

Section 2

SEA process

2 SEA process

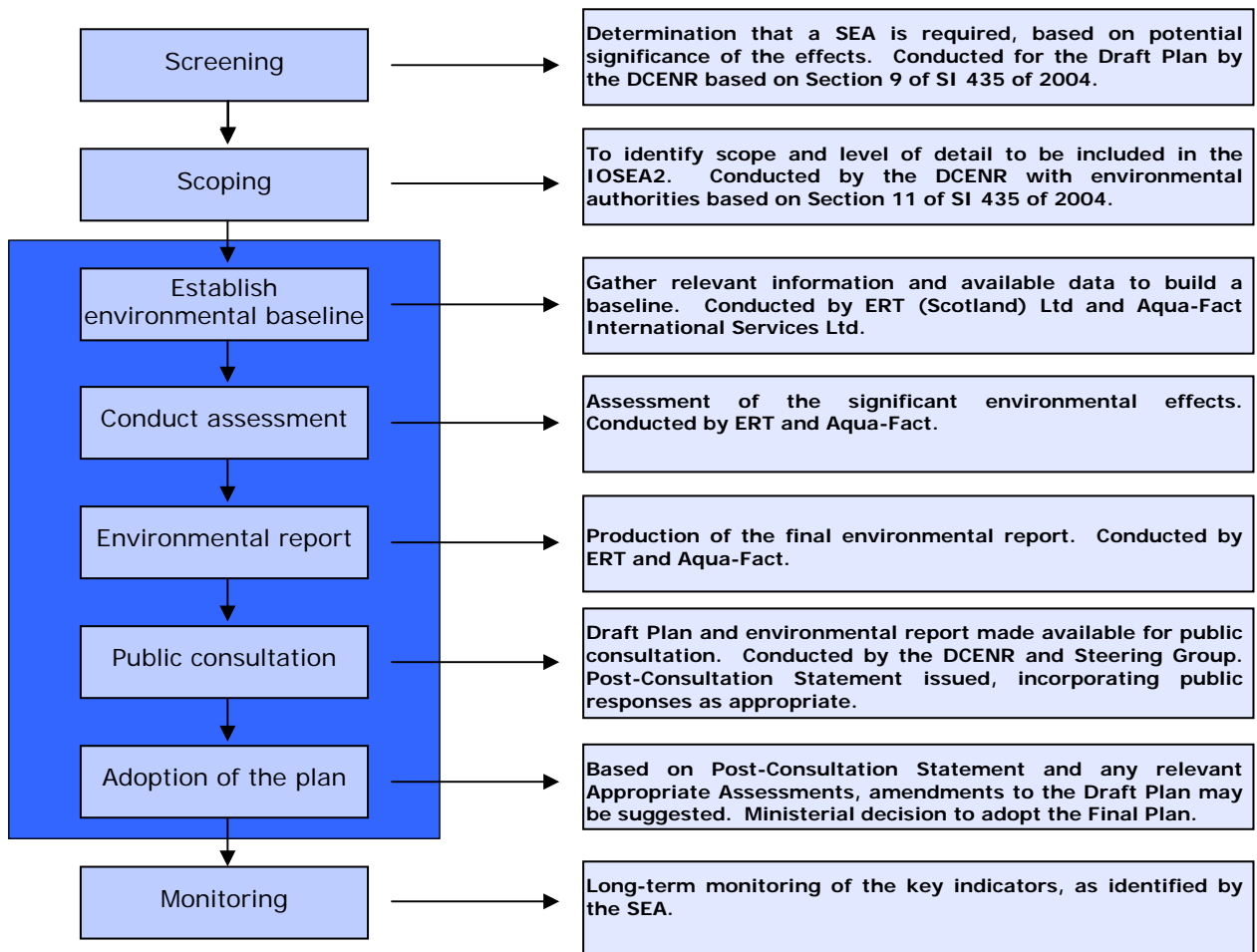
2.1 Introduction

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 (adapted from DoEHLG, 2004)





2.2 How the SEA process was applied to this plan

2.2.1 Screening and scoping the SEA

DCENR 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 Porcupine Basin – Scoping Stage was issued to the three statutory environmental authorities: EPA, DoEHLG and DCENR. In addition, scoping advice was also sought from the Department of Transport (DoT) and the Department of Defence (DoD). 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 Porcupine Basin 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, DCENR 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 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 Porcupine area. PSG was 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. 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 IOSEA2.

Recognising the importance of compiling and evaluating existing data in the Porcupine Basin and surrounding areas, PIP commissioned several projects to gather metadata and compile bibliographies. 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, DCENR 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 in Dublin in March 2007. 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 identify likely issues and potential sources of impact, an environmental issues identification (ENVID) exercise was conducted with the Steering Group commencing on 24 April 2007. 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 6, 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 final environmental report for the Porcupine Basin, the commencement of a public consultation process, as provided under SI 435 of 2004, will be announced and published on the IOSEA2 section of the DCENR/PAD website and in local and regional newspapers. A three week notice of the consultation period will be given and the consultation period itself will last for six weeks. The newspapers selected for public notification will include:

- The Irish Examiner
- The Irish Independent
- The Irish Times
- Foinse – Irish version
- Local and regional newspapers eg the Western People, Connaught Tribune, Galway Advertiser, Clare Champion, The Kerryman, Marine Times and the Irish Farmers Journal

In addition, announcements of the consultation process will be made on local radio stations. Printed copies of the environmental report will be made available for open review in the county libraries of Mayo, Galway, Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork. Feedback will be sought thereafter, 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 at several locations during the week commencing 17 September 2007. As well as advertising the meetings in newspapers and on local radio, the IOSEA2 Steering Group carried out a stakeholder identification exercise in order to ensure that representatives of the local communities, industry, NGOs, local authorities/public agencies and politicians are specifically invited to these meetings.

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

2.2.5 Adoption of the plan and monitoring

Following consultation, the views of the public as an important stakeholder will be collated and embodied into a consultation statement. This will be published, prior to consideration of granting of Frontier licences, 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 IOSEA2 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

