

Framing fracking: What could be done to improve the fracking debate?

Fracking is the process by which natural gas is extracted from otherwise impermeable shale rocks by the creation of fractures that allow gas to flow out of the rock. The use of fracking has expanded rapidly in the past decade, particularly in N. America, though it has often been accompanied by public unease. The UK has been no different in this regard, with significant public opposition emerging since the fracking of Britain's first shale gas well in Lancashire in 2011. This opposition has led to various acts of public protest: from the setting up of local and national level anti-fracking groups, to demonstrations and direct action.

Commonly cited reasons for opposition to fracking include; induced seismicity, water contamination, air pollution and traffic. Alleged benefits include energy security and a boost to the economy. Various government publications and rhetoric address these issues, with limited effect on public opinion. So how should the debate around fracking be conducted, and what are the issues that policy makers should be addressing? Fracking is the process by which natural gas is extracted from otherwise impermeable shale rocks by the creation of fractures that allow gas to flow out of the rock. The use of fracking has expanded rapidly in the past decade, particularly in N. America, though it has often been accompanied by public unease. The UK has been no different in this regard, with significant public opposition emerging since the fracking of Britain's first shale gas well in Lancashire in 2011. This opposition has led to various acts of public protest: from the setting up of local and national level anti-fracking groups, to demonstrations and direct action.

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Government Response

Research indicates that policy making institutions tend to assume that public opposition to a technology such as fracking stems from the perceived immediate risks, and that therefore assessment and management of the risks is sufficient grounds for developing the technology further. Issues not perceived as having a quantifiable risk are frequently seen as insufficient grounds for informing policymaking decisions. As a result, the debate surrounding fracking is largely concerned with technical issues. Research conducted by ReFINE has indicated that public concerns around fracking go beyond those directly associated with risk.

What are the public's concerns?

A study using 6 in-depth focus groups covering a range of demographics and locations across the

UK was conducted in 2013. A comparison of responses and attitudes from these focus groups were compared to analysis of the way in which policymakers and institutions present the debate around fracking to the public.

Analysis of policymaker reports and rhetoric indicates an inherent assumption that public opposition to fracking stems from a lack of understanding of the hard science and a lack of knowledge of the quantifiable risks. This was not reflected in the focus groups where it was seen that concerns were not exclusively limited to questions over risk or feasibility. Instead, many concerns were rooted in the way in which information on fracking is presented to the public. The focus groups identified four major areas of concern:

A lack of trust of key stakeholders and institutions, particularly focused on the UK Government and energy industry.

A perception that the public was not consulted sufficiently, and a fear that decision making was likely to be influenced by those with vested interests.

Concern that policy makers are “sleepwalking” into decisions regarding the position of shale gas in future energy policy, without due consideration or democratic process.

Perceived complacency and naivety on the part of scientific experts. A view that the potential impacts on local people are being dismissed or underestimated

What can we conclude

The debate around fracking should not focus solely on feasibility or objective risks, nor should policy makers underestimate the public understanding of these issues. Institutions should be more willing to engage with the public and accommodate a wider range of views, including the consideration of the possible uncertainties, areas of ignorance and issues of social acceptability around fracking. In order to appropriately engage the public, non-technical issues need to be considered a rational and justified part of the debate.

Key Recommendations

Policymakers should avoid appearing to “sell” fracking to the public.

The potential benefits of fracking should not be taken for granted by policymakers, and must be examined as rigorously as the perceived potential negative impacts.

The perceived lack of a democratic process in decision making was a concern to many.

The public and other organisations should be genuinely capable of influencing decisions.

Engagement with the public must be two-way communication. Policymakers should respond to wider public concerns rather than merely aim to convince the public of the case for fracking.

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Publication

[Framing 'fracking': Exploring public perceptions of hydraulic fracturing in the United Kingdom.](#)

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