

# Information

for County Councillors

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From:	Guy Robinson, Senior Planning Policy Officer
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To:	All County Councillors

## UPDATE: 14<sup>th</sup> Onshore oil and gas licensing round

- On 17 December 2015 the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) announced that Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDLs) for a total of 159 blocks were formally offered to successful applicants under the 14<sup>th</sup> onshore oil and gas licensing round.
- 10 of these blocks are wholly or partially in Somerset (two of which cross in to Wiltshire and two cross in to North Somerset). The licensee for all blocks in Somerset is South Western Energy Ltd. The map in the Appendix below shows these blocks in more detail.
- Licences offer licence holders exclusive rights within a licence area (usually 10km<sup>2</sup>)<sup>1</sup>. Note - further consents would be needed to take forward a proposal for oil and gas development within a licensed area, including planning permission and relevant environment permits, scrutiny by the Health and Safety Executive, and Oil and Gas Authority consents under the provisions of the PEDL.
- The Somerset Minerals Plan (adopted February 2015) includes a section on energy minerals that contains an oil and gas development policy. This provides the criteria against which any theoretical proposal would be determined, alongside other relevant policies in the Development Plan. For more information visit: [www.somerset.gov.uk/oilandgas](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/oilandgas)
- More information on the 14<sup>th</sup> licensing round is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/oil-and-gas-licensing-rounds>

<sup>1</sup> Oil and Gas Authority – Interactive Map: <https://decc-edu.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=29c31fa4b00248418e545d222e57ddaa>

## Other announcements on oil and gas development

- The government has also announced its intention to amend regulations concerning the drilling of boreholes for monitoring and investigative purposes (amending what is considered “Permitted Development”). This amendment will be laid before Parliament in 2016 i.e. this change has yet to take effect.
- On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2015, a DECC consultation ended on “Surface Development Restrictions for Hydraulic Fracturing”. Somerset County Council issued a technical officer response to this consultation, agreeing that there should be no surface-level development (i.e. the well site) in specific protected areas ((National Parks, the Broads, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), World Heritage Sites, Source Protection Zones 1, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Natura 2000 areas and Ramsar sites) through the licence conditions of PEDLs. This officer response made the argument that these restrictions should also extend to areas within Flood Zone 3 and nationally significant infrastructure (such as Hinkley Point).
- On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2015, MPs voted to allow fracking for shale gas 1,200m below protected areas (specifically national parks, the Broads, AONBs and World Heritage Sites), subject to the formal regulatory and planning permission processes. In Somerset such areas include Exmoor National Park and the Quantocks AONB.

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## **APPENDIX: further information on 14<sup>th</sup> licensing round**

- Somerset County Council responded to a DECC consultation on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for further onshore oil and gas licencing rounds in March 2014, raising concerns about the approach being taken and highlighting the need for central government to be clear about constraints that would make a location inappropriate for oil and gas development. DECC's responses to this SEA consultation are available to download from the .gov website (link [here](#)).
- DECC received 95 licence applications from the 14<sup>th</sup> licensing round (which closed in October 2014), covering 295 block areas in England, Scotland and Wales. Following reviews of geotechnical analysis, scrutiny of the operator competency, financial viability, capacity and environmental awareness (and following the decision not to award licences in Scotland and Wales), this was reduced to 159 blocks for further consideration.
- On 18 August 2015, the Oil & Gas Authority – UK's oil and gas regulator – announced 27 onshore blocks from the 14<sup>th</sup> Onshore Licensing Round will be formally offered to companies. None of these 27 blocks was in Somerset.
- A group of 132 further blocks were subjected to detailed assessment under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010. This detailed assessment (termed an "Appropriate Assessment" as part of the Habitat Regulations Assessment) was carried out on the blocks that were considered likely to likely to have such an effect on a European site.<sup>2</sup>
- In August 2015 Somerset County Council responded to DECC's consultation on the outcome of their "Appropriate Assessment" of the 132 blocks. DECC's conclusions from this consultation are available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/habitats-regulations-assessments-of-14th-onshore-oil-and-gas-licensing-round>
- Licences have since been offered by DECC to all 132 blocks assessed. For 75 of the 14<sup>th</sup> round blocks, the licence will contain a condition that prohibits all or specific activities in parts of the block.

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<sup>2</sup> The Habitats Regulations provide for certain protections to be accorded to designated sites, including Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Sites of Community Importance (SCI), designated under the Habitats Directive, and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) designated under the Birds Directive. UK planning policy also accords the same level of protection to sites listed or proposed under The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, called the Ramsar Convention, and to possible/proposed SPAs and candidate SACs. Collectively, all of these sites are referred to in DECC's latest report as "European sites".



Figure 1: Map showing the 14<sup>th</sup> round PEDL areas wholly or partially in Somerset

