

# UK government to override local consultation in drive for fracking

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The UK's Conservative government has announced its intention to override the usual local consultation exercises, after recent local council decisions went against the fracking companies.

Councils have been told that if they do not rule on applications for fracking within the 16-week timeframe set out by government, it will be taken out of their hands and decided by ministers. The government said the decision would unlock the “huge potential” for shale gas by accelerating the planning process.

This decision was followed by the granting of 27 licences for exploration of fracking potential in 100 square kilometre blocks of land in the north of England and Midlands. The blocks of land include areas around Lincoln, Nottingham, Sheffield and Preston. This means that large portions of the north of England and Midlands have been divided up between a handful of global oil and gas companies, such as INEOS (the Switzerland-based chemicals giant that owns the Grangemouth refinery in Scotland), Centrica-backed Cuadrilla and the France-based energy giant GDF Suez.

The proviso that planning permission is still required for fracking to commence is no longer seen as an impediment, since the government is clearly behind the frackers and will step in if councils do not fall into line. To ram the point home, the energy minister, Lord Bourne, told the *Daily Telegraph*, “It's important we press on and get shale moving ... Investment in shale could reach £33bn and support 64,000 jobs...”

The government changes on fracking came shortly after an opposite decision on wind farms, in which more control was given to local areas in a bid to reduce the number of wind farms being built. This was in spite of the fact that opinion polls show that more than three times as many people would prefer to have wind farms in their council area than those who would prefer

fracking.

The government has made it clear it is not willing to spend money on reaching targets for renewable energy, which it sees as a drain on resources that could be used more directly to assert their interests.

From the beginning of fracking in the UK, the Tories made it clear they are determined to do whatever it takes to make it a success by going “all out for shale.” The fall in the price of oil and gas has made them even more determined to remove what few restrictions are left. They have already introduced tax exemptions and allowed unprecedented access to areas of outstanding natural beauty and areas of special scientific interest.

A recent decision to allow exploration and drilling for gas in the North Yorkshire Moors shows how the situation has been transformed to favour the frackers. The concession has been given to Third Energy (formerly Viking), which is backed by Barclays Bank. Third Energy will begin working Eberston Moor in the North York Moors. Part of the agreement is for the company to dispose of huge amounts of wastewater by pumping it back into the ground. This is in spite of the wastewater being potentially radioactive and the fact that there are two protected zones for water collection within 10 kilometres of the planned re-injection well.

The area of Scarborough, in North Yorkshire is supplied with drinking and household water from the local aquifer. A submission to the Environment Agency by the water company involved stated that the planned re-injection may “directly affect their asset”—in other words, the water supply needed by thousands of people. The submission was made public only by means of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request.

In the past, decisions on issues affecting local areas were left in the hands of locally elected councils, to whom objections could be registered. While none of

this prevented the domination of society by the interests of big business, it did provide a certain brake on the process.

The ruling elite are being driven to the conclusion that such democratic niceties are incompatible with their race against their imperialist rivals, both within Europe and more widely. The stepping up of tensions with Russia has made them more determined than ever to lessen their dependence on imported energy supplies, falling oil prices notwithstanding.

Energy Secretary Amber Rudd said, “We need more secure, home grown energy supplies—and shale gas [obtained through fracking] must play a part in that.” A CBI spokesperson said, “Shoring up our energy supply for the future is critical for businesses ...”

In the case of fracking, fierce opposition by local communities played a part in councils turning down applications for fracking in their areas, including in Lancashire and Sussex.

A document commissioned by the government, *Shale Gas: Rural Economy Impacts*, was heavily redacted when originally published in 2014 by the Environment Department (Defra). The Information Commissioner later ordered Defra to publish the document in full, after a complaint was made by the environmental group Greenpeace. The unredacted version contained information that undermined the government's claims that fracking would have a negligible effect on the local population.

The report predicted:

- \* House prices would go down by 7 percent in the area around a site being tested for large-scale fracking.

- \* Nearby properties could face additional insurance costs.

- \* Traffic congestion could be worsened by up to 51 journeys per day during the exploration phase alone.

- \* Wastewater from fracking would place an additional burden on the existing treatment facilities.



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