

THE EFFECT OF FRACKING ON HOUSE PRICES

The allegation

According to MPs Barbara Keeley (Labour) and Caroline Lucas (the Green party), and anti-fracking campaigners, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) censored a study examining the effect of shale gas drilling on the rural economy, to remove evidence suggesting that house prices would fall.⁴⁴

Timeline

- Dec 2013 Defra received a request to release information on the economics of shale gas under Environmental Information Regulations 2004.⁵¹
- Jun 2014 Request was resubmitted.
- Jul 2014 Defra responded to the request by publishing 'Shale Gas Rural Economy Impacts report,' with large sections redacted.
- Aug 2014 The *Guardian*,⁴⁴ *Daily Mail*⁴⁵ and *Telegraph*⁴⁶ ran stories criticising the redaction.
- 8th Jun 2015 Following a contested Freedom of Information request, the Information Commissioner required Defra to publish an unredacted version of the report.⁴⁷
- 1st Jul 2015 Defra published the unredacted report.⁴⁸

How were government policy and public debate affected?

The present government is committed to expanding fracking for shale gas. It is unlikely that full publication would have altered policy, but it would have allowed greater scrutiny of the potential impacts of this policy.

The public debate about fracking has focused on the risks to health and the environment from the technique, and on the potential economic impacts. Much of the available evidence on risks to health and the environment is from the USA, which differs significantly from the UK geologically and in how fracking is regulated. Nonetheless a review of this evidence by the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering concluded that "the health, safety and environmental risks can be managed effectively in the UK" and that "seismic risks are low."⁴⁹ Despite this evidence being publicly available, media reporting of fracking frequently overstates the known risks and leaves the public ill-informed.⁵⁰

In publishing a redacted version of this study, Defra acknowledged the public interest in the information being published. But it also stated: "there is a strong public interest in withholding the [redacted] information because it is important that officials can consider implications of potential impacts and scenarios around the development of the shale gas industry and to develop options without the risk that disclosure of early thinking, could close down discussion."⁵¹

Defra failed to acknowledge that the redaction created a void, which was filled by speculation and anecdote in place of evidence, and which made it harder for the public to judge the claims that fracking will benefit the country economically.

⁴⁴ Mason, R (2014)

⁴⁵ Spencer, B (2014)

⁴⁶ Lean, G (2014)

⁴⁷ Information Commissioner's Office (2015)

⁴⁸ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2015)

⁴⁹ The Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering (2012)

⁵⁰ Sense about Science (2014)

⁵¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2014b)