

Information

for County Councillors

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To:	All County Councillors
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Oil and gas development (including fracking) in Somerset

What is oil and gas development?

This refers to the development process for extracting oil and gas from rock deep below the earth's surface. Oil and gas development can only occur within areas licenced by government.

Onshore oil and gas development commonly includes 'fracking', a term used to refer to the process of hydraulic fracturing. This is where a mixture of water, sand and chemicals are pumped at high pressure through boreholes into gas bearing rocks. The water opens up cracks in the rock, and the sand grains lodge into the spaces allowing gas to be released and travel back along the borehole. In the UK this technique is most commonly associated with shale gas extraction.

Is oil or gas currently being extracted in Somerset?

No. Somerset County Council (SCC) has not received any planning applications for oil and gas development - there is no fracking taking place in Somerset.

Are there licenced areas in Somerset?

There are currently eight Petroleum Exploration and Development Licence (PEDL) blocks in Somerset. Six are wholly in Somerset and two are on the Somerset/North Somerset border (see attached map in Appendix 1). All are held by South Western Energy Ltd.

The Government periodically issues time-limited Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDLs) in "licensing rounds", giving successful applicants exclusive rights within an area (usually 10km²) to explore for onshore gas and oil.

While the PEDLs give South Western Energy Ltd exclusive rights to pursue proposals for oil and gas development within the licenced areas, the licence holder is required to follow existing planning and regulatory processes, i.e., in applying for planning permission and relevant environment permits, and to gain consent to drill from the Oil and Gas Authority (OGA). The licensee's proposals will also be subject to scrutiny by the Health and Safety Executive.

What is Somerset County Council's role?

SCC is the minerals and waste planning authority for the county, with the exception of Exmoor National Park, which is a separate authority.

As mineral planning authority (MPA) for Somerset, we are responsible for determining planning applications for oil and gas development. We have to work within the planning system which governs the development and use of land in the public interest. The MPA may not address any emissions, control processes, or health and safety issues that are matters to be addressed under other regulatory regimes.

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.

As set out in the Somerset Minerals Plan, the County Council will promote early engagement with the licence holder, if the licence holder intends to pursue exploration or development.

SCC also has an agreed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to work together with neighbouring Minerals Planning Authorities, local district councils, Avon and Somerset Police and the Environment Agency. The MoU sets out how signatories have cooperated, and will continue to do so, regarding oil and gas development – in particular “unconventional” oil and gas development i.e. hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for shale gas and the extraction of coal bed methane (CBM).

Further information can be found on the SCC website: www.somerset.gov.uk/oilandgas.

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14th Round Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDLs) in Somerset

