

SHALE GAS

The public perception of fracking

A new study explores how the public views and engages with fracking – just as exploration for shale gas has resumed in Lancashire. Laurence Williams explains all.

There could not be more timely circumstances for the launch of a new interdisciplinary research programme into hydraulic fracturing (commonly termed ‘fracking’). After a seven-year gap, Cuadrilla began high-volume hydraulic fracturing at its Preston New Road site in the Fylde region of Lancashire in October – the first use of the controversial technique in the UK since Cuadrilla caused two small seismic events at nearby Preese Hall in 2011.

The resumption has once again put fracking in the headlines and into the public conscience, just as a team of academics in the Science Policy and Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of Sussex begin a three-year study to explore the political debate over the issue in the UK, alongside public perceptions of the technique and

participation in its governance.

In a 2012 joint report, the Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering concluded that the risks of using hydraulic fracturing to extract shale gas could be ‘managed effectively’ in the UK if operational best practices were implemented and enforced through regulation. The joint academies made a series of recommendations at the time, including the possibility of a cross-research council programme funding research into hydraulic fracturing and shale gas, with their public acceptability singled out as an important research topic.

Fast-forward to the present and just such a cross-research council programme has seen the Natural Environment Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council fund 26 individual projects across five challenges spanning the earth and social sciences.

The programme aims to provide current independent scientific evidence to understand the potential environmental and socio-economic impacts of shale gas development, and includes research into everything from the UK shale resource distribution to the lived experiences of local communities in close proximity to shale development.

Policy, public perceptions and participation

As a part of this programme, a project at the University of Sussex’s Science Policy Research Unit will focus on three key areas of interest related to fracking and the relationships between them.

First, the Westminster policy debate over this issue. The

government’s arguments in favour of shale development and the counter-arguments voiced from across the party-political spectrum will be examined using a mix of interviewing and document analysis.

Second, public perceptions of and attitudes towards shale gas development (including the use of hydraulic fracturing) will be studied using both a nationally representative survey and qualitative interviewing in a local case study community.

Third, the public participation opportunities and engagement exercises of government, regulators, the planning system and the industry will be analysed using a range of methods.

Of particular interest will be two key relationships between these distinct objects of analysis (policy, public perceptions and participation). Of interest will be how well dominant policy arguments – the reasoning through which the government attempts to justify shale development to a broader public audience – and indeed the counter policy arguments of shale-sceptics resonate with both the general public and local communities.

In other words, how well received are the arguments for and against? Does their resonance vary by geography, demographics, values, and other factors? Why do certain arguments fail to resonate with certain groups?

The analysis will also look at the scope for communities and the public to participate on and influence policymaking and regulatory decisions through formal processes of public engagement and participation.

Resonance of policy arguments

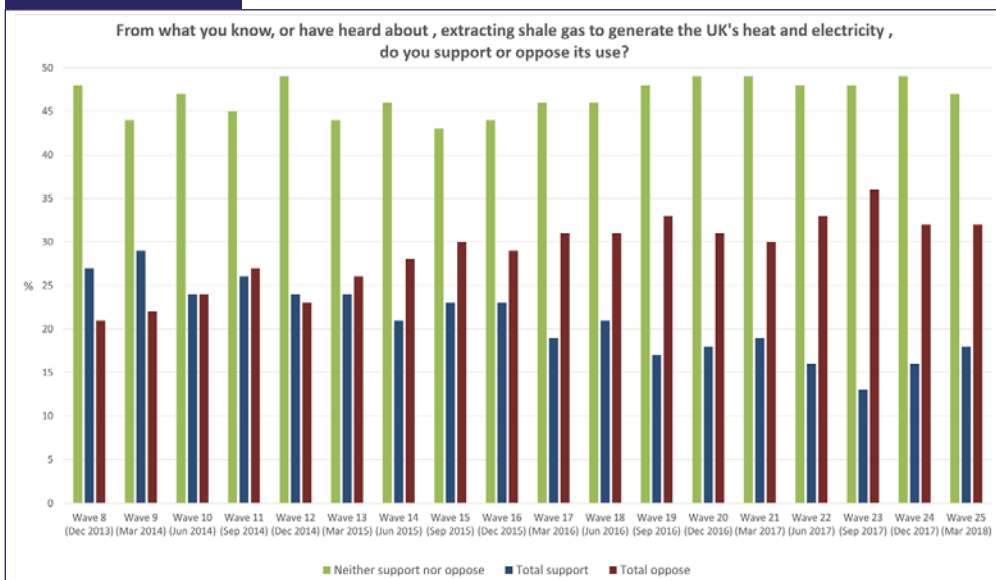
Why is further research here of particular importance?

