

## Shale gas and hydraulic fracturing (fracking) FAQs

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More information: [warrington.gov.uk/fracking](http://warrington.gov.uk/fracking)



**WARRINGTON**  
Borough Council

### **What is shale gas and hydraulic fracturing (fracking)?**

Hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking, is a process used to remove gas and oil from shale rock deep in the ground. It is estimated that more than 2.5 million wells have been 'fracked' worldwide.

### **What is the government's approach to fracking?**

The government believes that shale gas has the potential to provide the UK with greater energy security, growth and jobs, subject to continued environmental assessment and control.

More information on the national approach set by government can be found on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

### **Why is there an increased interest in onshore shale gas development?**

Supplies of onshore oil and gas are becoming increasingly important as existing offshore reserves in the North Sea begin to decline. In 2010, 125 million tonnes of oil and gas were produced in the UK – whilst 165 million tonnes were consumed.

By 2025, the UK is likely to be importing close to 70% of the gas consumed, if alternative energy sources are not readily available. At the moment, around one third of UK energy demand is met by gas. Oil and natural gas provide the energy source of raw materials to make a wide range of products and plastics, such as shampoo, toothpaste, washing powder and clothes. Natural gas is also a key component in the manufacture of fertilisers.

The government says that shale gas will help fill the gap alongside renewable and nuclear electricity, helping the UK reduce carbon emissions. By developing onshore oil and gas reserves, the government believes that we could provide greater security of energy supply. The National Planning Policy Framework expects Mineral Planning Authorities to provide for the extraction of mineral reserves of national importance.

### **What is the situation in Warrington?**

The surrounding areas of Warrington have a long history of industry, in particular coal mining. The area includes potential reserves of oil and gas, like coal bed methane and shale gas.

The UK's national oil and gas regulator has issued licences, for onshore oil and gas exploration in 10km x 10km blocks, to various companies in the Warrington area.

The licenses (issued by the [Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy - formerly DECC](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-energy-and-industrial-strategy)) grant exclusive rights to oil and gas operators in a given area. Operators must obtain the necessary consents and permission from regulators. Certain exploratory works may be carried out under permitted development rights without the need for planning permission.

### **Is the exploration of unconventional gas reserves safe?**

The process to secure permission for shale gas development is strictly controlled in the UK. The government has set a framework for any company to follow which requires licences and planning permission for each of the three stages of development:

- Exploration
- Appraisal
- Extraction



Planning permission is required from Warrington Borough Council at each of these stages. However, some site testing may be carried out under permitted development rights without the need for planning permission.

Checks are made by the regulatory bodies involved at each of the three stages involved in the shale gas development process. There is also a requirement for the operator to introduce their own well examination scheme and appoint an independent competent person to further scrutinise activity on the well.

### **Can the process affect public health?**

[Public Health England](#) assessed the risk to human health of extracting shale gas in an October 2013 report. They evaluated available evidence on issues including air quality, radon gas, naturally occurring radioactive materials, water contamination and waste water. They concluded that “the risks to public health from exposure to emissions from shale gas extraction are low if operations are properly run and regulated.”

### **How are the risks of earth tremors managed?**

In 2011, the then Department of Energy and Climate Change (now [the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy](#)) halted the use of hydraulic fracturing for shale gas in the UK after two tremors occurred in the Blackpool area. It carried out a careful assessment, drawing on recommendations from independent experts, a public consultation, and the Royal Society/Royal Academy of Engineering review.

In 2012, the then Department of Environment and Climate Change introduced measures to control seismic risks (earth tremors). Operators have to assess the location of any relevant geological faults before operations for shale gas or oil can begin. They must now submit to the Oil and Gas Authority the plan of operations, starting with small test fractures before main operations and install real-time monitoring systems. Operators must stop and investigate if they detect tremors above the normal range.

### **How would air pollution be controlled?**

Licences require operators to minimise the release of gases. Environmental permits and planning permissions may require monitoring or impose further limits. When it can't be economically used, natural gas must be 'flared' – burnt off - to reduce its global warming emissions. Natural gas may only be 'vented' – released into the air – when necessary for safety.

### **What is an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)?**

Certain planning applications for significant developments in environmentally sensitive areas are legally required to be accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). An EIA is a formal and detailed assessment of the likely impacts a particular development is anticipated to give rise to and how such impacts may be avoided or appropriately mitigated. Although only legally required in certain cases, the shale gas industry has undertaken to voluntarily submit an EIA for shale gas applications irrespective of whether or not one is legally required.



