Lessons on public participation from the UK shale gas controversy

KEY FINDINGS

• Formal opportunities for public participation in decision-making on shale gas development in the UK were generally restricted to a narrow range of issues and offered only limited scope for public influence.

• Formal participatory processes were largely limited to the consideration of the impacts of particular sites, or to inviting public views on policy interventions that aimed to help achieve the policy goal of establishing a domestic shale gas industry.

• There was a mismatch between the expectations that many members of the public had about participating in decision-making processes and the institutional realities of such exercises in practice, resulting in public cynicism and frustration.

• An ‘early and broad’ approach to public participation for Net Zero infrastructure would provide an early and clear picture of the public acceptability challenge, build trust in the government’s approach, shape policy to be more attuned to public values, and provide legitimacy for policy and any associated infrastructure requirements.

SUMMARY

The tensions that emerged between delivering energy infrastructure and giving the public and local communities a say in decision-making during the UK shale gas controversy offer a number of important lessons both for any renewed attempt to develop a domestic shale gas industry and as the UK looks toward the infrastructure required for Net Zero. University of Sussex researchers investigated formal public participation in UK shale gas decision-making in order to understand the nature and extent of the participatory opportunity on offer and learn what participants thought about these exercises.

This policy brief summarises the findings of this work and makes four recommendations to institutions that oversee formal participatory processes on energy infrastructure.

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COMPARING THE UK AND SCOTTISH APPROACHES TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Looking across four different types of formal public participation (the planning system, environmental permitting consultation, policy consultation, and a series of dialogue workshops conducted for the Department of Energy Climate Change) and 31 separate exercises, the researchers found that - in general - these participatory processes provided only limited scope for public influence, with a narrow range of issues typically open for consideration.

Broader debates about shale policy, its reconciliability with climate change targets and the social desirability of a shale gas industry were not usually accommodated within these processes, which instead focused on the site-specific impacts of particular applications (the planning system and environmental permitting consultation) or narrow ‘how’ questions of implementation (policy consultation and dialogue workshops). Such broader debates, having already been settled by the government, could not be reopened or public scrutiny through the participatory processes on offer, especially prior to the 2019 moratorium.

The exception here was the Scottish Government’s ‘Talking Fracking’ consultation exercise, which focused very broadly on onshore unconventional hydrocarbons and ‘anti-fracking’ consultation. The government had no intention of listening to anybody (anonymously) about the health of the people living close by, that it seems totally wrong. (anonymously, anti-fracking).

Many community members also expressed frustration that certain issues seemed to not be ‘on the table’ for serious consideration within participatory processes:

They didn’t seem to be allowed to consider the health impacts. So if it was a problem with noise, a problem with traffic, or that sort of thing, those are real planning considerations but if it’s an issue with what might happen to the health of the people living close by, that seems to be given less consideration and it doesn’t seem to be taken into account. It just seems totally wrong. (anonymously, anti-fracking).

COMPARING THE UK AND SCOTTISH APPROACHES TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was therefore a mismatch between the expectations that some members of the public had about their level of influence and the kinds of debates they wanted to have, and the institutional realities of the formal participatory opportunities actually available. Whilst there was clear desire to participate on broader policy questions, there were no formal processes that could accommodate such debates (in England), so narrower processes were inundated with comments that went beyond their remit – causing frustration on all sides.

LEARNING FROM THE UK SHALE GAS CONTROVERSY

Looking forward to Net Zero infrastructure, obvious lessons aimed at trying to prevent public frustration, cynicism and a wasted effort include the need for improved communication and public awareness of the types of issues and arguments that are within the scope of particular processes, and clear case studies of public influence achieved through participatory processes. Such lessons are of particular relevance to institutions tasked with designing and implementing public participation processes, such as the Environment Agency, planning authorities, and government departments.

More generally, and at the very least, clarity on this will at least help to prevent the overpromise-underdeliver dynamic seen in the shale gas case. This means conducting public participation on the broad question of ‘do we need or want this?’ prior to any government policy decision. Such a process may at the very least provide a clear articulation of the public acceptability challenge, and potentially deter a government from embarking on a costly and wasteful policy failure.

The utility of public participation as a tool for revealing (rather than necessarily shaping) the public acceptability of energy infrastructure is made obvious by the above comparison between the UK and Scottish Governments’ approaches to public participation in shale development decision-making.

The Scottish Government decided against pursuing a domestic shale gas industry on the basis of the overwhelmingly negative responses of those that took part in their consultation exercise. The UK Government, on the other hand, decided to pursue a shale gas industry without facilitating an equivalent public debate. Whilst ultimately failing to deliver a shale gas industry, this approach expended a good deal of time, attention and money; got bogged down in planning disputes due to strong local opposition; and generated a fair amount of anger and alienation within local communities.

However, ‘early and broad’ public participation doesn’t necessarily have to risk the delivery of essential infrastructure. Depending on their design and framing, such processes can be geared toward revealing public priorities and deliberating trade-offs across a range of technical and behavioural options, rather than merely generating a set of participants, as was the case with the Scottish Government’s shale gas consultation. They could alternatively employ intentional sampling strategies to better reflect the public at large, and in fact doing so would enhance the legitimacy of such processes.

Figure 1: Comparing the UK and Scottish approaches to public consultation on shale development policy

Source: Sovacool et al, 2020 (CC BY 4.0).
LESSONS ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FROM THE UK SHALE GAS CONTROVERSY

BENEFITS OF ‘EARLY AND BROAD’ PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There would be three main benefits of adopting an ‘early and broad’ approach, which would help to avoid some of the mistakes made in the shale gas case:

• An ‘early and broad’ approach sends an important signal that the government are listening to public views rather than ploughing on with a favoured approach irrespective of them. How the government is seen to be pursuing a policy is an important factor in people’s attitudes toward that policy.

• Such an approach may result in a policy that is better attuned to public values and priorities, which may therefore result in lower levels of opposition further downstream when it comes to securing permission for particular sites.

• Even in the face of opposition further downstream, such an approach would provide an important source of legitimacy for the resulting policy and buttress the claim that such infrastructure is in the national interest with the crucial addendum that the public were given the opportunity to play an active role in identifying the infrastructure that we must collectively host.

CONCLUSION

In the shale development case, the UK government felt that technical risk, resource, and economic assessments provided sufficient justification for their shale gas policy without the need for ‘early and broad’ public participation – as it turned out in practice, however, this was demonstrably not the case.

Achieving Net Zero will require both a considerable amount of new infrastructure and vast quantities public buy-in. In seeking to achieve both of these aims simultaneously, it is crucial that policymakers learn from and avoid repeating the mistakes made in the shale gas case.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Institutions tasked with designing and implementing public participation in decision- and policy-making on energy infrastructure should clearly communicate the kinds of issues and arguments that will be considered within the scope of particular processes to the public prior to the beginning of that process.

• To demonstrate the scope for public influence, where available, case studies of public influence on decision-making achieved through particular public participation processes should be identified and communicated to the public.

• To set realistic expectations, the purpose of any particular participatory process and the public role within it should be clearly communicated to the public prior to the beginning of that process.

• Institutions tasked with designing and implementing public participation in decision- and policy-making on energy infrastructure should adopt an ‘early and broad’ approach to public participation for Net Zero infrastructure.

This briefing was based on the following paper:

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The research presented here was funded by the UK’s Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the “Unconventional hydrocarbons in the UK energy system: environmental and socio-economic impacts and processes” research programme – grant number NE/R018138/1.

This briefing is supported by the Policy@Sussex initiative which connects social science research to a wide range of stakeholders.