

REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

22 SEPTEMBER 2014

15 NOTICE OF MOTION – UNDERGROUND COAL GASIFICATION

The Head of Legal and Member Services reported that at the meeting of the Council held on 14 July 2014 (minute 17 refers), the following Notice of Motion proposed by Councillor Geoffrey Watt and seconded by Councillor Gerry Ellis was referred by the Mayor to this Committee for consideration –

UNDERGROUND COAL GASIFICATION

(1) *Council recalls that at its meeting on 18th July 2011 it approved, with unanimous (all-party) support, a motion ‘Shale Gas Fracking’ (minute 28 refers) stating its opposition to shale gas or coal bed methane testing or extraction in Wirral until the Council was satisfied as to the safety of the process and the risk of adverse environmental impacts had been fully addressed.*

See:

<http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/g3562/Printed%20minutes%2018th-Jul-2011%2018.15%20Council.pdf?T=1>

(2) *It has subsequently emerged that conditional licences to explore for underground coal gasification under parts of the Dee Estuary, including the Hilbre Islands and a coastal strip from Caldy to Hoylake have been granted to Cluff Natural Resources Ltd and for an area just off the entire North Wirral Coast to Riverside Energy Ltd.*

(3) *Council notes that the Hilbre Islands are within the Dee Estuary Special Area of Conservation and Dee Estuary Special Protection Area (all part of a network of protected sites stretching across Europe called Natura 2000) and therefore covered by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations which also covers the Dee Estuary Ramsar Site. They are also protected through national legislation under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, as is the North Wirral Coast and the Mersey Narrows.*

(4) *Council notes that operations both onshore and above the low water mark would require planning approval to be granted by this authority and also that the Hilbre Islands and much of the coastal strip are within its ownership and thus under its control.*

(5) *Therefore, Council:*

(a) *Confirms its opposition to Unconventional Gas Extraction, including Underground Coal Gasification, Coal Bed Methane and Fracking, under Wirral, its offshore coastal waters and the Dee and Mersey estuaries until such time as the Council is satisfied as to the safety of the process and that the risk of adverse environmental impacts have been fully addressed.*

(b) Instructs the Chief Executive to write to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and to Wirral's four Members of Parliament, informing him and them of this decision.

(c) Instructs the Chief Executive to write to Wirral's neighbouring coastal local authorities (Sefton, Liverpool, Halton, Cheshire West & Chester, and Flintshire) informing them of this decision and inviting them to pass an equivalent resolution with the intention of protecting our shared environment.

In accordance with Standing Order 7 (6), Councillor Watt had been invited to attend the meeting in order for him to be given an opportunity to explain the Motion. Councillor Watt indicated that the Motion was largely self-explanatory and, in the light of recent publicity regarding underground coal gasification, requested the Council to re-affirm its opposition to such activities in the Dee and Mersey estuaries.

Councillor Mitchell indicated that he had seconded the original motion 'Shale Gas Fracking', which had previously been approved by the Council (minute 20 (18 July 2011) refers). He referred to environmental concerns arising from such activities in the USA and elsewhere and he highlighted the importance of alternative, Green, energy.

The Chair noted Members' objection to the politicisation of the issue, particularly in West Wirral and recognised that the public required clarification of the potential impact of such activities. The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment confirmed that officers were very clear of the views of the Council. However, in response to a question from the Chair, he stated that should the Council refuse permission to erect structures to enable fracking, the applicant could appeal to the Secretary of State. He further added that a recent bill in the Queen's Speech would allow fracking to take place underground without the surface land owners' permission. It was therefore vital that Members were aware of any decisions of neighbouring authorities, particularly in the Dee Estuary.

Resolved – That the Notice of Motion be supported and the Council be advised accordingly.