

Section 2

SEA process

2 SEA process

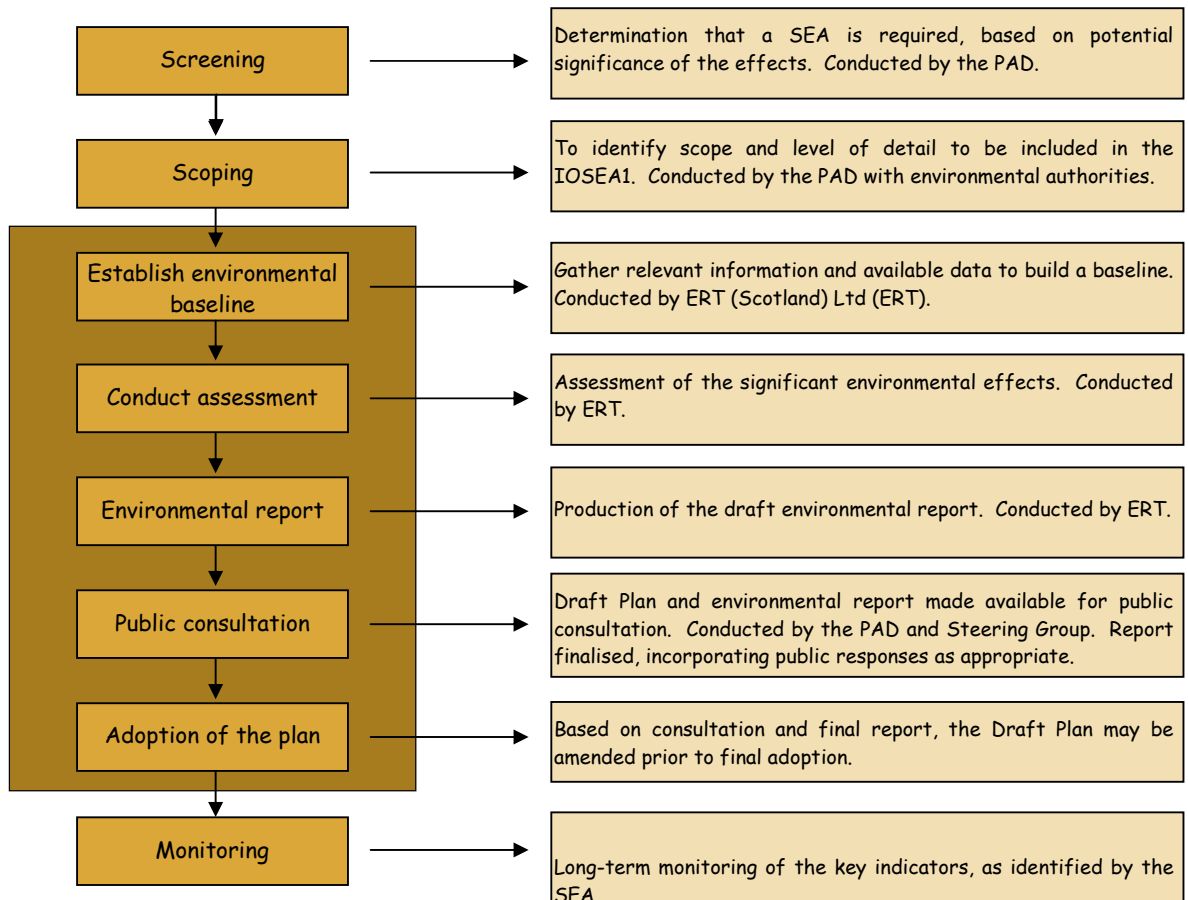
2.1 Introduction

The SEA and preparation of the final environmental report has been undertaken in compliance with the SEA Directive 2001/42/EC transposed into Irish law as:

- European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and programmes) Regulations 2004 (SI 435 of 2004); and
- Planning and Development (Strategic Environmental Assessment) Regulations 2004 (SI 436 of 2004).

It takes into account guidelines for SEA prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for the implementation of the Directive (EPA, 2004) and the guidance to implementing the SEA Directive published by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG, 2004). The key stages to be taken in the complete SEA process as outlined in the Directive are described in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1 SEA process



2.2 How the SEA process was applied to this plan

2.2.1 Screening and scoping the SEA

The PAD conducted a screening exercise to determine the requirement for SEA. Stakeholders and consultees were identified and initial steps taken to identify key environmental issues. A notice under Section 11 of the European Communities (Environmental Assessment of Certain Plans and Programmes) Regulations 2004, SI no 435 on a plan to issue Frontier Exploration Licences for certain blocks within the Slyne, Erris and Donegal Basins – Scoping Stage was issued to the three statutory environmental authorities: EPA, DoEHLG and DCMNR. The responses from the environmental authorities are given in Section 6.

2.2.2 How the baseline was constructed

The primary activities at this stage were information-gathering for the Slyne, Erris and Donegal Basins area. Data collection and establishing a baseline for the SEA encompassed physical and environmental information, the regulatory framework, and technical information about offshore oil and gas seismic and exploration activities.

