

PLAINS COMMUNITY COUNCIL UOG COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

- **Group:** The Community Council and the Peoples of Plains.
- **Date of meeting:** Tuesday 9th May 2017, 7-9pm.
- **Location address / postcode:** Plains Community Centre, Main St, ML6 7JG.
- **Number of attendees:** 30.

(i) UOG Community Discussion Process

1. Leaflets notifying residents of the meeting were posted through all doors in Plains.
2. The consultation began with a 35 minute introduction for residents, including a presentation followed information slides set out in Scottish Government's Discussion Pack for large groups, which was co-presented by Gordon Carmichael (Connecting Scotland) and 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. Presentation slides and a handout featuring generic community assets was not used at the request of Plains community councillors, who felt it was not applicable to the community.

3. The presentation was followed by 90 minutes of open circle discussion co-facilitated by Gordon Carmichael, Bronagh Gallagher (Connecting Scotland), and Jamie McKenzie Hamilton (CCN), and split roughly equally between benefits and risks of UOG.
4. Outcomes were written up by the facilitators. [These were first verified for accuracy with the community councillors and participants].
5. 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 main potential benefits put forward by residents, or emerging in discussion were:

BENEFITS

No benefits. Around three quarters (70%) of participants already perceived there to be no potential benefits of UOG for Plains prior to the discussion.

Local Jobs. Just under a third (30%) thought UOG could bring local jobs –the foremost perceived benefit. Some felt these would be short-term because gas production and work declines rapidly after the initial period. It was noted that industries moving into the area always promised jobs, but none had yet employed locally, and many viewed UOG similarly. Most believed a UOG industry would not provide any sustainable skilled work, which would be ‘flown in’ from elsewhere. In the words of one resident, ‘it’ll be low wage, zero hours work, catering or hotels, so it won’t bring any money into the local economy’. Others thought the c1400 jobs predicted for the industry was likely to be an overestimate, and commented on the uncertainty of the economic benefits as concluded in the research commissioned by the Scottish Government. Nevertheless, while considering it unlikely, many felt that if UOG operators committed to local apprenticeships or skills training then there may be greater community interest. One resident thought that any possibility for any local employment should be regarded as a benefit, stating ‘any jobs a good job, if enables you to live for a bit and take a holiday’. In summary, while all recognised a dire local need for jobs, and the idea that UOG might supply these appealed in principle, there was little faith that these would manifest based on past experience and the moratorium research. As one resident put it, ‘business always brings benefits, but it is another matter whether those benefits are proportionate to the risks to us, or the quality and quantity of any local jobs on offer’.

Additional Fuel Source. A few residents proposed UOG could benefit Scotland by providing a lower cost and more secure source of energy. In discussion, however, cheap energy was dismissed on the basis of the conclusions of the Scottish Government research. Energy security was questioned on several counts. One was UOG’s 15 year lifespan or, as one resident put it, ‘if it’s going to run out that quickly, it’s not much of a secure source’. Another was the view that it wouldn’t be Scotland who would control the gas, but a multinational industry where ‘everyone’s out to make a profit’. One resident compared the degree of uncertainty regarding the scale and security of UOG resources with current renewable energy production, where, ‘when those turbines are turning, you can see that they’re making cheap clean energy’. In summary, it was generally agreed there was a weak argument for the benefits of UOG in terms of national energy security and costs.

Slightly Cleaner Energy. That UOG could provide Scotland with a low climate impact energy source was proposed and considered. The ‘cleaner than coal’ argument was deemed irrelevant for Scotland, due to the cessation of its coal mining industry. One resident cited evidence she had read which suggested systemic fugitive methane emissions in US UOG fields, which had an estimated impact equivalent to 3-4 million cars. Another argued environmental impact assessment needed to also factor in the cost of materials and processes associated with UOG extraction (e.g. infrastructure and haulage), applying this equally to the renewables industry. Most felt UOG could not be considered ‘clean’ in terms of carbon emissions, if it caused environmental pollution in other ways. The general view was that the ‘clean energy’ argument was probably industry spin, and that it was ‘hypocritical’ for the Scottish Government to consider short-term intensive fossil fuel extraction given the national position on renewables. One resident said, ‘I meet people who already believe fracking is banned forever in Scotland’, and another stated, ‘this year we’ve had days where we’ve been totally powered by renewables, so where’s the hurry?’

