

## STATEMENT BY BALCOMBE PARISH COUNCIL

13th August 2013

Balcombe Parish Council (BPC) recognises the right of people to protest against the oil exploration currently taking place at Lower Stumble, just outside Balcombe village, provided they do so peacefully and lawfully.

However it would like to correct the record following the “exposure” of its failure to comment on Cuadrilla’s application for planning consent in 2010 published last week in a national magazine

In January 2010 BPC received a copy of a one page circular letter from County Development at WSCC inviting recipients to comment on a proposal “to upgrade existing stoned platform and drill an exploratory borehole for oil and gas exploration” at the [existing] Lower Stumble Hydrocarbon Exploration Site. Unlike the invitations to comment on planning applications with which BPC was familiar, no details were attached, although a link to a website address at which the application could be inspected was provided.

BPC assumed that this was another company seeking to check the findings of Conoco, which drilled the original exploratory borehole on the site in 1986. It had no knowledge of the fracking technique and the media had not yet started to comment widely on the process. The well that was created in 1986 had, in the experience of several councillors present, been drilled without an appreciable impact on the village. In addition the proposed re-use of the original platform came with a planning precedent for both the site and the activity. Furthermore this was a complex and highly technical application and BPC felt it lacked the expertise to assess the application. It therefore felt no reason to object. This is an assumption for which BPC has publicly apologised on numerous occasions, including at subsequent Parish Council meetings and at the public meeting attended by Cuadrilla in January 2012. With the wisdom of hindsight BPC should have subjected the application to close scrutiny and advertised it far more widely. But it should be borne in mind that it is highly unlikely that any comments or objections that it might have made would have affected the outcome of the application.

It is worth noting that in response to an application for an additional four production wells at Singleton two years earlier their Parish Council similarly responded with no objections. The wells are on a production site in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) about a mile south of the village.

Others to whom the Balcombe application letter was sent included the Environment Agency, High Weald AONB, Natural England, Gatwick Airport, Network Rail and Mid Sussex District Council. None of these bodies with paid staff and professional expertise raised any fundamental objections to the application.

Subsequent close inspection of the application revealed no reference to hydraulic fracturing or fracking although, towards the end of a long and complex document, there is a statement in Appendix C that “there may be a need to stimulate a stage.....” followed by a description of the process that we now know as fracking. In 2010 very few people in the UK, other than those involved in the oil/gas industry, had heard of it. Further on the application states that “the stimulation required will be none or small...”

BPC has no power and virtually no influence over events at Lower Stumble. It is using what little influence it does have with the various stakeholders and authorities to try to minimise the impact of the current exploration activities, and it is satisfied that these activities will not involve fracking. If and when there are any proposals for fracking Balcombe Parish Council is committed to oppose them.

Parish Councillors are unpaid volunteers, many of whom work full-time, who give a great deal of their time to the community. Over the past 18 months BPC has done its best to keep Balcombe residents informed and will continue to do so, predominantly via the BPC website and Facebook page. However it cannot continuously monitor compliance of the activities at Lower Stumble with all the conditions which are imposed by the regulatory authorities.

Anyone who believes that Cuadrilla is in breach of any conditions should contact the organisation concerned. They all have paid, trained staff who can deal with such concerns.