

Staying On Target



Quarry Management spoke to Colin Mew, HM Principal Inspector of the recently established Quarries National Inspection Team, about the key health and safety challenges facing the aggregates industry, including the drive towards Target Zero

Despite major health and safety improvements in recent years, quarrying still remains a potentially dangerous industry to work in, with slips, trips and falls, manual handling and vehicle-related accidents being among the most common incidents.

Health and safety best practice, therefore, continues to be a top priority for the industry. Since 2000, the accident rate in the sector has dropped by 77% (up to the year 2008/09) and there is now a continuing effort to eliminate all incidents through Target Zero.

The Quarries National Joint Advisory Committee's initiative is to have zero RIDDOR

reportable incidents. This represents a significant challenge, so *QM* asked Colin Mew, HM Principal Inspector of the Quarries National Inspection Team, whether companies have a realistic chance of achieving zero reportable incidents.

'Yes, definitely. It's not going to be easy but I think it's both realistic and achievable for the quarrying industry to achieve zero preventable accidents because that is the key to fulfilling Target Zero,' he explained. 'Many quarry accidents that occur are preventable and if companies can focus on this, it will help the industry to stay on track towards achieving zero incidents and injuries. Some operators

are already recording zero employee accidents, which is highly encouraging.'

One of the key factors in achieving the above is competence, and the HSE actively encourages quarry operators to be able to demonstrate the competence of their workforce by using recognized national frameworks and developing and maintaining employees' skills through CPD.

'A fully competent industry workforce is absolutely key to meeting Target Zero,' continued Mr Mew. 'Everyone in the quarry and in the management structure, on and off site, should be competent to deal with everyday situations and ➤

demonstrate retained health and safety knowledge.'

As the quarrying industry aims to have a fully competent workforce by the end of 2010, one of the major concerns is what view will the HSE take of employers who cannot demonstrate a professional competent workforce from 2011.

'We haven't changed our policy as a result of the 2010 target because the requirement to have a competent workforce has not arisen from the targets set by the industry,' explained Mr Mew. 'Competence has been a requirement of the Quarries Regulations since they came into force in 2000, so our view will not change. We will continue to help companies work towards competence and, in some serious cases, take necessary action as we have in the past against those who fall short.'

HSE also recognizes that to improve safety performance further there needs to be a greater emphasis on raising the awareness of employees at all levels. The importance of strong and active leadership from the top is something Mr Mew is keen to highlight.

'I think it is vitally important that everyone within an organization communicates with, and looks out for, each other,' he said. 'The management should provide clear, visible leadership that needs to be conveyed across all levels of the company, starting from the boardroom right down to the employee operating the loading shovel in the quarry.'

'An organization will never be able to achieve the highest standards of health and safety management without competence and the active involvement of senior management demonstrating leadership, both of which, in my view, can significantly change the occupational behaviour of a workforce.'

The key message from HSE is that competence and 'visible felt leadership' can contribute immensely to the industry's overall safety standards and performance. At the

Industry-specific activities, such as blasting, do not account for a high number of accidents in the sector, but they remain an important focus for the Quarries National Inspection Team



A fully trained and competent workforce can help the quarrying industry meet Target Zero

same time, companies need to be fully committed to the development of their staff and, in the process, have proactive health and safety strategies in place to tackle the most common accidents in quarries.

Formed last October, the Quarries National Inspection Team has been set up to advise, inspect and carry out any necessary enforcement action on all opencast coal and hard rock quarrying operations in Great Britain (excluding the East and South East regions). Prior to the formation of the team, there was no central management system for quarry inspectors, who previously worked across a range of industries and were managed by their respective divisional regions.

HSE recognized that by having a dedicated national inspection team operating under a single management structure, it would provide better cohesion and help maintain the competence and skills of the inspectors.

Although the inspection strategy of the national quarry safety team does not cover

sand and gravel quarries, Mr Mew and his colleagues are still a major resource for HSE's general inspectors to call on when they investigate incidents at sites that are not part of the team's responsibility.

