

Background:

Sefton Council received a motion on fracking at its meeting on 24th July 2014. Following a debate, it was resolved that the Motion and the Amendment be withdrawn and that an all-party Working Group be appointed to consider the implications set out in the Motion and Amendment in more detail and submit their findings to the Cabinet for consideration in due course and that the membership and terms of reference for the Working Group be determined in the near future.

Introduction:

Scientists from the British Geological Survey (BGS) have estimated that the total volume of gas in the Bowland-Hodder shale in northern England is some 1,300 trillion cubic feet (central estimate). Industry estimates of the potential gas resource also vary significantly as do the assumption of how much of that potential resource can be recovered.

Whether exploitation of shale gas in England is commercially viable has yet to be proven though, it is clear that Government is supportive of this emerging industry because of potential contributions to future energy demands.

The technology for shale gas is not new. However, technological innovations mean that deeper deposits are potentially exploitable and the horizontal reach of wells has also increased through deployment of directional drilling technology.

There is a very wide range of views regarding the pros and cons of shale gas exploitation with many claims and counter claims available through reports and via the media. A polarised debate has emerged over the last 2 years. These often conflicting views are largely based on evidence from shale gas exploitation in other countries, notably the US. It is also based on some assumptions on how this may or may not transfer to the English situation and the local geological conditions underlying the Liverpool City Region.

What is clear is that knowledge in the UK is based on limited industry practice that has yet to progress beyond a few exploration drilling activities and some seismic mapping.

Sefton's position:

The principal regulatory processes through which Sefton Council has a formal role are:

- Land use planning; and
- The EU Habitats Directive.

To date, Sefton has not agreed a formal position on shale gas, or other energy minerals for that matter, although there is a generic draft mineral policy in the

emerging Local Plan for Sefton. This policy has been drafted to be flexible and with a range of minerals issues in mind, include potential shale gas exploitation in Sefton.

The land use planning system provides Sexton with two principal regulatory opportunities – development of land use and minerals planning policy and; the development management process. It is crucial that any policy position or planning decisions are in conformity with National policy or that there is a clear and objective reasoned justification for any variation to that approach.

It is perhaps helpful to remind Members of the need to ensure that any Local Plan policy is sound and deliverable and can pass the stringent tests of Public Examination. Similarly development management decisions should only take account of material planning considerations for the determination of that application.

As a minerals planning authority, Sexton will have the role of issuing planning consent at each of the three principle stages of shale gas development:

- Exploration;
- Test fracking and commercial appraisal;
- Production.

Sexton must also comply with the Habitats Regulations as competent authority and this is relevant given the large are of designated site and supporting habitat for the nature conservation sites within the Borough.

In addition, Sexton has interest and some limited regulatory powers in the following areas:

- Public health including physical and mental well being;
- Environmental health and environmental protection;
- Economic impacts and opportunities.

The Environment Agency is the primary environmental regulator.

The HSE is responsible for workplace safety in the extraction industry.

The Wider Picture

Government is currently inviting bids from the industry through the 14th round prior licencing available blocks for Petroleum Exploration and Development licences. The deadline for bids was 28 October 2014.

More widely the LCR Local Enterprise Partnership is convening a sub-Committee to explore the economic issues associated shale gas in the City Region. Directors of Public Health are maintaining a watching brief over the public health issues

associated with the activity both in terms of local issues and wider matters associated with greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

Merseyside EAS has already reviewed that available evidence and this plus other published reports clearly provides a useful, evidence-based, and objective starting point.

Other Matters Which May be of Concern

- Community impact, benefits and dis-benefits and impact of community sums and business rates.
- Access for minerals exploration and exploitation activities.