

Division Report June 2016

Oh what a month! At the time of writing the country is in shock over the sudden and untimely death of Jo Cox, the EU Referendum is imminent and we are only weeks past one of the most contentious planning applications to be determined by NYCC, the Fracking of the KM8 well. By now we will know the results of the referendum, but in the run up, dozens of people asked me for advice on how to vote as "they find the matter too complex". I am afraid I was not much help as firstly I believe it to be a very personal decision and secondly I think "in" or "out" it's going to be a bumpy ride.

There's a whole spectrum of views on the issue of "fracking" within the division. Many are passionately "against" but there is also a strong campaign group "for" fracking. Some people have been frightened witless by scare tactics and some people simply don't have a view. It's been a long time since I was a member of NYCC planning committee but I am still targeted by campaigners believing I am a committee member. Both before and after the decision, I received a plethora of abusive threatening letters and emails, the likes of which I have never seen before. I hasten to add, not one came from the within the area which I represent. Where I did receive genuine letters from residents I was able to engage in sensible and meaningful debate.

Planning is another complex issue and with regard to the KM8 application it became clear that what was lost on many people was that actually the decision of the planning committee was a fairly narrow one. They were not deciding if fracking was a permitted activity – national policy said it was. They were not deciding if the process proposed was safe – the environment agency had already issued a permit to say it was. The role of the committee was to say whether this industrial process was an appropriate use for the land in relation to a batch of local and national policies. Because the gas well already existed and had been producing "conventional gas" for about 20 years, with a established infrastructure the situation was unique and therefore would not necessarily set a precedence for the acceptance of further applications.

We should now direct our energy into ensuring that the authorities enforce the agreed regulations and that the company is held to account for their promises. I have always advised campaigners to engage with consultation on the new policies being developed on fracking within the emerging minerals and waste plan. This is our safeguard and will ensure a balanced environment for people to live in and tourism and agriculture to operate in, but also for the legal extraction of minerals and gas to take place for which we have a legal duty, like it or not.

I understand the frustrations attached to these complex decisions and only time will put these events into perspective. Whatever political persuasion you are inclined towards, it seems that we are all questioning the relevance of political engagement at the most fundamental level. My view is that we get strongest representation when we work actively with the hand we are dealt.

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