

## **Balcombe oil drilling. Press statement by CPRE Sussex.**

CPRE Sussex, the Sussex countryside charity, is shocked by the decision by West Sussex County Council (WSCC) officers to recommend approval for Angus Energy to have yet more time to explore the commercial viability of their oil well at Balcombe. CPRE has long campaigned against this environmentally mad-cap proposal.<sup>1</sup>

WSCC claims to acknowledge that we face a climate emergency. As the Climate Change Commission has recently pointed out<sup>2</sup>, local authorities potentially influence around a third of UK greenhouse gas emissions, and their role is crucial in delivering the nation's commitment to net zero carbon emissions through the use of their planning powers. Yet, when the chips are down, WSCC bottles out of the tough decisions required to turn their fine words into necessary action.

This is another example of a council over-valuing illusionary economic benefits of onshore fossil fuel exploitation at the expense of our climate and of the precious, supposedly protected High Weald AONB countryside around Balcombe. The poor residents of Balcombe, who have already faced a decade of disruption are exposed to the potential of at least another 4 years of uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

The decision is perverse in terms of the impact on the High Weald AONB. An earlier planning application<sup>4</sup> was withdrawn by Angus last year after WSCC's planning officer recommended its refusal on the ground that it would involve major development that would have a significant adverse local impact on the AONB. There are no landscape related differences in the latest application for essentially the same works that would justify the different conclusion reached as to its impact on the High Weald.

As to the broader climate change impact of supporting more fossil fuel extraction, WSCC simply ignored it. The planning guidance requirement that councils should use their planning powers "*to help to shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions*"<sup>5</sup> was ignored. Instead the Council gave great weight to the illusory argument that future oil production at Balcombe would protect the UK's energy security – despite the UK having no oil fuelled power stations and the conclusions of both the Government and its quango, the Oil and Gas authority, that we have "*sufficient capacity to meet demand, as well as respond to supply shocks*".<sup>6</sup>

Planning bodies are failing to get to grips with the harsh reality that the protection of our environment and climate requires tough decisions that change behaviour and attitudes if the Government's fine words about tackling global warming are to be more than dandelion seeds puffed away in the wind. This decision by WSCC is as short-sighted as those that threaten expansion of both Heathrow and Gatwick, and that approved a new coal mine in Cumbria.

Frack-free Balcombe campaigning may no longer hit the headlines as it did back in 2012 and 2013; but, thanks to the developers' prevarications, the residents of Balcombe have already faced a decade of uncertainty as to whether their rural back yard is to become a major oil production hub. It may be 2025 before they and we learn the outcome. It is appalling that WSCC should again leave them in such extended limbo over a development so environmentally harmful that should never have been allowed to see the light of day.

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### **Notes for editors**

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.cpresussex.org.uk/what-we-care-about/fracking/>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/local-authorities-and-the-sixth-carbon-budget>.

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- <sup>3</sup> Angus Energy's planning permission allows them a further 12 months to carry out their testing from the time that they start work in addition to the 3 years they have already had for this purpose, but permits them up to 3 years before that work has to start if the permission is not to lapse.
- <sup>4</sup> WSCC planning reference WSCC/071/19.
- <sup>5</sup> National Planning Policy Framework para 148.
- <sup>6</sup> Statutory Security of Supply Report 2019, produced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. See also Oil & Gas Authority Report: "UK Oil and Gas Reserves and Resources as at the end of 2019": [https://www.ogauthority.co.uk/media/6681/uk\\_oil-gas-rr\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ogauthority.co.uk/media/6681/uk_oil-gas-rr_2020.pdf)