

BONNYBRIDGE COMMUNITY COUNCIL UOG COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

- **Group:** The Community Council and the Peoples of Bonnybridge.
- **Date of meeting:** Thursday 23rd March 2017, 7-9pm.
- **Location address / postcode:** Bonnybridge Primary School, FK4 1LR.
- **Number of attendees:** 70.

(i) UOG Community Discussion Process

1. Leaflets notifying residents of the meeting were posted through doors throughout Bonnybridge, and left in public places: libraries, clinics etc.
2. The consultation began with a 45 minute introduction for residents. This was top-and-tailed by 10 slides put together and presented by two Bonnybridge community councillors. The remaining presentation followed information slides set out in Scottish Government's Discussion Pack for large groups, and was presented by Jamie McKenzie Hamilton from the Community Chartering Network (CCN).

On the basis that residents new to the subject would benefit from a variety of UOG perspectives, a matrix was put together for the purpose. This showed the information summarising the research commissioned by Scottish Government (as set out in their handout cards in the Group Discussion Pack), alongside summaries of legal submissions from the Dart Energy PLI. The matrix was included in the presentation, and as a handout.

In prior pilot consultations aimed at understanding what processes can help facilitate effective community discussion, it was found that framing conversations around shared assets and values helped to bring forth responses which were grounded in the community experience as a whole. This finding is consistent with empirical research conducted by the Common Cause Foundation (<http://valuesandframes.org>). For this reason, a list of generic community assets and values that arose through the Community Chartering experience of Falkirk communities (http://faug.org.uk/community_charter.pdf) was also presented and handed out.

3. The presentation was followed by 90 minutes of open circle discussion led by Roland Playle (CCN) and split roughly equally between benefits and risks of UOG. Due to the numbers, participants were split into two groups, one moderated by Jamie McKenzie Hamilton and the other by Roland Playle.
4. Outcomes were written up by the facilitators. [These were first verified for accuracy with the community councillors and participants, and then broadcast for residents who may have been unable to attend].

Precise details of the materials and process employed can be made available on request to uogconsultation@charteringnetwork.org.

(ii) **Outcomes.**

1. Overall, and in light of the available evidence, what do you think would be the main benefits, if any, of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

The potential benefits put forward by residents in order of importance were:

No benefits: At the outset of the discussion, over 75% of the residents perceived there to be no potential benefits of UOG at all to the community of Bonnybridge, and an additional 20% thought there would be ‘very few benefits’.

Jobs: The potential benefit most cited (around 5%) was jobs. Several people mentioned that there was not enough clear information to know what the industry was proposing in terms of local benefits arising from employment. However, in discussion it was decided that overall these would not represent sustainable or stable employment, that any skilled work would be sourced outwith the community, and any local jobs would at best involve ad hoc or manual labour, and / or would not be in keeping with the aspirations or character of the community. On this basis, the benefit was dismissed as immaterial given the potential risks.

Cheaper Fuel: Several residents noted cheaper Scottish energy or energy security could be a benefit of UOG in a broader context, but this was also dismissed in conversation, on the basis of market forces and the Scottish Government’s finding that there would be little impact.

Government Income: A few thought additional tax revenue could bring some benefits in investment in infrastructure, though many others felt the industry’s tax avoidance schemes would see most of the taxable profit channelled offshore.

Land-owners: a minority mentioned that land-owners could potentially see benefits from the selling of their own land.

2. Overall, and in light of the available evidence, what do you think would be the main risks or challenges, if any, of an unconventional oil and gas industry in Scotland?

The potential risks put forward by residents in order of importance were:

Health Impacts. A significant majority considered the potential health risks of having an intensive industry in close proximity to be unacceptable. Residents cited the growing evidence for health impacts associated with UOG activities from elsewhere (asthma / nose bleeds / chest infection / hormone disruption / cancer) and the far-reaching effects of toxins associated with activities, including BTEX chemicals, carcinogens and endocrine disrupters. The question was raised as to why Scottish communities had not been invited to contribute their knowledge to the Scottish Government’s public health report as they had been on others. It was emphasised that the Health Report concluded there to be ‘inadequate evidence’ for adverse health impacts, and that this entailed an intolerable degree of uncertainty for the community. The proposed buffer zone between extractive sites and residential areas, particularly schools, was deemed to be arbitrary and unacceptable, and many expressed deep concerns about the potentially far-reaching health effects on their children. The view was also put forward that potential health risks were likely to be exacerbated by a ‘self-regulating’ industry seeking to maximise their profits, given the context of intensive extraction with a short window of opportunity and insufficient regulatory resources. Essentially, the community believed if UOG went ahead they would essentially be the guinea pigs in an experiment involving many unknowns, as they felt had been the case with the Rechem development (see below). As with Rechem,

