

BA13+ REPORT TO WESTBURY AREA BOARD

The latest BA13+ Community Area Partnership meeting had an environmental theme. We met on 17th November, a suitably rainy night, to hear about flooding and fracking in Wiltshire.

The meeting was held at the Leighton Recreation Centre, and was chaired by Carole King.

A good-sized audience heard first from Guy Parker from the Environment Agency who led a talk entitled chalk and cheese; briefly touching on the Somerset levels (where the cheese comes from) and concentrating on the chalk areas, i.e. here in Wiltshire

Areas of chalk are susceptible to groundwater flooding. The chalk formations run down and across from Buckinghamshire and down to Dorset across Wiltshire, and down into France. The chalk can be 300 metres deep, and full of water. An explanation was given of what causes groundwater flooding, and how it is different to runoff water.

The Environment Agency provide an excellent warning service. They monitor groundwater levels via boreholes.

Guy concluded by speaking about the Somerset Levels (the cheese to the chalk). A good argument could be made for not digging ditches and dredging them, and instead planting more trees as water levels wouldn't rise so high.

Cllr. Gordon King noted that the poor water quality in the Westbury area wasn't related to the drinking water but the farmers allowing nitrates to run-off into the aquifers, which Guy agreed with.

Trevor Carbin then spoke briefly on fracking, or hydraulic fracturing. His intention was to put forward a fairly balanced viewpoint. He himself has a background as a geologist, but is now a politician. The British geological survey estimated there could be 1,300 trillion cubic feet of shale gas under Britain. They also believed that communities hosting shale gas extraction should share in the financial benefits – so if Westbury had become the new Aberdeen, we would have had a great deal of money flowing into the town!

Trevor ran through the various phases of shale gas exploration. In West Wiltshire in 2015 South Western Energy were awarded licences for exploration in a 20 sq km area around Westbury, primarily looking for coal-bed methane. There is however very little coal in this area so it was a bit of a mystery as to why they were awarded licences. There was then a consultation on the impact on the wildlife in the area in late 2015. In September 2016 it was announced that South Western Energy were not taking up their licences, quoting rising energy prices. They still didn't explain why they ever thought there was coal bed methane under west Wiltshire. Trevor is of the opinion that there is a 99% percent probability that there won't now be any fracking in this area.

Regarding the opposition to fracking. People object to earthquakes, water contamination, health risks, increased traffic, development in the countryside. It's impossible to say whether it would be an environmental disaster here in Wiltshire or whether it would be like Whytch Farm in Dorset, the largest operation in Europe, which for the past 40 years has quietly got on with its business without anyone really noticing. There are 15 wells there. At one time they were producing 100,000 barrels of oil a day.

The UK government now has to show its commitment to climate change. Pursuing fracking and burning fossil fuels only takes us in the wrong direction.

Trevor was thanked for a very thought provoking presentation.

The venue and theme of the next Partnership meeting, which is scheduled to take place on 16th February 2016, is to be agreed at the next Steering Group meeting, which takes place on Wednesday 14th December at Crosspoint.

Phil McMullen, BA13+ Community Area Partnership administrator