

September 2013 Public forum on fracking

Shale gas extraction using hydraulic fracturing – or fracking – was the topic of a lively debate at our public forum at Pulborough Village Hall on Thursday 6th September.

The meeting was chaired by Professor Joe Howe of the University of Central Lancashire, a leading expert on sustainable development, who was joined by County Councillor, Morwen Millson and Nick Grealey, director of energy consultancy *No Hot Air*.

The large audience included representatives from a number of stakeholder organisations, notably from CPRE, Friends of the Earth, Horsham District Council, Parish Councils, Pulborough Society, South Downs National Park Authority, South Downs Network, Sussex Wildlife and West Sussex County Council. There was also a contingent from Balcombe - where permission had been granted for exploratory drilling - anxious to make their feelings known.

Professor Howe began with an overview of the technology and its potential benefit to communities in the more deprived areas of the UK. He cited the North-West where heavy engineering had gone into decline and the economy was struggling. He also regretted a trend of informing the public too late for participation in the decision-making process.

Cllr Millson followed with serious concerns about allowing this form of gas extraction when so many questions remained unanswered. Her list was quite comprehensive and her points covered most of the entire debate. She had attended a meeting at Balcombe and, after studying the issues, had initiated a debate in the Council at which it was determined to ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to look more carefully at the whole process.

In view of poor regulation in the US where fracking was widespread, she wanted to see a coherent regulatory framework that would cover the gaps between various Government departments. Before any licenses for exploration are issued, answers are needed to from where and how the required 20 million litres of water per well would come. How would the used water containing chemical additives be disposed of? How would leakage be prevented? At Balcombe there would be between 42 and 64 wells, each well requiring either 25,000 water tankers making 1,600 journeys over 5 to 10 days, or a pipeline. There was a scenario of up to 800 wells over the Weald, leading to massive industrialisation. Finally, Cllr Millson wondered what incentives there were to find alternatives to fulfil Copenhagen carbon pledges, when we continue to use up the fossil fuels we have left.

Before the meeting was opened to the floor, Nick Grealy put up a stout defence in support of the industry, claiming that there had been a lot of scaremongering and misrepresentation of facts. He reminded the audience that fracking took place between 10 and 15,000 feet below ground and that the fractures generated by the process are less than 1 millimetre. He insisted that the technology had advanced to a point where risks could be eliminated or minimised and asked the audience to consider the potential economic benefits of energy self-sufficiency, lower energy prices and the multi-billion-pound contribution to the Treasury and Tax Authorities, as well as eliminating the need for paying for imported gas to wealthy Middle-east countries. He also pointed out that wells were temporary and that full restoration of the landscape when they became exhausted, would not be a problem. Shale gas extraction, he said, would even help the use of renewables such as wind-power, as the electricity generated was dependent on wind and there was as yet no means of storing the energy for use during becalmed periods.

There was no shortage of comments and questions from the moment the Chairman invited participation from the floor, and it was immediately clear that these came from an informed audience expressing serious concerns, to many of which there were, as yet, no direct answers. The effect of methane gas leakage on climate change, the effect on the South-East with a population density seven times that of the US or New Zealand, and again, the lack of regulation which should be in place before exploration, the use and disposal of chemicals, the massive use of water, the radioactivity in shale rock, the export of technology we do not use ourselves – these were all given attention by the panel and audience members.

Another area of concern was the lack of enforcement of regulations. A CPRE representative pointed out that whilst the Environment Agency regulated, there was no follow-up by enforcement. The evening's debate reflected CPRE members concerns and also the concerns of the wider public, and they ought to be answered. The Government should be pushed for this information, bearing in mind that we face an energy drought and the big investors are indecisive.

Morwen Millson had earlier urged the public to write to their own and other MPs, as she thought this was not a matter for local politicians. As the meeting drew to a close she said it had been a fascinating evening and that she would now go home, look at the *No Hot Air* website and write to her MP.

Nick Grealy commented that shale gas extraction was not perfect, but realism was needed about renewable energy. He thought there was implausible confidence, at this point, in wind and solar power.

In winding up, Joe Howe thanked his co-panellists. It had been a most stimulating debate and he was grateful to the Wiggonholt Association for organising the event.

The overall impression given by the meeting was, that serious concerns about fracking were fully justified and that answers were needed before this form of extraction is allowed to go ahead in the densely populated South-East.