

NILGA response to the Department for the Economy consultation on Petroleum Licence Applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16

Executive Meeting

9th August 2019

These applications are for oil and gas exploration, including shale gas exploration ('fracking'). They could affect a huge area of Northern Ireland, taking in parts of six (6) of the 11 councils.
PLA 1/16 covers parts of five (5) councils, potentially affecting much of the greater Belfast area.
PLA 2/16 covers a large area of Fermanagh & Omagh District Council.

At the NILGA Executive meeting 21st June 2019, NILGA staff were charged with ascertaining the current local government position on exploration for hydrocarbons in Northern Ireland and to formulate a response accordingly.

Derek McCallan
Chief Executive

Date 31st July 2019

1. INTRODUCTION

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, is the representative body for district councils in Northern Ireland. NILGA represents and promotes the interests of local authorities and is supported by all the main political parties. Planning, licensing and sustainable economic development are key issues for local government due to their huge impact on the shaping and viability of local communities, economy and environment. NILGA is pleased to be able to have an opportunity to comment on these applications and we trust that our comments will be taken into account when providing a Minister with recommended actions.

2. CONTEXT

Both Scotland and Wales currently operate a moratorium or outright ban on fracking whereas the UK Government has promoted shale gas exploration in England. In the Republic of Ireland the use of hydraulic fracturing in onshore petroleum exploration or extraction is prohibited (the prohibition does not apply to offshore). Previously the Minister for the Economy informed the NI Assembly that any decision on the use of High-Volume Hydraulic Fracturing for shale gas would be a matter for a Northern

Ireland Executive. NILGA notes that at this stage the public consultation is being used to prepare to make a recommendation to a future Minister.

In 2016, Chris Hazzard, the then Minister for Infrastructure reviewed what had been permitted development rights for oil and gas exploration and noted the strength of response supporting change to the permitted development system.

The 2015 DfI Strategic Planning Policy Statement states that “The policy approach for minerals development, including peat extraction from bog lands, must be to balance the need for mineral resources against the need to protect and conserve the environment.” (para 6.154) and goes on to state that “...in relation to unconventional hydrocarbon extraction there should be a presumption against their exploitation until there is sufficient and robust evidence on all environmental impacts.” (para 6.157)

More recently (2019), the UK Government amended the Climate Change Act to enshrine in law, a commitment that the UK will meet a target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

3. COUNCIL VIEWS

NILGA acknowledges that there is no technical reason for opposition to these licence applications, however, it is noted that of the 11 District Councils, the majority are opposed to shale gas exploration, either through their development plan and alignment with the requirement of the SPPS, and/or articulated by council policy decisions. The remainder are considering their approach to minerals applications including applications for hydrocarbon extraction through their ongoing LDP process, again in line with the requirements of the SPPS.

4. NILGA VIEW

NILGA urges the Department for Economy to consider the massive contribution that hydrocarbons have to the production of carbon emissions and also, to consider the impact of the use of hydrocarbons from shale deposits in the production of ‘cheap’ plastics, which is in conflict with the waste hierarchy and circular economy aspirations to maximise plastics recycling. There seems to be little point in exploration work if the regional, national and international policy direction is to ‘keep it in the ground’. In this regard, NILGA highlights and supports the strength of the local government position, particularly in relation to exploration of shale deposits. NILGA would welcome further discussion with the Department as consideration of these and similar applications develops.

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