

No.1	APPLICATION NO.	LCC/2019/0037
	LOCATION	Land At The North-eastern End Of Suttons Lane Great Altcar Lancashire
	PROPOSAL	County Matter - Construction of a temporary wellsite and associated access track, drill, hydraulically stimulate and test two petroleum exploration boreholes including drilling rig (maximum height 60m) and associated plant and equipment, followed by wellsite restoration.
	APPLICANT	Aurora Exploration (UK) Ltd
	WARD	Aughton And Downholland
	PARISH	Great Altcar
	TARGET DATE	11th September 2019

1.0 REFERRAL

- 1.1 The application has been called in for consideration at Planning Committee by Councillor Westley to consider the impact of the development on the openness of the green belt and the potential loss of amenity to nearby residents.

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Council have been asked for their observations on this application (a County Matter) which has been made to Lancashire County Council for the construction of a temporary well-site and associated works including access track.
- 2.2 West Lancashire raises objections on Green Belt and visual impact grounds. The development is considered to be inappropriate development in the Green Belt and no case for very special circumstances has been put forward as part of the application. The proposed development would be detrimental to visual amenity and the landscape character.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION - OBJECT

4.0 THE SITE

- 4.1 The application site comprises worked farmland to the northwest of Sutton's Lane, Great Altcar. The site is accessed via the Formby Bypass, Lord Sefton Way and Sutton's Lane. The application site measures approximately 1.72 hectares, including the access track. The site lies within Flood Zone 3. Downholland Moss Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located approximately 100m north of the application site.

5.0 THE PROPOSAL

- 5.1 The Council has been asked for their observations on this application (a County Matter) which has been made to Lancashire County Council. The proposal involves the drilling and testing of 2 exploratory boreholes to establish whether oil/gas could be extracted for commercial productivity from the site. The actual production of oil/gas from the site would require a separate planning application as the current application only covers test drilling.
- 5.2 There would be 8 phases to the planned process:

Phase 1 is the preparation of the site and this is expected to last for 16 weeks. This will include improving vehicle access to the site and then the construction of the concrete

drilling area. Work would be carried out from 7am to 7pm Mon – Fri & 7am to 1pm on Saturdays.

Phase 2 & 3 are the drilling of the vertical and then horizontal boreholes to allow access to the shale beds, each borehole would take approximately 5 months to drill.

Phase 4 is the hydraulic fracture stimulation stage when liquid will be pumped at pressure to cause the rock to crack and potentially allow natural gases to be released. This phase would last for 60 days.

Phase 5 is the initial flow test which will determine whether natural gas can flow to the surface at consistent flow rates. This phase would last for 60 days.

Phase 6 is the extended well test, this will be carried out if phase 5 is successful, to test different parts of the well. This phase would last for 90 days.

Phase 7 is the decommissioning phase and will take place if there is no success at phase 5/6. This phase would last for 4 weeks.

Phase 8 is the wellsite restoration. This will be carried out following phase 7 to ensure that the site is returned to its pre-development state. This phase would take up to 8 weeks to be completed.

6.0 PREVIOUS RELEVANT DECISIONS

6.1 None.

7.0 CONSULTEE RESPONSES

7.1 Environmental Protection (Contamination) (09.08.19) – no objection.

7.2 Environmental Protection (23.08.19) – no objection.

8.0 OTHER REPRESENTATIONS

8.1 None received.

9.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

9.1 The application is accompanied by an Environmental Statement which includes the following documents:

Statement of Community Involvement
Environmental Statement
Design and Access Statement
Contaminated Land Assessment
Flood Risk Assessment
Transport Statement
Noise Assessment
Lighting Assessment
Air Quality Assessment
Archaeological Assessment
Habitat Survey
Landscape Impact Assessment
Planning Statement

10.0 RELEVANT PLANNING POLICIES

10.1 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG), the Joint Lancashire Minerals and Waste Development Framework Core Strategy DPD (February 2009), Joint Lancashire Site Allocations and Development

Management Policies DPD (September 2013) and the West Lancashire Local Plan 2012-2027 DPD provide the policy framework against which the development proposals will be assessed.

10.2 The site is located within the Green Belt as designated in the West Lancashire Local Plan.

10.3 **National Planning Policy Framework**

Achieving sustainable development

Building a strong competitive economy

Promoting healthy and safe communities

Making effective use of land

Protecting Green Belt land

Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change

Conserving and enhancing the natural environment

Facilitating the use of minerals

10.4 **West Lancashire Local Plan (2012-2027 DPD)**

SP1 – A sustainable development framework for West Lancashire

GN1 – Settlement boundaries

GN3 – Criteria for sustainable development

EN2 – Preserving and enhancing West Lancashire's Natural Environment

IF3 – Service accessibility and infrastructure for growth

Supplementary Planning Guidance - Natural Areas and Areas of Landscape History Importance (August 2007)

11.0 **OBSERVATIONS OF DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION**

Principle of development – Green Belt

11.1 Policy GN1 of the Local Plan states that planning applications for development in the Green Belt outside of settlement boundaries are to be assessed against both national policy (the NPPF) and any relevant local plan policies.