It was nearly five years ago that ex-Prime Minister David Cameron announced his government was ‘going all out for shale’ and this enthusiasm for exploiting the UK’s shale resources has been shared by each UK government since.

Several years of concerted attempts to justify this policy position to the public, though, have achieved only limited success. For example, the latest attitudes tracker by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) asking about public attitudes to shale gas had ‘neither support nor oppose’ at 47%, total opposition at 32%, and total support at 18%

Figure 1. Fracking is not exactly favoured in the UK

Source: BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker



The [public] perception tends to be that fossil fuels are polluting, archaic and finite; that continued reliance on fossil fuels for our energy is undesirable; and that policies and innovations aimed at extending our ability to utilise fossil fuels are short-termist options that defer rather than solve our energy problems

(see Figure 1). Other UK surveys have found shale gas to be the least favourable amongst a range of energy options (even versus coal).

The perception tends to be that fossil fuels are polluting, archaic and finite; that continued reliance on fossil fuels for our energy is undesirable; and that policies and innovations aimed at extending our ability to utilise fossil fuels (eg CCS, hydraulic fracturing) are short-termist options that defer rather than solve our energy problems, and therefore constitute a non-transition.

This positions the government's 'gas as a bridging fuel' argument as going against the grain of seemingly widely held common sense public views on the matter.

Through measuring the resonance of policy arguments using both quantitative and qualitative methods we will shed further light on the extent and variance of this problem for key policy arguments concerning shale development and attempt to get to grips with the reasons why dominant policy arguments do or don't chime with certain publics.

Procedural fairness

That same body of qualitative and participatory work also makes clear the importance of public participation in policy and

decision-making. One analysis found that concerns over a lack of transparency, democracy and community input in the governance of shale development had become the most prominent anti-fracking argument in the UK by early 2014. This superseded concerns over risks to public health and the local environment, climate change and the industrialisation of the countryside.

Subsequent events – for instance recovered planning appeals, Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project proposals, and the jailing of anti-fracking protestors – are only likely to have increased concerns over shale governance in the years since. Other studies have regularly found that perceptions around the trustworthiness of institutions and inclusivity of decision-making processes have been key reasons for scepticism over shale gas development.

This puts questions of procedural fairness and legitimate decision making at the heart of the issue. Processes of public engagement and participation on shale development decision making are one way that these governance concerns might be addressed.

However, as well as being potential solutions these processes are also the subject of concern

themselves. In other words, such processes may help to resolve or amplify local and broader public resistance to shale development depending on whether they are perceived and experienced as authentic and sufficient or as unduly circumscribed and tokenistic.

Through examining public expectations, perceptions and experiences of engagement and participation processes on shale gas, alongside the design, purposes and institutional realities of such processes, we will clarify the extent to which they are working to address or exacerbate governance concerns.

In short, the study aims to improve our understanding of public views and values on shale development and how well policy arguments resonate with them, as well as how effectively opportunities for public participation in shale development decision making produce acceptance, legitimacy or better decisions. It's fair to say that the 'fracking' debate looks set to rumble on in the years it will take us to explore these aspects thoroughly. ●

Laurence Williams is a Research Fellow in Environmental Politics at the Science Policy Research Unit based at the University of Sussex, sussex.ac.uk/spru



Membership

Are you a leader in the energy industry?

If you are working in a senior level energy-related role, you could be eligible to upgrade your membership to Fellow of the Energy Institute (FEI) status.

Fellowship of the EI is awarded to energy's leaders and influencers, providing the highest level of recognition for outstanding members of the EI community.

Anyone can apply to become a Fellow. To be successful, you'll need to show that you have played a significant role in providing innovation, problem-solving and thought-leadership in the sector.

Visit our website to find out more

energyinst.org/fellows