if local health impacts did emerge, residents felt it would already be ‘too late’ and they would be left with the burden of having to prove an unprovable link, as well as potentially long-term, far-reaching effects.

Pollution of our local environment and our experience of it. Participants talked about how densely populated the landscape around Bonnybridge is, and also about how this enhances the importance of the rural and natural areas for walking, leisure and general wellbeing. The local wildlife was referred to by many, as was the responsibility of the community to protect and improve habitats. Concerns were raised about potential impacts on canal tourism, and pollution to the water table and system, including further contamination to the Bonny Water. The lack of knowledge regarding the treatment of waste water and that it was felt there could be no guarantee of seepage of pollutants, meant that many people felt a severe lack of security regarding the industry.

All this considered, residents were in general agreement that the UOG industry would have a significant negative impact on both the local natural environment (through contamination of soil, water, farmland and the ecology) and their own experience of the industry (through the impacts of incongruous infrastructure and concerns about unseen pollution on cherished places and landscapes, and the peace-of-mind they afford). Some proposed noise pollution associated with the industry and related traffic, and its consequences for stress levels and quality-of-life, to be high among their potential risks.

Ineffective regulation and cost to public purse. While a few felt the UK regulatory framework was superior to the US and Australia, a significant majority of residents had no faith in the promise of effective regulation due to past local experiences. Due to lack of regulatory expertise and resources, the general expectation was that the UOG industry would end up being largely self-regulating, while also seeking to maximise profit. The belief was that the regulatory framework would be inadequate, slow to respond to new information and breaches, and abuses would be subject to soft fines, not hard consequences. It was put forward that unequivocally proving a link between industrial activities and health effects is difficult or impossible –hence why the Scottish Government’s research reports ‘inadequate evidence’– and that the industry would use this to deny culpability for impacts. Many asked who would be responsible for issues in the event of operator bankruptcy, or which could emerge after decommissioning, and how long after decommissioning regulation would continue for. The general view was that liability for action or clean-up would fall with the local authority and the tax payer. In the context of austerity and public service cuts, it was also considered unlikely that any resources would be available for this. It was also felt that once contamination due to known or unknown factors became evident, it might already be systemic and irreversible, rendering any action to clean-up or regenerate the environment non-viable.

Rechem. Many, if not all, of these factors had occurred in relation to the Rechem incident, cited by many in discussion. This had entailed a new industrial waste facility which the community were told constituted a significant local economic benefit. Over many years, a range of impacts on public and environmental health emerged in the vicinity of the facility: including birth defects, eye and respiratory problems, and sickness and death of livestock. The community were certain these were associated with Rechem, but the operator denied it and the regulators were unable to demonstrate a link and operations continued. This resulted in a perpetuation of the horrific effects over the course of many years, which some believe continue to the present day, and also caused long-term damage to the reputation of the community.

The ineffective monitoring and regulation experienced by the community in the past amounted, for the vast majority, to a lack of trust in the regulatory bodies to effectively safeguard local people’s

health. It was mentioned that SEPA did not exercise enough power or have ‘teeth’ to rein in big industry, or the will to interrupt activities perceived to contribute to economic growth. It was also generally agreed that it was beyond SEPA’s capacity (due to budgetary pressures), to regulate a billion-pound industry/company effectively. As well as Rechem, mining tragedies and the effects of open-cast mining were cited and the mistrust felt towards regulatory bodies was also extended to include the industry/companies themselves. Many cited that there should be no confidentiality agreements made between the industry, and local landowners or other community stakeholders.

