

BAA hosts sector overview

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This year's British Aggregates Association conference featured a variety of speakers from across the industry. Alison Carter reports on the sector's approach to heritage risks, water issues, skills and finance

The Palace Hotel Buxton provided a welcoming venue for this year's British Aggregates Association (BAA) annual general meeting and conference, with Peter Huxtable, BAA secretary and the day's chair, welcoming 88 members to the event.

The first speaker in the five-minute sessions was Caz Jewell, programme manager at Nature After Minerals (NAM). She outlined the organisation's successful restoration work and highlighted its current and future aims: to promote best practice, help identify key demonstration sites and provide biodiversity advice on mineral site design.

Phil Slater from SLR Consulting gave a comprehensive update on quarry-related water issues. He reminded attendees of the changes that have taken place: Discharge Consent is now called a Water Discharge Activity Permit and may also be part of a wider environmental permit; Flood Risk PPS25 has been replaced by national planning guidance, but with the same standards; 2012 SEPA guidance on Scottish groundwater-dependent terrestrial ecosystems reduces the list of vegetation types that indicate groundwater dependency and covers the issue of compensation if dewatering is refused.

However, Slater questioned where funding would come from to cover potential claims. A group within the Mineral Products Association is looking at these issues and discussions are ongoing as to how dewatering licences would work in practice, he said.

He also felt it would be useful for those operating in the quarrying sector to keep accurate records of water use, for example for dust suppression and wheel washing (rainwater harvesting does not need a licence). He said the CBI Minerals Group felt the threshold for serious change must be set in relation to economic consequences.

Heritage risks

Will Bedford from CgMs acknowledged that the mineral sector could be wary of archaeological finds. He outlined useful strategies to avoid unreasonable pre-application costs, such as engaging early on with heritage risks, using previous studies and focusing on key objectives.

Martin Layer from Smiths Bletchington gave an update on inert waste restoration, following the demise of paragraphs 9 and 19 on waste exemptions. The sector's options are to register a new waste exemption, stop the activity or apply for an environmental permit. But Layer said the most significant question is whether the act is recovery or disposal.

He said guidance could be found in the Environmental Agency's EPR 13 (RG13) Defining Waste Recovery: Permanent Deposit of Waste on Land document.

Layer said a number of 'test' points should be examined: Is there a clear benefit from the activity and is the waste suitable for its intended use? Is more waste being proposed than is really necessary and would the proposal be properly carried out? And is the waste a substitute for a non-waste material?

Robin Hamilton from Home Revolution discussed his development of zero-cement concrete. Having designed an energy-neutral revolving building, Hamilton needed to fill the walls with 500,000kg of a high-density stable material with a high thermal mass.

No such material could be found so he developed Greencrete. Although not able to describe Greencrete in detail for commercial reasons, he was able to say that current mixes are predominately calcium carbonate based, with varying particle sizes.

As HM principal inspector on the national quarries team, Colin Mew looked at issues of health and safety within the mineral sector. He expressed concern about operations relating to the high amount of explosives used.

Mew said the government's spending review was affecting health and safety because cuts were due to be made. However, he said the Red Tape Challenge did not represent any significant health and safety changes and the department was jointly working with industry on its targeted initiatives covering communications, planning and reporting.

Julian Smallshaw from the MPQC Skills Centre and Institute of Quarrying outlined the new approach to higher apprenticeships.

Meanwhile, Ian Lamond, a partner at Stephens Scown LLP, examined the impact of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on minerals working in England. He said that, while the statutory context remains unchanged, planning law requires that planning applications for minerals must be determined in accordance with the minerals local plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

He confirmed that the NPPF was a material consideration in planning decisions but said its policies were so broad that they could be interpreted in several ways. However, he said it was reassuring to see paragraph 144 highlighting that "great weight should be given to the benefits of mineral extraction".

Government support

Rounding up the day's presentations, Peter Prior, chairman of Summerleaze, spoke of "the great illusion in 2012". He questioned the fairness of companies receiving cheap money from the government to set up in competition with other firms that had spent significant time building up their reserves without any help.

He felt that attendees should research and contest the Competition Commission's examination of the industry's structure and argue for the disintegration of large cement companies' interests in aggregates and ready-mixed concrete. He also said that any BAA members under undue pressure from the institutions or large cement firms must be supported.

Finally, Prior said that assets disposed of by large firms because of re-organisation should be put on the market quarry by quarry so that all companies could consider buying them.

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