

A reply from John Penrose, MP for Weston

22nd December 2016 Robin Whitlock 0 Comments

“Thank you for contacting me about fracking. You’re absolutely right it’s an important issue, and I strongly agree we need to make sure it’s safe. The most important point to make at the start is that, whether we use shale gas or not, it doesn’t reduce or change our existing commitments to use green energy and boost our proportion of renewables. Those programmes are unchanged, so shale gas would only alter the mix of our remaining fossil fuel usage, making us less dependent on Russian gas and Middle Eastern oil.

On the safety of fracking as a technology, the cross-party independent Energy and Climate Change Parliamentary Select Committee concluded that there was no evidence that fracking poses a direct risk to underground water aquifers, provided the drilling well is built properly. But even so the Government has announced it can’t go ahead unless new and stringent conditions are met. Rightly, there are quite a few of them, but the most notable is that each application will now have to go through the local planning process, plus earn approval from the Environment Agency to make sure there is no risk to the environment.

In addition to this, the Infrastructure Act 2015 forbids the Secretary of State from issuing consent for fracking if it takes place within a ‘protected groundwater source area’. That means fracking is banned at depths of less than 1,200 metres within 50 metres of a point where water used for domestic or food purposes is extracted. Drinking water isn’t normally found below 400 metres, so there’s at least 800 metres between drinking water sources and any zone where fracking is taking place.

On your point about National Parks and other protected areas, I’m happy to reassure you that there is no truth in the reports saying that the Government is changing its stance on this. What has happened is that the Government has introduced draft regulations that define the areas in which fracking will be banned and National Parks are going to be included. This means that no wells could ever be drilled in National Parks, and no fracking which might extend underneath them from a well drilled outside would be allowed unless it is more than 1.2 km down. So Ministers are, as promised, leaving them intact (and rightly so!).

So there are already some pretty solid legal protections (which I strongly support) to make sure local communities can’t be forced to accept fracking or drilling if they don’t want it. These newly-strengthened planning laws mean that, if someone wants to apply for a fracking licence, it can only happen if the local community is happy that the benefits it will reap (in the form of increased business rates etc.) would outweigh the disruption of the drilling process. This, of course, would have to be decided during the planning process by local Councillors, who are obviously democratically accountable. It means local voters will get a properly democratic say in balancing the risks and benefits for their community. And personally, I’d only be prepared to support fracking if local communities are clear they approve of it. It’s a pretty high bar for a fracking application to clear, I hope you’ll agree!

Yours sincerely,”