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 main potential risks put forward by residents, or emerging in discussion were:

Risks

Cumulative Risks to Public and Environmental Health. Foremost among residents' perceived risks were the potential impacts of UOG on public and environment health. Of particular general concern were cumulative impacts, given the number of polluting industries already hosted by the community (including an incinerator, landfill site, and quarry). There was a desire for clarity on who would be responsible for assessing and monitoring cumulative impacts in the event of local UOG extraction, and how regulation of these would be conducted and enforced. Given the complexity of the local situation, there was a deep scepticism about the ability of regulators to link impacts 'unambiguously' to a specific polluter, and concerns that a UOG industry, or others in the area, would take advantage of this to deny responsibility and continue harmful activities.

Residents also spoke about how the area was 'riddled with mines', and many ranked the instability and interconnectivity of the subsurface context high among UOG's potential risks. They described incidences of local subsidence and unheeded warnings by old local miners regarding the potential for mine collapse and sink holes. People talked about the periodic 'bubbling up' of polluted mine water into houses and onto roads in the Bentley Park area, or into local burns, turning them into the 'red braes'. It was mentioned that the local authority had recently informed the community that the plastic used for many of their water pipes could allow chemicals to leach through them. One woman had grown up in a region of Italy where the water table had been poisoned by agricultural nitrates, requiring everyone to drink bottle water. She talked about how, 'when I came to Scotland, I was amazed that Scottish people drink from a tap', and stressed how anything which risked so valuable an asset as clean drinking water should not be considered. Others expressed concerns about the potential impacts of air pollution from traffic and industrial activities. One resident had worked on oil tankers where 'venting to atmosphere had caused the deaths of so many people', noting that UOG operators could compress unwanted gases instead of venting and flaring, 'but then that costs, and money always comes first, that's the way business works'. Another cited research she had read about US gasfields which suggested fugitive emissions could be an inherent problem with the UOG industry. All this considered, there were genuine concerns that pollution from UOG activities 'could escape and then go wherever' underground, and into local soil, air or water, and that such risks to the community were not properly addressed or understood.

A quarter of all participants rated the *uncertainties* associated with the conclusions of the Scottish Government on UOG impacts as high among the potential risks. One stated, 'there are just too many unknowns', and another, 'the list of scientists gets ever longer, and still they can't come up with an answer'. People didn't understand why there wasn't already sufficient data to demonstrate certainty from historical UOG activities in Scotland, and the absence of detailed base line and impact data over this period undermined confidence that the industry would be governed responsibly going forwards. In the words of one resident, 'it has been going on in Airth for 20 years, surely there must be a wealth of first-hand samples, and data on geology, and health impacts?' There was a general consensus that

all scientific and economic information related to Scottish operations to-date –industrial chemicals, seismic surveys, gas production– should be made available for consideration by communities under the moratorium. Given the potential burden of risk to Scottish communities, residents felt strongly it was unacceptable and biased for any information related to UOG to be held back from the public consultation for consideration by regulators only, or for reasons of commercial confidentiality.

Traffic Impacts. There was general disagreement with the conclusion that UOG traffic impacts were unlikely to be significant or detectable at a local level. It was noted the local quarry already involved 190 daily truck journeys on community roads, and thus UOG would double the volume of heavy traffic if it came to the area. One resident spoke about how she dreads travelling local backroads already because ‘you turn a corner and there’s a humungous lorry speeding towards you’ and felt UOG traffic would increase the risk of accidents. Others were concerned about the health impacts, and how these would be monitored, or as one participant said it, ‘the diesel and the smell, who is going to regulate that?’ In short, the general view was that the cumulative impacts of UOG traffic on local infrastructure and health could be significant, and that this couldn’t be ‘objectively assessed’ but needed to be properly quantified and qualified on a case-by-case basis.

