

The Need to Consider the Prior Extraction of Coal Resources Ahead of Development

Across the country valuable surface coal resources are being needlessly sterilised by new non-mineral development such as housing, employment and retail. In England in 2006 the introduction of MPS1 indicated the Government's desire to ensure that minerals are safeguarded from sterilisation through the definition of Mineral Safeguarding Areas (MSAs). Similar obligations are set out in Minerals Planning Policy Wales, with a slightly different approach being advocated in Scotland under Scottish Planning Policy.

The roll-out of MSAs across England has been slow due to the general progress on LDFs, particularly as definitive boundaries need to be set out on proposals maps which usually accompany site allocation documents which tend to be the last to be undertaken.

Defining MSAs do not achieve the Government's aims on their own; they need to be properly implemented when applications for non-mineral development come forward in such areas. Part of that consideration includes the need to assess the potential for the mineral to be extracted ahead of development being undertaken. This is known as prior extraction or pre-extraction. The prior extraction of coal resources has been successfully undertaken across the country both in urban and rural areas over many decades. In addition this can address mining legacy issues on some sites thereby facilitating safe development, whereas on other sites it can generate much needed additional revenue from coal sales. In all cases where coal is present on a development site, a separate permission is needed from The Coal Authority to intersect with or to remove the coal because it is owned by the State, this is a simple process dealt with by the operator themselves.

Prior extraction of coal can take place within major urban conurbations, it can occur on a small or large scale, and examples are recorded on sites ranging from 0.3Ha to 28.0Ha.

Practical Example: Sackville Street/Fitzwilliam Street in Barnsley which was the brown field site of the former Canister Works. 0.85 Hectares mixed use development including 188 residential units with ground floor A1/A3 units and parking within the main built up area Barnsley town centre. The site is located in an area of surface coal resource and also former mining legacy including shallow workings and mine entries. 1,600 tonnes of coal were extracted within 4 weeks as part of the other site works. This development achieved two national policy objectives: avoiding the unnecessary sterilisation of coal (MPS1) and removed existing land instability caused by former coal mining (PPG14). The development was successfully completed and now makes a vibrant contribution to the street scene.

Such extraction is usually undertaken as part of the overall groundwork activities on site and it normally only takes a matter of days or weeks rather than months or years. Also the appearance of such prior extraction looks more like other site preparation activity; it does not look like what most people would consider being mineral extraction.



Pillars of coal being extracted as part of ground works: prevents sterilisation and effective method of remediating unstable ground caused by former coal workings



Coal close to the surface being extracted as part of ground works: prevents sterilisation and effective method of remediating unstable ground caused by former coal workings

Outcrop of coal close to the surface which would be sterilised without prior extraction and has the potential to cause instability for surface development



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As the protection of coal as a valuable energy mineral is important to the future diversity and flexibility of the UK energy market, The Coal Authority is charged with ensuring that the surface coal resource across the country is not needlessly sterilised by non-mineral development as one of the organisation's objectives. Further information on coal resource issues and the planning system can be seen on our website:

<http://coal.decc.gov.uk/en/coal/cms/services/planning/planning.aspx>.

The Confederation of UK Coal Producers (CoalPro) is the Industry Body and together with the individual operating companies are keen to promote the opportunities for prior extraction of coal resources amongst decision makers and developers. Further details of operators can be obtained from www.coalpro.co.uk/members.shtml

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