

Development Control Committee
Meeting to be held on 21 May 2014

Electoral Division affected: West Lancashire North

West Lancashire Borough: Application No. LCC/2014/0047

Permission is sought for the retention of the site compound and access track for a further 3 years to allow pressure monitoring of the bowland shale reservoir, followed by plugging and abandonment of the existing exploratory well and site restoration. Beconsall Shale Gas Exploration Site, Banks Enclosed Marsh, Bonny Barn Road, Hundred End, Banks.

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Executive Summary

Application - Permission is sought for the retention of the site compound and access track for a further 3 years to allow pressure monitoring of the bowland shale reservoir, followed by plugging and abandonment of the existing exploratory well and site restoration. Beconsall Shale Gas Exploration Site, Banks Enclosed Marsh, Bonny Barn Road, Hundred End, Banks.

Recommendation – Summary

That the Development Control Committee visits the Beconsall Shale Gas Exploration Site before determining the application.

Applicant's Proposal

Planning permission is sought to retain the drilling platform and associated highways access at the Beconsall Shale Gas Exploration Site for a further three years to undertake pressure monitoring of the Bowland Shale reservoir. Following the testing the well would be plugged and abandoned and site restored back to agriculture.

Planning permission for the temporary change of use of agricultural land to a site for drilling an exploratory borehole and testing for hydrocarbons including the construction of a drilling platform and highways access was granted on the 20th October 2010 (ref 8/10/0973). The well testing operations were to involve a process of hydraulic fracturing known as 'fracking'; however, whilst the well has been drilled no 'fracking' has been carried out.

The pressure monitoring would involve perforating the well casing by the use of a small contained charge. The perforation would extend two to four feet beyond the well casing into the rock (Hodder Mudstone) formation to allow any gas to flow from natural pathways/ fractures within the rock to the well. The section/s of the perforated

well would then be isolated by the use of 'packers' to create a pressurised 'test zone' which would then be monitored by equipment within the 'test zone' for a period of approximately 12 months. The process would not involve the injection of fluids into the well but existing fluids within the well would be re-circulated. After the testing period, the packers and monitoring equipment would be removed, the well plugged and abandoned and the exploration site restored.

The pressure monitoring equipment would take two weeks to install followed by a monitoring period of 12 months. After completion of the pressure monitoring a period of approximately 4 weeks would be required to plug and abandon the well, followed by a 12-14 week period to fully restore the site. This would equate to a 72 week total timeframe. The applicant is hoping to start the pressure testing as soon as possible this year and ideally in mid-summer. The application is for a three year time period to undertake all of these activities. This time period is intended to factor in the circumstance that the pressure monitoring would not commence until spring/summer 2015 and the fact that no activity (pressure monitoring installation, well plugging, abandonment and site restoration) can be undertaken in the wintering wildfowl season between 01 November and 31 March.

Description and Location of Site

The site is located in a field within an area of flat agricultural land used for the growing of arable crops known as 'Banks Enclosed Marsh' approximately 1.5km northwest of the village of Banks, 3km west of the village of Beconsall and 700m to the north of Marsh Road that links the settlements of Banks and Beconsall.

The surface area of the works measures 0.99 hectares and consists of the drilling platform and site access. Access to the site is via an existing field access on the east side of Bonny Barn Road, an existing un-adopted farm track that serves Marsh Nurseries and links to Marsh Road. The existing field access has been widened and a new 163m length of a stone surfaced track constructed to provide access through the field to the drilling platform. The first 35m of the track from Bonny Barn Road is 14m wide to allow for the passing and manoeuvring of vehicles. The remaining 128m length of the track is 4m wide.

The working platform is bound by an open perimeter ditch on all sides except for the south-west side where the majority is piped and covered to allow access on to the platform. Beyond the ditches, the north-west and part of the south-western edges of the working platform have 3m high soil bunds formed from the stored topsoil and subsoil removed during the construction of the working platform. Controlled watercourses in the form of drainage ditches run along the south and east sides and to the north of the working platform. The nearest residential properties are at Marsh Nurseries approximately 200m to the west and at Marshfield Farm approximately 400m to the north. The site is located within the Green Belt and Marsh Farm Fields; North Meols Biological Heritage Site. The Ribble Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Ribble and Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area (SPA) are approximately 650m to the north. A Public Right of Way is located approximately 290m to the east of the edge of the working platform.