Traffic. A third of the participants did not accept the Scottish Government’s finding that UOG traffic would not be significant or detectable at a local level. Many believed that heavy vehicles carrying hazardous chemicals and waste through the community or on smaller country roads over the course of many years, represented many risks to health and wellbeing, including additional congestion, noise, pollution, health impacts from diesel fumes, spillages, accidents and dangers to cyclists. It was also felt this extra heavy traffic would constitute a substantial extra burden to the roads, and to the public purse when related repairs or upgrading were required.

Climate Change. Around 20% of the participants highlighted the risk of Climate Change, expressing the view that exploiting a new fossil fuel was wholly incompatible with the Scottish Government’s world-leading commitment to renewables and ambitious carbon reduction targets. Many felt any potential UOG investment or subsidies should be directed towards this vision of a truly sustainable economy and the long-term employment opportunities it represented.

Impacts on community reputation and property values. Due to past industries the community was known as ‘Dirty Bonnybridge’ and has had to work hard to recover its reputation. The general view was that the proximity of the UOG industry would result in a backsliding of reputation and similar stigmatisation, particularly if accidents occurred which resulted in harm to property, health or environment. It was also seen as a reversal on the ‘green’ investments and developments that had been made, particularly to tourism in the area which had made a significant contribution to the local economy. Several residents highlighted the potential damage to houses which could arise from small earthquakes or subsidence. Many felt a loss in house values was inevitable and that this would far outweigh any potential community incentives, and also that neither the industry nor the Scottish Government would provide compensation for this or for any harm to property.

Unstable hydrogeology. Some highlighted potential risks associated with the instability of the local geology, which was already compromised by heavy faulting and mining. Evidence of underground ‘pathways’ was cited, including a recent incident where the Bonny Water changed colour for a few days due to red ochre pollution from old mine-workings from an unknown source, and the tragedy in Castlecary where two children died when an old mineshaft opened up in the village swing park. In this context there was a genuine concern that gas and chemicals associated with UOG activities may escape, or remain underground and not emerge until after the industry had left, thus representing a long-term, immitigable and irreversible local impacts. It was also felt subsidence from UOG activities and heavy surface infrastructure was another potential risk to the community and their property, particularly considering the many shallow and uncharted mines in the area.

3. If you have any other comments on the issues as discussed in this consultation, please provide them here:

This section forms the main substance of our consultation and revolves around the *OUR MESSAGE TO GOVERNMENT* questions (or what we think the Scottish Government need to take into account when considering the future of unconventional oil and gas development in Scotland).

There is one main message or question to the Scottish Government which arose from our consultation:

Our community refuses any social license for the UOG industry to operate in our area, will they and the Scottish Government respect our collective position? We have discussed the potential benefits of hosting UOG extraction and have concluded there to be none or very little to our community. We do not believe an incentive scheme based on the short-term profit of overseas operators will manifest meaningful income, or that there will be any stable local employment opportunities. Therefore, we reflect on the burden of potential risk we are being asked to bear, in a context of little or no perceived benefit. We have further concluded this burden of risk to be wholly unacceptable. This is an intensive extractive industry seeking to maximise its profits over a short-term period, within a densely populated area and in a novel and complex hydrogeological context. Scottish Government's research is inconclusive regarding the risks of UOG, yet there is a growing body of evidence from elsewhere that these may be inherent and uncontrollable. Such risks could well be exacerbated by factors associated with the local geology and we would ask why there is no mention of this in the Scottish Government's research to inform the public consultation? We are told that potential harm can be mitigated by effective regulation, yet we have little trust in that promise on account of our past experience (Rechem). We believe Government regulators are under-resourced, lacking expertise, influenced by the industry, and ultimately will prioritise economic growth over our safety. In summary, we are not prepared to risk sacrificing the long-term health and wellbeing of our community and its environment, let alone for no apparent reward. At a national level, we do not think UOG is consistent with the vision of a sustainable Scotland, and would rather see the Scottish Government continuing its investment in renewables and a basis for an economy and employment which extends beyond 15 years. Moreover, Nicola Sturgeon promised that UOG would not go ahead unless it had been proven beyond any doubt by the scientific evidence that there was no risk to health. The Scottish Government research has not demonstrated this certainty, and therefore we would expect them to reject the UOG industry in Scotland, as we are doing in the community council area of Bonnybridge.