

County Council – 4 November 2014

Themed Debate – Fracking

At its Meeting on 1 July 2014, the County Council agreed a Motion from Councillor John Sanders in the following terms:

"Oxfordshire has been identified as one of the areas where there could be a potential to frack for shale gas. Rightly many residents particularly in the north of the County are concerned about the implications for their communities. This Council believes that its members need to have the opportunity to discuss the issues and asks that a Themed Debate is organised in the near future to allow that to happen."

The Council had before them two briefing papers for members' information. The Chairman noted that there was no decision to be taken.

Prior to the debate Council heard from two members of the public. Mr Mobbs, a University lecturer and Independent Environmental Consultant spoke against fracking. He urged the Council not to take any decision on this issue on the basis of the reports submitted as they were not Oxfordshire appropriate; he noted gas had been found in Oxfordshire at a depth of 200m and stated that it had been found to be dangerous in the USA when drilling at that depth; that there would not be enough capacity to deal with the waste disposal impact; water pollution would be an issue and referring to paragraph 5.4 on national emissions he stated that there was no evidence to back up the assertion that the impact would be relatively small.

Dr Evelyne Godfrey, Archaeological Scientist, spoke on the County Council responsibilities under the European Landscape Convention (ELC) which should be referenced during any debate on fracking. She highlighted aspects of the Convention that stressed the contribution that landscape had on cultural life, on the creation of jobs; on well-being and on quality of life. She urged the Council to have due regard to ELC in order to be properly prepared for any application on fracking.

During the debate, the following issues were raised:

- 1) Experience of fracking was based on the position in America which was less regulated with poor attention paid to the impact of wells, gas escape and seismic activity. It was noted that Britain had a good track record on health and safety and regulating activity and a lot would depend on the regulatory criteria.
- 2) A member commented that there was to be a review of the engineering evidence and it would consider health and safety and the environment. Strong regulation and robust monitoring would be needed and The County Council can influence that. Environment Risk Assessments should be mandatory if fracking is allowed. The Environment Agency already monitors water quality but this needed to be well funded.
- 3) In addition to Environmental Impact Assessments it would be important to carry out Health Impact Assessments as soon as possible.
- 4) It would be important to do baseline analysis of water quality and seismic activity to measure any impacts accurately.

- 5) There was concern that the process used a great deal of water and a query as to whether there was a sufficient supply in Oxfordshire. This could be a deciding factor when looking at fracking.
- 6) Several Members made the point that there was a need to explore alternatives to the current supply of gas as there was a dependence on it. Members referred to the energy gap and the need to look at options.
- 7) A Member noted that in expressing concerns about fracking none the less as a planning committee member it was important to keep an open mind.
- 8) A member commented that for members who neither supported nor opposed fracking there was confusing information available. It was suggested that the reports today and speakers did not provide sufficient information and urged members to view a podcast by Professor Joe Cartwright, Shell Professor of Earth Sciences at Oxford University, which gave a background to extraction and a comparison of the US and Oxfordshire.
- 9) Local constituents had asked about property rights and a member suggested that guidance was required on questions such as "how far down did you own your land?"
- 11) There was concern that the impact on the environment would be irreversible so that great consideration needed to be given to those impacts.
- 12) If an application came before the Planning Committee there was an expectation that there would be officers available to answer the questions members had and that the information provided would be Oxfordshire specific.
- 13) A member pointed out that fracking concerned not only a small piece of land but involved land downwards and sideways. 1% of revenues was to go to the community but it was still unclear who would benefit and it was not defined who would suffer the risk. There seemed to be an element of compulsory purchase order on a community as a whole with a lack of freedom to determine what is going on under a community.
- 14) There was some discussion on whether fracking would be profitable given the different situation in the UK compared to the US.

12) A variety of views were expressed both in support of and against fracking:

In support of fracking it was refuted:

- that fracking had caused pollution in the UK,
- put more methane into the atmosphere,
- used too much water – in the US it accounted for 0.3% of the water used, less than on golf courses
- used unsafe chemicals - there were 13 chemicals used in the process and all were safe.
- caused earthquakes - earthquake research had shown that it was at such a small scale that it could not be detected.

Members in support also commented:

- in respect of the impact of the well site on the environment it would be no larger than a cricket pitch, taking up less space than wind turbines and with less impact on birds and bats.
- with regard to other alternative forms of energy a member commented that solar and wind power were subsidised and were not viable.
- that the need to fill the energy gap now and that the report answered concerns. The County Council is in control and must ensure fracking only happens where it is safe to do so.

- that 27 countries in the world were fracking and 17 other were looking at it. The reported incidents in Pennsylvania had been over used and over stated and we need to look at what is best for Oxfordshire.
- there were compelling economic reasons to consider fracking, along with the need for fuel security.

Members against fracking stated:

- that the process did cause water pollution referring to the high number of on-going cases.
- the process did use a great deal of water. The process in Texas had caused water shortages.
- It was believed that chemicals did enter the water table and that there were 600 chemicals involved, some of which were known carcinogens.
- there was concern at the escape of methane from the process.
- that the geography of Oxfordshire could not be compared to that in America as Oxfordshire had more variable changes. The folds, faults and fractures made the process unsafe in Oxfordshire.
- that there had been measurable earthquakes including one in Lancashire at 2.2 on the richter scale.
- that as the planet was warming up dangerously then it was important to move away from non-renewable energy to renewables such as wind, solar and hydro-electric.
- that the presumption should be that fracking is dangerous unless proved otherwise. A member questioned why if France and Germany had banned it we were not.
- it was unlikely to be profitable and so was not a viable replacement for renewables. If the planning process is too difficult it undermines investor confidence and we were mistaken to believe that we would be the determining authority when the Secretary of State could overrule and determine.