

Voice of independents

The British Aggregates Association (BAA) has also been invited to the table to discuss the future integration of aggregate related industries. However, it seems doubtful it will be in favour of any move towards losing its autonomy, which is no bad thing. In the politics of quarrying, the BAA is the worthy opposition, always probing, always pushing and never shy to speak out over the dispatch box. Now it has come up with a site audit scheme that has even left the QPA gobsmacked. MQR spent some time with the association that sees itself as the true voice of the independent quarryer in the UK.

Industries are always adapting and realigning themselves and aggregates is no exception. Waste directives, REACH, the aggregates levy and sustainability are just some of the recent drivers pushing companies in new directions.

The Strategic Leadership Group of the Concrete Platform (see front page) feels that trade associations throughout the related industries also need to walk through this changing landscape with their eyes open and following the path the unions have trodden recently and combine to form a large superassociation.

In the words of the QPA's chairman, Lynda Thompson, in a recent letter to members: "We do not command the authority and recognition appropriate to a sector that provides around £5.5 billion of essential construction materials."

"...we should accelerate the alignment of key industry bodies - with a view to moving towards full integration at some time in the future."

And she has a point. A quick game of word association with the public on the word quarry and the chances are you would hear them use terms such as 'environmentally unfriendly' and 'dusty' rather than 'my kitchen extension' and 'toothpaste'.

But in an environment where only the positives of integration are being pushed by the powerful interested parties, we should also be asking what has the potential to be lost. It is a concern felt strongest by the UK's small and medium sized (SME) quarry operators.

The British Aggregates Association (BAA) has also

been invited to the superassociation table. And while it says publicly it is keeping an open mind about the plans, behind closed doors the words 'cold day in hell' are doubtless well worn.

Created after a spat between members of the QPA over the aggregates levy it has been the *de facto* dispatch box opposition to the UK's major aggregates trade association ever since. And the industry has been much better off because of it.

As the QPA large player membership continues to fall to foreign cement ownership, the BAA remains a UK 'independent' SME stronghold. And it is not shy to fight its corner. A quick glance at most task forces and working groups and you'll find the BAA. And it was the BAA that charged into the European courts to fight for the removal of the aggregates levy.

However, the QPA also has SME members - a small number belonging to both bodies. And they strongly support the QPA. However, the idea of being merged into a superassociation being driven by global cement firms leaves them feeling nervous. Defection is not being ruled out.

"Let's just say that if the trade association isn't offering what you want it to you have to consider your options. We already have a small voice. Under the new association it may disappear altogether," one QPA independent member told MQR.

Of course, members may choose to stay at crunch time - and the first meeting on the subject of merging in late July certainly calmed a few nerves - or opt for both bodies to spread its bets. But there is a

danger that the gravity the superassociation assents when it finally arrives may drag the BAA in. Or worse, the BAA could find itself repelled into the lobbying wilderness. And this would be a huge loss, a fact made clear by two of its recent developments.

The first is its charging of Cartel Damage Claims (CDC) to investigate alleged price fixing in the cement industry.

The QPA could hardly launch such an investigation if it were needed because of its membership, and the chances of the superassociation launching such a case are about zero given the cement firms are driving the integration.

The BCA strongly denies the accusations being made by the BAA and only time will tell. But to have an organisation with the will to bring a case because it believes it has evidence the globals are not playing fair can only benefit smaller UK players.

Its second development highlights how an SME specific body can offer a tailored approach to this particular area of the quarrying market which would not be possible with an organisation with large global members.

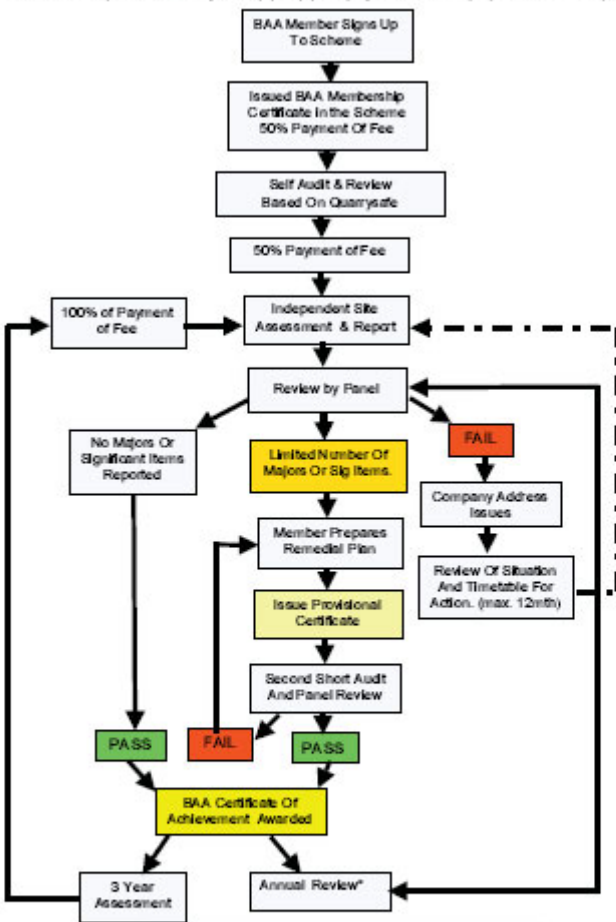
The development is the BAA's new site audit scheme officially launched on a wet Monday afternoon in late June in Buxton, Derbyshire, the day before the start of the Hillhead show.