Inadequate regulation. A recurring discussion theme was a lack of faith in the capacity and assurances of regulators, which had arisen as the result of past local experiences. For example, community councillors spoke of a recent engagement with SEPA regarding issues over the smell of a local landfill site, where they acknowledged their limited resources for the region (6 investigators). Community complaints were also dismissed on the basis of objective assessments that the smell was ‘acceptable’, although on the day of the site visit ‘it was obviously bad as soon as they got out of their car’. The general view was that local industries were ‘self-policing’, with one resident stating that when they are required to submit samples ‘they’ll pick the one which is the cleanest’. People did not believe there was a joined-up regulatory framework sufficient to assess and control cumulative impacts, attribute impacts to polluters, or that there would be hard enforcement in the event of accidents or abuses, and thought that UOG operators would take advantage of this. In the words of one resident, ‘there are so many polluters here, if there are effects they will blame each other, and we’ll be the ones who lose out’. Others had reservations about the dependency of the Scottish Government on big business, particularly Ineos, and thought this might influence hasty decisions and deter regulators from obstructing UOG activities. In the words of one participant, ‘Government doesn’t have the money to invest, so they need business, and let the business get away with it. Everything they’ve done, it’s take the money and we’ll deal with the repercussions later’.

A quarter of the participants expressed particular concerns about who would be responsible for clean-up issues which might emerge after *decommissioning*, or if an operator went into liquidation. They highlighted the ineffectiveness of regulation in this respect by the response to their problems with the emergence of polluted mine water after heavy rain. As one resident put it, ‘we ask the Coal Board for help, they say ‘no’. The Council: ‘no’. SEPA: ‘no’. No-one wants to take responsibility’. There was general consensus that before UOG could proceed, the community would need to feel confident there was a framework of regulation, bonds and insurance in place sufficient to cover the costs of property damage and clean up in any eventuality.

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 were three messages or question to the Scottish Government which arose from our consultation:

We have reached a consensus position that the moratorium must be extended till there is greater certainty regarding the benefits and risks of UOG, and should the decision be taken to proceed with a Scottish UOG industry based on current evidence, then we would reject the social license for any activities in our community council area. After weighing up the potential benefits and risks of UOG for Plains, we have reached a consensus position that significantly greater clarity and certainty is needed regarding both before our community would consider hosting the industry. This was particularly so given local factors which we feel exacerbate the risks but which have not been given proper consideration in the research commissioned by the Scottish Government. This includes the population density compared with UOG fields elsewhere, the complex geological context, our experience of industrial pollution and its causes, and of ineffective and under-resourced regulation, and most importantly, the cumulative impacts on public and environmental health of the multiple industries in our area. For a significant majority of us (around 80%), we feel these factors and the evidence of UOG risk is already sufficient to reject fracking in Scotland outright. However, we are all in agreement that the moratorium must be extended, and that the economic and scientific information currently available to the public and the Scottish Government is too uncertain for a responsible decision to be made. We cannot understand why more data on isn't forthcoming given the 20 year history of the UOG industry in Scotland, and this fact doesn't give us confidence that it has and will be effectively controlled. We believe that proper impartial consultation necessitates the disclosure of all scientific information or evaluation related to UOG, and which may be reserved for regulators (e.g. chemicals, geological surveys, ecological and health impacts), for consideration by those communities who would sustain the burden of any risk. We feel strongly that the profit motive and promises of big business should not drive us to rushing into decisions which could have huge implications for national health and reputation, without due diligence on the part of the Scottish Government and people. On the one hand, we want to believe that UOG will be safe and will bring the economic benefits and jobs it promises to our community (despite our repeated experiences to the contrary with local industries). However, on the other, we also believe a single accident or oversight could have far-reaching effects on our public and environmental health, and this is not a burden of risk we are prepared to accept given the degree of uncertainty in present findings. As one of us put it, 'the impacts could be immediate, but when the damage is done, it's done, it's too bloody late'. On this basis, we ask that the moratorium be extended pending a stronger evidence-based argument for UOG, whilst wishing also to make it known that, should the Scottish Government decide to go ahead based on current evidence, then Plains rejects the social license for UOG in our local community council area.