### **How does the 'scoping request' and 'scoping opinion' support an EIA?**

The first steps of the preparation of the EIA involves the prospective applicant submitting a scoping request to Warrington Borough Council.

The scoping request identifies a proposed site, outlines the proposed development, highlights the main environmental impacts and invites the council to provide a 'scoping opinion', setting out the environmental topics and key issues that the prospective applicant should include within their EIA. This includes site issues like the impact on water resources, noise, visual impact, transport and restoration of the site.

Providing a 'scoping opinion' is a technical exercise and the 'scoping request' is therefore shared with various specialists both within the council and external organisations, such as the [Environment Agency](#), for their comment and suggestions as to any additional points the EIA should consider.

Feedback will be used by the applicant to inform their proposals in readiness for the submission of a full planning application and EIA to the council.

### **What is the planning process for shale gas development?**

The normal planning process has to be followed for planning applications for unconventional gas extraction. There are usually three main stages which require planning permission.

- **Stage 1 – Exploration:** This involves building a drilling rig and drilling vertically, deep into the ground, to find out how much gas is in the shale. This does not involve fracturing.
- **Stage 2 – Appraisal:** This involves using the rig to carry out tests to see how the gas flows out of the shale.
- **Stage 3 – Production:** This involves applying for planning permission to set up a full-time commercial operation. If the company gained planning permission, these works would take several years to complete.

The company will need to show how it has carefully considered the impacts and practical issues about how the site will operate and how it will affect the local area. This includes full and proper consideration of a range of issues including:

- lighting, dust, smells and noise
- operating hours of the site
- lorry access and routes
- flood risk
- site restoration and aftercare once the works have been completed.

Firms wishing to carry out production also have to get the relevant licences and approvals from the [Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy](#) under the [Petroleum Act](#); the [Environment Agency](#) and the [Health and Safety Executive](#).

### **What is Warrington Borough Council's policy on shale gas exploration and development?**

The council acts as the Minerals and Waste Planning Authority. The planning system controls the development and use of land in the public interest. This includes ensuring that new development is appropriate for its location taking account of the effects (including cumulative effects) of pollution on health, the natural environment or general amenity, and the potential sensitivity of the area, or proposed development to adverse effects from pollution. In doing so the focus of the planning



system should be on whether the development itself is an acceptable use of the land. Minerals planning authorities have to assume that other non-planning regulatory controls will operate effectively.

The council is undertaking a [Local Plan review](#). As part of the evidence base underpinning the review of the Local Plan, the council has commissioned Urban Vision to provide baseline evidence to support the policy approach in the Local Plan, which will guide future minerals development in the district.

Petroleum Exploration and Development Licences (PEDL) allow for the pursuit of a range of oil and gas activities, subject to planning permission and other consents. The council would need to consider any application on its relative merits.

### **What is the role of the Planning Committee?**

Most major planning applications, including those for hydrocarbon development accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment are determined by the council's [Planning Committee](#).

The committee makes decisions based on facts using the information presented by applicants with commentary and analysis from planning officers, taking into account responses from technical consultees and the views expressed by other interested parties.

All decisions are made impartially by members of the Planning Committee. The committee, taking into account the relevant facts and applicable law. Planning applications are considered on their relative merits in accordance with the [National Planning Policy Framework](#). A planning application can only be refused where there are legitimate reasons to do so.

The committee considers each planning application on its individual merits. It cannot predetermine any application. Guidance has been issued to councillors by the [Local Government Association's Planning Advisory Service](#) on handling planning applications for the various stages of the process. This includes the types of issues they must consider when making a decision and those which they cannot.

Both objectors and supporters may, with prior approval, speak at a meeting of the Planning Committee, before a planning application is determined.

The committee must take care not to 'close its mind' such that it is unable to properly assess an issue. This means that the council may be limited in terms of what statements it can make if an application is received, so as not to prejudice the decision making process.

### **How are the proposals publicised to give local residents the opportunity to comment on a shale gas application?**

Warrington Borough Council is required to make objective decisions on applications and is committed to being open and transparent about approaches made by companies.

The council will publicise any planning applications it receives, so local people have the opportunity to get involved and have their say. The council will publicise the fact that it has received a planning application by placing a press notice, erecting site notices and writing directly to people who live close by. All planning applications are also listed online: [warrington.gov.uk/planning](http://warrington.gov.uk/planning)

In addition, the shale oil and gas industry has set out its own [Community Engagement Charter](#). This includes commitment to engage with communities early at each stage of the planning process.



However, there is not formally requirement for any works that take place under permitted development rights to be advertised. The council encourages any potential developer to engage with the local community.

