

Early engagement is key to success

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Political uncertainty could affect minerals, planning, housing and fracking. Some progress is being made, if only the government would stop calling elections. Jez Abbott reports from the British Aggregates Association's annual conference



Laurence Carmichael with the quarry of the year award won by Longwood Quarries

Three years of political turmoil have had a damaging knock-on effect on minerals and planning, an Environment Agency expert suggested at a recent industry event.

Speaking at the recent British Aggregates Association (BAA) annual conference near Birmingham, environmental planning specialist Jim Davies said the current political landscape had been defined by the recent general election, last year's Brexit vote and the Scottish independence poll of 2014.

"We've had a general election, referendum and Brexit vote, and things like that tend to delay processes and put spanners in the wheels of progress," he said. "A lot of ministers have changed.

"Meanwhile, the Brexit talks in Europe are early and ongoing, and a lot of EU regulation filters down to what you do. At the moment it's 'carry on as normal', so we will until we come out of the EU. One thing that will not change, however, is our need for housing. Brexit will come and go, but that need will remain, as will the need for minerals. What we do at your level impacts on housing and economic growth and attracts interest from ministers."

Davies, who used to sit on the West Midlands aggregates working party as a county-council planner, currently works for the EA's national planning team responsible for permitting interfaces and pre-application advice.

He told the BAA conference that "early engagement" was still key in planning and permitting. "The sooner we come together, the sooner we can iron out any showstoppers – my emphasis is to make planning and permitting further aligned and combine the two as close as we can without encroaching on primary legislation."

Davies mentioned some good-practice examples of early engagement, such as Sirius Minerals' plans to start site preparation for the construction of its £1bn potash mine, under the North Yorkshire moors. Davies said early engagement that resulted in moving works away from a natural watercourse helped blitz a potential "show-stopper".

Another major project was Drakelands. Wolf Minerals started work on the tungsten mine on the edge of Dartmoor, Devon, two years ago, but engagement was originally hampered because 14 different parts of the EA were involved. After re-evaluating teams and creating a single point of contact, the project picked up.

Policy and politics also came up in a talk by Victoria Bankes Price, a planning adviser for the Woodland Trust, who spoke of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) presumption to protect woodland. Local planning authorities should aim to conserve and enhance biodiversity, according to the NPPF, and planning permission should be refused if significant harm resulting from a development cannot be avoided or at least be compensated for.

Bankes Price urged minerals companies to communicate with environmental campaigners. "Talk to us up front. We may have to agree to disagree, but we can engage with everyone. We have 'nimbys' who want to use us to put a stop to housing, but we don't want to be used as a vehicle for objectors."

The issue of fracking was raised by Mark Oldridge, managing director of Mineral Surveying Services, which is working for Cuadrilla at two shale-gas sites in Lancashire. It had been a "rollercoaster ride" of problems, he said. One of the sites, Preston New Road, had 18,022 objections, mainly on water pollution and seismic activity worries.

Oldridge dismissed fears the UK would become like the US, which has 1.7 million wells. The UK has drilled only 2,000 wells since 1940 and only 10% have been hydraulically fractured. A flashpoint came in April 2011, when two earth tremors registered on the Richter scale after drilling struck underground fault zones, Oldridge

said. As a result, highly sophisticated 3D survey techniques were introduced to pinpoint new sites. "There is a great future for fracking in the UK, providing they can get it right and engage with the local community."

The conference recognised the efforts of BAA standards and awards panel chair Eric Darlow, who retired after ten years in the post. Darlow spent 60 years in the quarrying industry, having started aged 17 as a trainee. For 30 years he was HM inspector of quarries and was also a Health & Safety Executive (HSE) policy expert. He was awarded an MBE for services to the quarrying industry in 2012.

"It has been a great joy working for the BAA and has helped me understand the importance of smaller quarrying companies," he said. "When I was head of the inspectorate, I felt we could solve the industry's appalling accident rate at the time by concentrating almost solely on big companies. It was a mistake and I have made amends."

Darlow said his replacement as panel chair, Steven Cole, was a "committee founder and stalwart, whose knowledge and competence are well known to the industry". BAA director Robert Durward said Darlow brought a lifetime's industry experience, unrivalled knowledge of regulation, and authority thanks to his policy work.

BAA Award | Small quarry scores twice

Longwood Quarries won the BAA quarry of the year award in June. The seven-staff quarry in Blankney near Lincoln has supplied screened lime and crushed aggregates to the farming and construction industry for more than 50 years. Quarry manager Laurence Carmichael said the award was for high operating standards, good health and safety and comprehensive training. Longwood Quarries also won a BAA operating standards scheme certificate, as did WCL Quarries in Muckley Corner, Staffordshire. Harleyford Aggregates picked up the final certificate of the day for meeting BAA operating standards at Sipson quarry at Heathrow.