11.2 Paragraph 133 of the NPPF retains the government's view that great importance is attached to Green Belts. It states that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. Paragraph 143 of the NPPF states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

11.3 Paragraph 146 states that '*certain other forms of development are not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it*'. These include mineral extraction and engineering operations.

11.4 It is considered that the installation of an access track, hardstanding including drilling platform, perimeter fencing (3m high solid fencing), welfare and security facilities would fall into the category of mineral extraction and engineering operations. The scale of the operational development would compromise the openness of the Green Belt and would therefore be inappropriate development. The development would encroach into the open undeveloped area, contrary to one of the purposes of including land within the Green Belt as set out in paragraph 134.

Very Special Circumstances and the Green Belt Balance

- 11.5 The applicant in the submitted Planning Statement considers that as the proposed development is for temporary minerals development and includes full restoration of the site when operations cease, it is appropriate development within this Green Belt location. No case for very special circumstances has been put forward. However, the NPPF does not make exception for temporary development within the Green Belt. It is for LCC as decision maker to weigh the Green Belt balance. However, it is considered that there would be harm to the Green Belt which has not been justified by the applicant as part of their submission.

Impact upon Visual Amenity and Landscape Character

- 11.6 Policy GN3 of the Local Plan requires new development to protect and enhance the existing landscape. Policy EN2 requires development to maintain or enhance the distinctive character and visual quality of the Landscape Area. The NPPF supports this approach.
- 11.7 The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment which has been submitted with the application classifies the current landscape as being of 'Medium Sensitivity' and goes on to say that the proposed development would introduce large 'industrial' type structures, lighting and activity into a relatively attractive landscape, reducing the semi-rural qualities of Altcar Moss. It concludes that as the development is temporary in nature and includes for full reinstatement of the wellsite and access track no significant landscape effects are identified.
- 11.8 The site is within 'the South Western Mosses' as characterised in the 'Natural Areas and Areas of Landscape History Importance' SPG, with the general characteristics being low lying, flat and open moss land, where tall, columnar constructions are inappropriate. I consider that the installation of a test well and the associated infrastructure would introduce industrialisation into this area which would have a significant impact on visual amenity and the landscape character of the local area, contrary to Policies GN3 and EN2 of the Local Plan.

Highways

- 11.9 Policy GN3 of the Local Plan requires proposals for development to incorporate suitable and safe access and road layout design and ensure that parking provision is made in line with the standards set out in Policy IF2.
- 11.10 The County Council is the Highway Authority and will assess the application in respect of highway safety issues.

Drainage

- 11.11 Policy GN3 and IF3 of the Local Plan seek to ensure flood risk is avoided/mitigated through development and that proposals for new development can be appropriately accommodated by existing water and drainage infrastructure. Paragraph 165 of the NPPF requires priority to be given to sustainable drainage systems.
- 11.12 The site is predominantly within Flood Zone 3 and the County Council as Lead Local Flood Authority, together with the Environment Agency will assess the proposals in respect of drainage issues.

Impact on neighbouring properties

- 11.13 Policy GN3 of the Local Plan states that development should retain or create reasonable levels of privacy and amenity for adjoining occupiers and minimise the risk from all types of pollution and contamination.
- 11.14 The Council's Environmental Protection and Community Safety Team have considered the submission in respect of noise, air quality (dust) and lighting in terms of both the construction and the testing/operational phases. They are satisfied that the information submitted with the application refers to the correct standards and any baseline monitoring work and predictions have been undertaken correctly and with reference to the correct relevant standards/guidance. They consider that the information submitted sufficiently demonstrates that in terms of noise, air quality and lighting, there would not be a significant detrimental impact on the amenities of local residents, in accordance with Policy GN3.

12.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 12.1 West Lancashire Borough Council raises objections on the following grounds:

The proposed development is inappropriate development within the Green Belt which causes harm to openness and would cause urban sprawl by encroaching into the open countryside contrary to the purposes of the Green Belt. West Lancashire Borough Council consider this Green Belt harm to be substantial and in the absence of any very special circumstances, has not been justified by the applicant.

The proposed development would introduce an industrial element into the landscape to the detriment of visual amenity and the character of the local landscape, contrary to Policies GN3 and EN2 of the Local Plan.