Background

Planning permission for the temporary change of use from agriculture to site for drilling an exploratory borehole and testing for hydrocarbons including construction of a drilling platform was granted on 20 October 2010 (ref. 08/10/0973). Condition 1 of the permission requires the site development works, drilling operations, testing and site restoration to be completed within a period of eighteen months from the commencement of the development, with the drilling operations to be completed within a period of three months from the date of their commencement.

The development of the site commenced on the 28th March 2011; consequently the site had to be restored by the 27th September 2012. The construction of the drilling platform, creation of access to the highway and the drilling of the exploratory borehole has been completed.

An application to extend time periods for the completion of well testing and restoration was submitted on 19th September 2012 (ref. 08/12/1032). The application proposed that the well testing operations by fracking and site restoration be completed by 28th March 2014. A screening opinion was undertaken and which concluded that the proposal would require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

On the 6th June 2013 the applicant proposed a revision to application 08/12/1032. The amended well testing operations were to involve undertaking a reservoir diagnostics programme, the purpose of which would be to collect better data on geological conditions and collect natural gas samples and formation water samples from 4 different shale intervals at different depths in the well. The testing would have been for a period of 60-90 days and to commence in late July 2013. The data would then have been used to help determine the recoverability of the natural gas contained in the Bowland Shale. The site would then have been restored by 28th September 2014. However, given it had been determined that the development as initially proposed constituted EIA development, it was determined that the application could not be amended in the way proposed. No EIA has been submitted and the application remains undetermined.

The application the subject of this report has been submitted to undertake a test program to obtain reservoir pressure that will be needed for a full evaluation of the Bowland Shale formation. The purpose is to understand initial reservoir pressures within the (Hodder Mudstone) formation of the Bowland shale so as to be able to model the future well performance and the recoverability, or not, of the shale gas reserves.

Planning Policy

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Paragraphs 11 – 14, 17, 56 – 66, 79 – 81, 87 – 90, 100, 103, 109, 118 – 125, 144 and 147 are relevant with regard to the requirement for sustainable development, core planning principles, the requirement for good design, protecting green belt land, flood risk, conserving and enhancing the natural environment and facilitating the sustainable use of minerals.

Technical Guidance to the National Planning Policy Framework – Flood Risk and Minerals Policy

Paragraphs 33 – 48 are relevant with regards to the restoration and aftercare of minerals sites.

Joint Lancashire Minerals and Waste Local Plan – Site Allocation and Development Management Policies – Part One

Policy NPPF 1 Presumption in favour of sustainable development
Policy DM2 Development Management

West Lancashire Replacement Local Plan

Policy DS2 Protecting Green Belt
Policy GD1 Design of Development
Policy EN1 Biodiversity
Policy EN3 Coastal Zone
Policy EN10 Flood Risk
Policy EN11 Protection of Water Resources

Advice

The planning application has generated a considerable amount of interest with over 100 representations having been received to date objecting to the proposal primarily in respect of visual, traffic, habitats, noise, pollution and seismic activity. A full summary of the representations received will be provided when the application is reported for determination.

The site falls within the Marsh Fields Biological Heritage Site (BHS). The BHS is an area of agricultural land used by bird species and, particularly by wintering wildfowl in the season between 01 November and 31 March, as supporting habitat to the Ribble and Alt Estuaries SPA.

A full assessment of the proposal against national policies and the policies of the development plan along with an assessment of the impacts of the proposal against those policies and in light of advice received from statutory consultees and representations received, will be provided in the report when the application is presented for determination.

However, given the nature of the proposal and level of public interest received to date, it is considered that the Committee visit the site before determining the application. This would have the benefit of members being familiar with the site and environs before determining the application and so having a clear understanding of the issues associated with the proposal.

Recommendation

That the Development Control Committee visits the Beconsall Shale Gas Exploration Site before determining the application.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Directorate/Ext
LCC/2014/0047	27/3/14	Rob Jones/Environment/534128
08/12/1032		
08/10/0973		

Reason for Inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A