been able to identify any sites in the West Midlands where insufficient inert materials have been available to secure the intended restoration in the expected time period. I have identified one site where the MPA argues that the delay in inert filling is due to the site operator charging too high a fee (and where there is no time limit on restoration), and another where restoration is due to start soon when mineral working has been completed but the MPA questions the competence of the firm to achieve the filling. These are commercial constraints on filling, not matters of inert fill availability or capacity.

Many of the issues surrounding the use of inert fill in the West Midlands have arisen at a public inquiry held in November 2017 into a proposed development at Pave Lane Quarry, Telford & Wrekin, from which the decision is awaited. This was a proposal for sand and gravel working followed by backfilling with 1.5mm³ of inert waste. One of the grounds for refusal of the application was *“The need for the waste facility as an additional landfill site has not been established and any purported benefits arising from the proposal are significantly outweighed by the loss of best and most versatile agricultural land. As such, the proposal is contrary to Policy ER7 in the Telford & Wrekin Local Plan (Submission Version) and national planning policy”*. Issues in dispute at the inquiry included the availability of inert material, the capacity of existing sites to accommodate it, the practicability of return loads to the quarry from sales of aggregates, the likely speed of restoration, and the impact of the site being 20km from the edge of the West Midlands conurbation. The outcome of the inquiry will have significant implications for the likely effectiveness of arguments relevant to the proposed allocation of sites 4 and 5 in the Warwickshire MLP.