### **How do I submit my views about a planning application?**

The council always advertises applications and invites written comments. Visit [warrington.gov.uk/planning](http://warrington.gov.uk/planning). If the council does receive a planning application, people will be able to comment online, via email or in writing. Members of the public also have the opportunity to present their case in person at the committee meeting.

### **What issues can I address when commenting on a planning application?**

The council can take certain issues into account. These issues include:

- Whether the proposal is an acceptable use of the site.
- The visual impact of a new building or structure (location, size, and appearance) on the local area and on the wider landscape (including designated landscapes)
- The impact on neighbours and the surrounding area resulting from overshadowing, overlooking, loss of privacy, and disturbance caused by noise and lighting.
- The impact on the local environment including dust and air quality.
- Whether new roadways, accesses, and parking are adequate and the impact on highway capacity and road safety
- The impact on the rights of way network
- The impact on the historic environment
- The impact on ecology and biodiversity
- The risk of contamination to land and impact on soil resources
- The risk of flooding
- Land stability and subsidence
- Site restoration and aftercare
- Consistency with national and local planning policies.

The council **cannot** take into account issues that are not legitimate considerations of the planning process. This includes:

- The number of letters or petitions received about an application as a reason to refuse permission
- The demand for, or alternatives to, onshore oil and gas resources
- Emissions, control processes, or health and safety issues that are matters to be addressed under other regulatory regimes
- Loss of views
- Boundary and other disputes between neighbours, for example, private rights of way or covenants or
- Loss of property value.

### **What weight is given to the views of the public and others?**

The responses submitted by statutory consultees and representations by objectors and supporters on planning grounds are 'material considerations' and they are fully considered before a decision is made.



However, the number of objections or supporting representations received is not a planning consideration, regardless of how many people submit an opinion or sign a petition. Members can only consider objections and representations which address planning issues with proven, factual information. Planning issues include the location of the site, transport and access, the identified land use for the site in local development plans, wildlife, flora and how water resources could be affected.

**What happens if planning permission is refused?**

If a planning application is refused by the council, it has to give valid planning reasons why it has done so. The applicant has the right to appeal the decision and a Planning Inspector is appointed by the government to decide whether permission should be granted.

If an appellant considers that the council has acted unreasonably, e.g. that there is insufficient evidence to support a reason for refusal, they can also seek to recover the costs of the appeal; the Inspector would determine whether costs should be awarded against the council.

**Can I appeal against a decision made by the council?**

Only the applicant has the right of appeal, however, any person 'of sufficient standing' can challenge a decision on the basis that regulations and procedures were not correctly followed. They cannot challenge the decision itself.

**Has Warrington Borough Council ever considered a fracking planning application before?**

The council has not received an application or previously determined an application. Some limited testing for unconventional shale gas, such as coal bed methane, has taken place without the need for planning approval.

**Has fracking ever taken place in Warrington in the past?**

No.

**How many oil/gas site permissions have been granted in Warrington? How many wells are already in operation?**

No are no wells in commercial use in Warrington at this time.



## Further information about oil and gas

**What is conventional oil and gas?** - 'Conventional' oil and gas refers to oil and gas resources (known as hydrocarbons) which are situated in sandstone or limestone rock formations. Conventional oil and gas does not include shale gas or coal bed methane extraction.

**What is unconventional oil and gas?** - Natural gas produced from shale and coal is often referred to as 'unconventional' and this refers to the type of rock type in which it is found.

**What is shale gas?** - Shale gas is methane found in rocks deep below the earth's surface which had previously been considered too impermeable ('tight') to allow for economic recovery. Shale gas is considered to be 'unconventional'. Technological advancements over the last decade have made shale gas development economically viable.

**What is coal bed methane?** - Many coal seams contain natural gas, either within the seam itself or the surrounding rock. This coalbed methane is trapped underground, and is generally not released into the atmosphere until coal mining activities take place. Historically, coalbed methane has been considered a nuisance in the coal mining industry, however, coalbed methane has become a popular unconventional form of natural gas. This methane can be extracted and injected into natural gas pipelines for resale, used as an industrial feedstock, or used for heating and electricity generation. Coal Bed Methane is considered to be 'unconventional'.

## Freedom of Information requests

The council will be publishing the FOI requests received in relation to fracking, and the responses, on the website: [warrington.gov.uk/fracking](http://warrington.gov.uk/fracking)

You can find out how to submit a Freedom of Information request at: [warrington.gov.uk/foi](http://warrington.gov.uk/foi)

