

Statement on Proposed Gas Drilling at California Quarry

The Town Council first included the planning application for temporary gas drilling at California Quarry on its meeting agenda in August 2013. One year on, I feel it is important that we make clear the Council's position not only in respect of this proposal, but also in relation to any further application that may be lodged in the future.

Firstly, I will deal with the Town Council's response to the initial planning application. In August 2013 the Town Council registered 'No comment' to the application for temporary drilling, which was lodged with Dorset County Council to determine. This was because it included the access route along Panorama Road, which is in the Town Council's ownership, and, further south, a track across Town-Council-owned land. The Town Council has a policy not to comment on any planning application which has a direct impact on property in its ownership.

The reason for this policy is to ensure that the Town Council cannot be accused of commenting on an application on the basis of its own best interests as a property-owning body, rather than in the public's interest on the merits or otherwise of a planning application. A request was made during public participation time for the Town Council to review this policy, and this was duly done at the council meeting on 23rd June 2014. The Council accepted the Clerk's advice that this policy should remain in place, although, as recorded in the minutes, in cases where Members feel there are wider issues of public interest at stake that position can be reviewed and appropriate advice taken. Should there be another planning application this would certainly fall into this criteria.

My second point of clarification is that although the Town Council have decided not to comment through the planning process, this does not prevent it from discussing the wider implications of the proposal. Indeed, tonight will be the fourth occasion in the last year that the application has appeared as an agenda item in full public session for any councillor to comment on it as they see fit. Representations have been made during the public participation session at almost every monthly meeting in the last year and the Town Council has certainly not ignored the concerns that have been raised. The Town Clerk, I and other councillors have met with InfraStrata on two occasions during this period, both to seek assurances regarding access along the Town Council's roads and, more recently, to raise questions of public concern and seek reassurance that fracking will not take place at California Quarry.

It is important to remember, that our discussions are as Town Councillors, and that the Town Council's powers are governed by statute. As such they are limited: we cannot repair the town's roads as that is the function of Dorset County Council; likewise we cannot intervene in the running of schools, libraries, hospitals or nursing homes, and we cannot grant or prevent the granting of planning permission. Hence, even if the Council were unanimously to vote tonight to oppose the drilling operation, we cannot prevent it taking place as we do not have the legal power to do so.

So, given the restrictions on its roles and responsibilities, how can the Council help to ensure that the concerns of local residents are taken into account. The Council has recently invested in a number of information boards that can be put up in the town to advertise matters of interest. With the Council's agreement, these could be used to publicise the forthcoming public information event being organised by InfraStrata. The Town Council can also publicise this through its website and newsletter, provided that it can be distributed in advance of 27th October 2014.

Finally, looking to the future, we may receive a further planning application for a permanent drilling rig. The Town Council may well conclude once again that it cannot comment through the planning process, although as mentioned earlier that will be the matter for the Council to determine at that time. What the Council can certainly do if such an application is received is advertise it on its information boards, raise awareness through the news page of its website and through its newsletter. As with the Navitus Bay Wind Park application this would be carried out in a neutral manner, informing the public of the deadlines so that they can comment directly to Dorset County Council as the body responsible for making the decision. It should also be remembered that Purbeck District Council will also be a consultee. There is no reason why residents cannot send their concerns to Westport House to ensure that they are taken into consideration when the District formulates its response to any such application, and the five of us Town Councillors who are also District Councillors can help to ensure that that is done. Your concerns will not be ignored.

1st September 2014
