

Unconventional Hydrocarbons in the UK Energy System

Framing ‘fracking’ in the UK policy debate, 2010-2018

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What are the key ‘frames’ in the UK policy debate?

According to our analysis nine key ‘frames’ or perspectives on shale gas development have been central to the UK policy debate over the period of study. Of these nine frames, four are supportive of shale development and five are sceptical. The nine key ‘frames’ identified were:

Pro-shale development frames

- ‘Low impact development’ - views shale development as only producing mundane and temporary nuisance impacts which will not amount to industrialisation of the countryside
- ‘Lower carbon fuel’ - views the development of a domestic shale gas industry as compatible with if not a positive contribution towards meeting the UK’s climate change targets
- ‘Manageable risk’ – views the risks associated with hydraulic fracturing as manageable, and UK regulation as world-leading
- ‘Wealth and security’ – views UK shale resources as an opportunity for potentially substantial economic and energy security benefits

Anti-shale development frames

- ‘Bad gas governance’ – views shale development as being imposed on unwilling local communities by a central Government behaving questionably
- ‘Dirty fossil fuel’ – views the development of a domestic shale gas industry as irreconcilable with the UK’s climate change target

Summary

This briefing reports the findings of an analysis of the UK (Westminster) policy debate over shale gas 2010-2018.

This involved analysing 1,557 policy documents and the interviews with 30 policy-makers, representatives and other policy-aligned stakeholders. Documents analysed included major political speeches, manifestos, select committee reports and passages of parliamentary debate.

Research Programme Summary

The overarching objective of the research programme is to improve significantly the scientific evidence base on shale gas as a potential energy resource for the UK.

More information can be found at www.ukuh.org

About the project

The FFEfP (‘Fracking’, framing and effective participation) project researches three key areas of interest and the relationships between them. These are: the Westminster policy debate, public perceptions, and public participation opportunities.

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- ‘Elusive threats’ – views hydraulic fracturing as novel, highly risky, and as the subject of ongoing uncertainty; views accidents as inevitable, especially in the context of perceptions of inadequate regulations and underfunded regulators
- ‘Industrialise the countryside’ – views shale gas development as industrialising the British countryside
- ‘No repeat revolution’ – sceptical about the prospects of a UK industry, ranging from doubts over a reduction in gas prices to scepticism over the emergence of an industry of any significance at all



Which were the most widely used frames?

Pro-shale development frames were more widely used than anti-shale development frames (1,447 uses vs. 969 uses). The most widely used individual frame was the ‘wealth and security’ frame (715 uses), followed by the ‘manageable risk’ and ‘lower carbon fuel’ frames (407 and 295 uses). The most widely used anti-shale development frame was the ‘elusive threats’ frame (260 uses).

How has the policy debate unfolded over time?

After initial low-level use of pro frames (especially the ‘wealth and security’ frame) in 2010 the debate starts to pick up in 2011 with increasing use of anti frames along with increasing use of the ‘manageable risk’ frame in response. The ‘industrialise the countryside’ frame starts to be used in 2012, and the ‘bad gas governance’ frame in 2013. Generally the debate reaches a crescendo between Q4 2015 and Q1 2016 as the Infrastructure Bill passes through the Houses of Parliament, after which frame use drops back down to lower levels.

How does the UK debate compare to other countries?

Frames similar to the ‘wealth and security’ frame seem to be dominant features of pro-shale discourse across Europe, the US and Argentina. The ‘lower carbon fuel’ frame seems to be common across Europe but less pronounced in the US and especially Argentina. Similarly, whilst the ‘manageable risk’ frame seems widespread across Europe, excessive regulation is seen as a threat to growth in the US. Anti-shale development frames concerning local environmental contamination seem common across all regions, although the strong focus on regulatory competence we find seems particular to the UK. The ‘dirty fossil fuel’ frame is used across Europe and the US, though appears to be less prominent in Eastern Europe and the US. The ‘bad gas governance’ looks to be fairly common within Europe and aspects of the ‘no repeat revolution’ frame have been identified in the Dutch debate. Finally, the prominence of the framing struggle over land use impacts (i.e. the ‘low impact development’ frame vs. the ‘industrialise the countryside’ frame) seems a particular feature of the UK debate.



