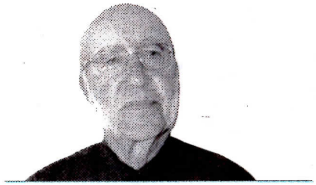
David Moore: what happens if the fracking process goes wrong?



It's not really surprising that the fracking question never really goes away and it resurfaced last week when an application to drill an exploratory well in Wisborough Green was rejected, albeit due to concerns about traffic.

I'm sure that many of you will remember when the energy crisis became a news headline, when in 1973 we were told that the world's supplies of oil would be exhausted within the next 20 years.

The advice given at the time was to improve the insulation of our homes so as to reduce our energy usage.

We were provided with information that allowed us to assess the cost effective benefits of various types of insulation but at the same time we were given information on the risks associated with such improvements.

For example, roof and cavity wall insulation were the favoured approaches provided the risks associated with such work were taken into account.

With roof insulation, this meant ensuring that the work was undertaken in such a way so as not to interfere with the essential ventilation to the roof space.

On the other hand, a number of cavity wall insulation systems existed and we were given guidance on the risks associated with each of those systems as it was important to avoid rainwater transmission occurring across the filled cavity.

Even though the insulation of our existing housing stock is unfinished business, attention in recent years has focused on alternative energy sources, such as wind, water and solar power.

We have more or less jettisoned coal as a fuel, even though we have a significant stock, and concentrated on things such as wind or solar panel farms.

The cost effective question seems to have been ignored in our desire to switch to zero carbon renewable energy despite the fact that we continue to need the 'dirty' power stations to cover us when the wind doesn't blow at the right speed or the sun doesn't shine.

Then all of a sudden, along comes our saviour, fracking. We want to drill down into the shale rock formation, which lies below the water table, use large quantities of water, a necessary resource for human survival, to inject chemicals into the rock in order to release methane for use as a fuel.

The first question of logic that arises is if you burn the methane to generate energy, surely it's contrary to the drive to switch to zero carbon renewable energy?

We also have the additional problem of identifying the risks with any new approach to energy generation and then deciding what to do if something goes wrong.

This was done many years ago during the development of nuclear fission reactors to generate electricity.

We know the risks, we know what control systems are needed and we know what to do if something goes wrong.

This is precisely what's missing with the fracking approach.

All we get are platitudes with very few facts. Let's return to one basic but simple question that continues to be asked but remains unanswered.

What happens if something goes wrong during fracking, which leads to contamination of the water supply, particularly the aquifers?

How do you decontaminate an essential and necessary resource?

The standard reply that, 'it's unlikely to happen', is pointless.

We must know what would be done if it did happen.

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