Despite the low level of exploration activity in the past, the PAD has continued to conduct and to sponsor environmental data gathering and analysis in the area. This work has been administered under the auspices of the Petroleum Infrastructure Programme (PIP), a joint oil and gas industry-government partnership established in 1997. As sub-programmes of the PIP, the Rockall Studies Group (RSG; established 1997 to 2001) and the Porcupine Studies Group (PSG; established 1999 to 2002) actively promoted and commissioned significant research and data gathering projects to improve the environmental understanding of the Rockall Trough and Porcupine areas. These groups were succeeded by the Irish Shelf Petroleum Studies Group (ISPSG), which continues the work of the PIP throughout the Irish offshore area.

In addition, the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI), with the Irish Marine Institute, has conducted a state-of-the-art survey of Ireland's seabed known as the Irish National Seabed Survey (INSS) over seven years at a cost of €33m. The most recent data-gathering voyage was made in 2005. Many data displays are available and there is ongoing interpretation of seabed characteristics and their marine sub-environments. The INSS has also supported a variety of ancillary projects throughout the survey programme, ranging from physical oceanography to cetacean and seabird recording.

Several international research projects, such as the European-funded MESH (Mapping European Seabed Habitats) project and GEOMOUND, ECOMOUND and Atlantic Coral Ecosystem Study (ACES) projects studying seabed mounds, are also relevant to the IOSEA1.

Recognising the importance of compiling and evaluating existing data in the Rockall Trough and surrounding areas, the PIP commissioned several projects to gather metadata and compile bibliographies, such as those by Davies & Carey (1998). More recently, the ISPSG of the PIP commissioned a synthesis of current understanding of the deep water environment to the west of Ireland (Hartley Anderson, 2005), in order to provide an accessible information resource for use in environmental assessment. Industry-funded environmental appraisals of the west and southwest coasts of Ireland were carried out during the period 1995 to 1997. Other initiatives that have been undertaken to identify and compile sources of marine data relevant to environmental management of Irish waters include those by White *et al* (2002), who compiled oceanographic metadata for the northeast Atlantic, and Roche *et al* (2005), whose inventory includes ecological publications for the area.

Hence, there is a large catalogue of environmental baseline data and some analysis that has already been conducted. However, the PAD recognises that the work is not exhaustive and some areas have been only lightly examined to date. At present, interpretation of the data gathered and publication of findings is incomplete and ongoing at the GSI, the Marine Institute, universities and other institutions in Ireland. This work will be invaluable in informing project-specific environmental assessments for any proposed exploration activities. Details of INSS survey progress and associated projects are presented at annual INSS seminars, the most recent at Cork in November 2005. Presentations from this and previous seminars contain a wealth of data and are available on CD through the INSS website (<http://www.gsiseabed.ie>). In view of the fact that a considerable amount of interpretative work is in progress, Section 5 of this environmental report (and the more detailed Technical Annex to this report) indicate the range and scale of existing data on different aspects of the environment, and the status of their evaluation, and summarises the key findings and data gaps to date.

2.2.3 Conduct assessment

The SEA Directive is not prescriptive as to the assessment approach that should be used. This environmental report does not use an objectives-led SEA assessment process similar to the indicative list of Environmental Protection Objectives outlined in Table 4b of the SEA guidelines (DoEHLG, 2004). Rather an interaction-significance based assessment process has been used, similar to that commonly used in marine environmental impact assessment and which combines both relevant knowledge and an appreciation of the receiving environment with experience of relevant aspects of the activities being assessed. The process is described fully in Section 6.

In order to accelerate identification of likely issues and potential sources of impact, due to the schedule, an environmental issues identification (ENVID) exercise was conducted with the Steering Group commencing on 2 February 2006. The workshop considered the technical aspects of the seismic and exploration drilling activities and provided the first step in identifying potential interactions between the likely scenarios and the receiving environment. Details of the ENVID are described in Section 9, where they were used in conjunction with the scoping responses from the environmental authorities in order to identify the key impacts and concerns for detailed assessment.

2.2.4 Consultation process

Following publication of the draft environmental report for Slyne, Erris and Donegal, the commencement of a statutory 4-week public consultation process, as provided under SI 435 of 2004, will be announced and published on 11 April 2006 on the IOSEA1 website and in the following local and regional newspapers:

- The Irish Independent
- The Connaught Tribune
- The Sligo Champion
- Donegal Democrat
- Mayo News

Printed copies of the draft environmental report will be made available open review in the county libraries of Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Donegal. Feedback will be sought thereafter until mid-May, through direct consultation with relevant authorities, industry groups, experts and the public.

Furthermore, as provided under Article 13 (2)a and (2)b in SI 435 of 2004, open public regional consultation workshops will be organised on 20 April 2006 in the Radisson Hotel, Sligo, and on 21 April 2006 in the Harbour Hotel, Galway, from 10:00 to 15:00.

During these workshops the public will be given the opportunity to review the draft environmental report, and to consult available experts. This consultation process is seen as an integral part of this first Irish Offshore Oil and Gas Strategic Environmental Assessment.

2.2.5 Adoption of the plan and monitoring

The views of the public as an important stakeholder will be collated and embodied into the final environmental report. This will be published, prior to consideration of granting of Frontier licenses, and will include appropriate operational guidelines or restrictions, which may need to be implemented by applicants. Long-term monitoring requirements of the key indicators identified by the IOSEA1 will be established.

The relationship between the SEA process and the preparation of the environmental report is shown in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Application of SEA process to the preparation of the environmental report