'During the course of any proactive or reactive work, we can provide advice and expertise for general inspectors visiting sand and gravel sites,' explained Mr Mew. 'As the quarries team was formed only a few months ago, it's still early days for us so we are learning and exploring new ways of developing our inspection strategy and working with our colleagues in HSE – nothing is cast in stone.'

One key issue high on Mr Mew's agenda, and which forms an integral part of the national inspection team's strategy, is addressing the common incidents that occur repeatedly in the quarrying industry. Ongoing training has played a significant role in helping the industry to achieve its targets, but there is growing concern that the main causes of injury in quarries continue to be manual handling, falls from heights, workplace transport and slips and trips.

'I'm not surprised by this,' said Mr Mew. 'When the team receives RIDDOR forms, regrettably it is frequently a repeat of the common incidents that I have seen before, as my colleagues and I rarely come across 'new' accidents. As the overall HSE statistics will show, common accidents such as slips, trips and falls account for the large number of RIDDOR reportable incidents in the sector. Therefore, to achieve Target Zero the industry has to concentrate on eliminating the more commonly occurring incidents that quarry inspectors often see.'

However, it is important that activities which pose a high hazard are not overlooked. One of the primary reasons for setting up the national safety team was recognition of the need to bring our core specialisms together for the benefit of the industry. For example, we have expertise in the safe use of explosives in quarries and in other safety-critical areas,

such as tip and slope stability.

'These industry-specific activities may have a low probability and do not account for a high number of accidents in the sector, but they can have serious and potentially fatal consequences. They are significant risks that I cannot ignore and HSE will be very proactive and, if necessary, reactive to them.'

Another important focus for Mr Mew is the health risks associated with the quarrying industry, most notably employees exposed to respirable crystalline silica and whole-body vibrations.

'Part of our remit is to look at the health issues in quarries,' he continued. 'There are emerging areas of which, at this stage, we don't yet know the full impact, for example, the effects of whole-body vibration. The obvious health risks that we do know more about include respirable crystalline silica, which we closely monitor because we know long-term exposure can lead to silicosis.'

'As quarrying is a potentially highly hazardous industry, I think we have acted proportionately to the health and safety risks concerned, which has generated a lot of support from the sector.'

While the majors continue to lead the way in raising standards of health and safety across the aggregates industry, the Quarries National Inspection Team will need to take a different viewpoint of SMEs who do not have

the same resources and personnel as the larger companies.

'There cannot be a situation where one approach fits all circumstances,' explained Mr Mew. 'With regard to organizations that lead the way in health and safety, we have to look at ways of aligning our priorities in terms of health and safety with the objectives of those companies, providing there is mutual agreement. Naturally, we will take a different approach to operators who we believe are underperforming, as well as those who do not have a mature health and safety culture or coherent plans to achieve continuous improvement in safety.'

'As the quarries team now has a national focus and a single line-management structure, we are currently evaluating new approaches to health and safety inspection in conjunction with a number of companies.'

With many firms fully committed to safety improvements, Mr Mew is impressed by the wealth of best practice information available on websites and believes online resources, including Agg-Net (www.agg-net.com), which contains a dedicated health and safety risk-management section, Safequarry.com, where ONJAC guidance can be found, and HSE's own website (www.hse.gov.uk), can be a first port of call for smaller companies looking to achieve a level of competence.

'There are many online resources out there which are completely free and have useful information on good health and safety practice,' he commented. 'Sharing best practice and making up-to-date information easily accessible is essential and will help SMEs gain a better understanding of the current issues.'

Looking ahead, one of Mr Mew's key objectives is to influence and demonstrate good health and safety practice to the wider quarrying industry. He firmly believes the aggregates sector can play a pivotal role in improving the safety performance throughout the supply chain, from equipment manufacturers and quarry owners through to maintenance engineers, contractors and hauliers.

'High on my list of priorities as principal inspector is seeing Target Zero engrained at every level and in every organization that the national safety team inspects,' said Mr Mew. 'If the quarrying industry can achieve this in five years' time, it can have an influence and a positive impact throughout the supply chain. Target Zero will be instrumental not only in encouraging the industry to benchmark its own health and safety standards, but also in demonstrating the success of employers who have achieved excellence in occupational health and safety and world-class standards of competence.'

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