While the global companies will have established in-house independent audit systems that allow the monitoring of each site, many SMEs will not be able to afford to hire a dedicated H&S specialist or bring in independent consultants. This is where the BAA

The BAA AGM dinner after the introduction of the new Scheme for assessing operating standards. A range of the owner operators' fears made their way through to the surface during the meal especially the existence of a UK cement cartel currently being investigated by Cartel Damage Claims.



THE BAA SCHEME FOR ASSESSING OPERATING STANDARDS



Left. The new BAA audit scheme assesses sites on a traffic light system. Right. Continuous improvement is built into the scheme to encourage those taking part to strive towards excellence in operating standards.

Guidance Note
In completing this Appraisal the Assessor will use the Guidance in the HSE Approved Code of Practice as the basis of their assessment, supplemented in due course by further guidance notes prepared by the BAA supervising committee on an iterative basis.

The assessment will be based on random samples of activities, supporting documentation and interviews carried out on the day. Therefore issues may exist which might not or were unable to be identified on the day.

The assessor will ask a number of general questions to assess whether the question regulations have been appropriately complied with in proportion to the hazards and risks associated with that particular operation.

The level of compliance will be judged and scored on a traffic light basis against the Approved Code of Practice and relevant legislation as follows:

- Indicates adequate compliance; however system will require ongoing review and demonstration of continuous improvement.
- Indicates a partial compliance or single aspect of the system which needs to be investigated to determine the corrective action.
- Indicates a major failure of compliance that requires immediate corrective action and could depending on the circumstances result in a prohibition or improvement notice being issued.
- Indicates not applicable to this operation.

audit scheme could prove invaluable.

Hearing about it for the first time at its launch, Her Majesty's Inspector of Quarries Phil Smith had this to say to *MQR* about the scheme: "If the BAA gets good sign up it should be a step change in raising standards. I can see no real pitfalls with it."

"If the BAA were to market it I know from the industries I deal with there is a desire for some kind of independent reassurance that what they are doing is correct. This is a possible template for other industry areas. In short, it's got wheels on," he said.

Smith says he is seeking to present the scheme to the Quarries National Joint Advisory Committee (QNJAC). And even the QPA is impressed with it.

When one senior official was asked his opinion of the scheme, he looked around in a conspiratorial manner before whispering with a nod: "It is really quite good". When asked if QPA members could use it, he looked around again before pursing his lips and nodding yes.

Devised and developed by the BAAs John Baxter and former Foster Yeoman H&S director Rory Graham, the *Scheme for assessing operating standards* is based on Camborne School of Mines' John Bennett's MIRO funded work on Quarry Safe.

Described by some as a welcome break from NVQ box ticking, the audit scheme places competence on sites rather than individuals and is meant to offer owner-operators the comfort of knowing health and safety operating standards in their quarries comply with the demands of the HSE.

Using a traffic light system (see picture page 14) for assessment it rates the site either compliant, partially compliant or a failure. And it has continual improvement built into it (see flow diagram left) both in terms of its own progression and in terms of its members' sites, which is exactly what the HSE wants to hear.

"The BAA system will be developed and modified in light of experience and this is what the HSE is looking for in an audit scheme. It is not set in stone and is continually evolving," Smith told *MQR*.

The BAA piloted the scheme at four sites it deemed top notch operators. Three made no preparation for the assessment. All got one or more red light.

Reasons included inadequate risk assessment, a lack of H&S awareness among workers, inadequate training records, a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities in site management, poor use of noticeboards, and poor contractor control.

The firms involved did not expect the red lights, says Baxter: "It shows the need for such a scheme. It is now up to members if they want to continue with it," he told the BAA AGM launch.

And it appears as if they do. A quarter of members have signed up so far and Baxter is still refining the documents for use. He is expecting more to sign up when the papers are ready.

But it is not a cheap option for smaller operators. It costs each operating unit about £2,500. This is for 2.5 days assessment, two assessors and their travel expenses -

although costs will be site specific so it will fluctuate around this figure.

However, as Baxter states, there are a range of benefits, including financial ones.

"Firstly, you get higher operating standards and safer sites. This has a knock on effect on insurance. We have chatted to insurers and they suggest a 15% reduction on insurance costs for scheme

members," Baxter told the BAA meeting in June.

Of course, the scheme isn't foolproof. Like all others it could fall foul of ownership issues, as Smith outlines: "It would be easy to pass responsibility on to someone else for taking the actions outlined by the assessment. But that is the problem with bringing consultants in general," he told *MQR*. And he is right. The zero

target will not be reached by schemes but by staff owning and operating within a health and safety framework.

But as a scaffolding to build towards zero incidents the scheme is invaluable as it targets those who have the least available resources to spend on ensuring their workers are well protected.

And it is a product that only the BAA could have organised

because of the profile of its members, which shows the benefits of a strong, vocal SME-based association.

As much as the QPA is also a home to SMEs it cannot respond to their needs at this level. The BAA may court controversy and some may doubt some of its tactics but the quarrying industry is much better off with it to act as another voice for UK independents.



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