

Date: 19 September 2018 at 17:11:44 BST  
To: Member of the Public  
Subject: From the office of John Penrose MP

Dear xx,

Thank you for contacting me about planning permission for fracking although, having gone through the email which you and others have been asked to send me, I'm worried that it's pretty misleading. As an example, there is no proposal to make fracking allowed as permitted development, as the email states: the only suggestion (and it's only a consultation at this stage, not a final or firm decision as - again - the email states) is for exploratory drilling to be allowed as permitted development. The difference is important, because exploratory drilling is the same process as you'd get for traditional gas or oil exploration: in other words they're making a hole to see what's at the bottom, but that's it. They aren't allowed turn the hole into a fracking well, and any proposal to do so would still require full-scale planning permission, with all the usual local democratic community input.

So we'll both have to take the allegations and briefings you've been sent with a pretty hefty pinch of salt. But, that said, there's an important underlying principle where - even though other pieces are misleading and wrong - I suspect we'd both agree with their argument: it's absolutely vital that no fracking happens unless it is safe, and has democratic consent from local residents. Separately, I'd add a third condition to go with these first two: that, whether we use shale gas or not, it mustn't reduce or alter our existing commitments to use green energy and boost our proportion of renewables. Shale gas might alter the mix of our remaining fossil fuel usage, making us less dependent on Russian gas and Middle Eastern oil, but it shouldn't be used as a way to go back on our climate change promises.

To start with 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 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. Equally, fracking will not be allowed within a protected groundwater source area (to protect drinking water) and Ministers are also considering whether water companies could become statutory consultees on any application for fracking licences in future too.

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. The planning process engages local Councillors, who are obviously democratically accountable, and 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,

John Penrose