

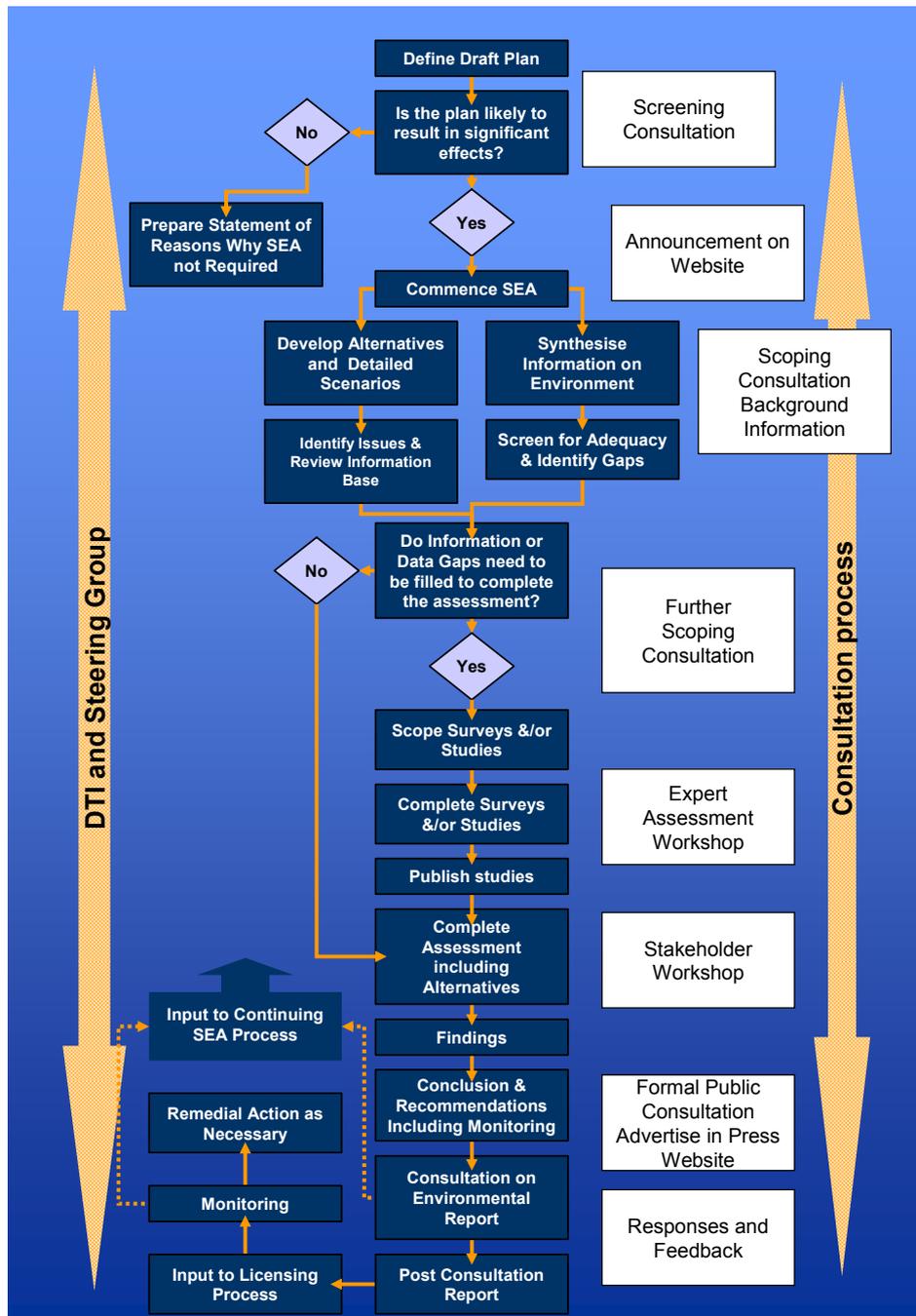
2 SEA PROCESS

2.1 Introduction

The DTI oil and gas licensing SEA process is underpinned by the requirements of the SEA Directive, UK implementing legislation and those of the Aarhus Convention – see Section 1.

A summary of the SEA process used for SEA 6 is given below in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 – Overview of the SEA Process



The SEA process aims to help inform Ministerial licensing decisions through consideration of the environmental implications of the proposed action.

In November 2000, the Cabinet Office published a code of practice on written consultation which provides criteria (which have been applied to SEA 6) for consultations involving documents in written or electronic form. The Code of Practice was reviewed, and a revised code was published on 20 January 2004 - see below.

CODE OF PRACTICE ON CONSULTATION

The six consultation criteria:

1. Consult widely throughout the process, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultation at least once during the development of the policy.
2. Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses.
3. Ensure that your consultation is clear, concise and widely accessible.
4. Give feedback regarding the responses received and how the consultation process influenced the policy.
5. Monitor your department's effectiveness at consultation, including through the use of a designated consultation co-ordinator.
6. Ensure your consultation follows better regulation best practice, including carrying out a Regulatory Impact Assessment if appropriate.

These criteria must be reproduced within all consultation documents.

Extract from Code of Practice on Written Consultation issued January 2004

Since SEA 1, the DTI oil and gas licensing SEA process has evolved and the following process improvements have been implemented:

- Establishment of a SEA Steering Group with wide representation from a range of stakeholders (established in early 2001)
- A formal scoping step with relevant consultation bodies and authorities
- Integrated management of survey, consultation and assessment processes
- Facilitation of public consultation through a dedicated website
- Widespread dissemination of data and information
- Development of modular documents applicable to more than one SEA
- Syntheses of data to facilitate access
- Commissioning of expert underpinning studies
- Publication of technical reports on website, CD as well as hard copy where requested
- Involvement of authors of expert underpinning studies and other users in an assessment workshop
- Stakeholder workshop meetings
- Environmental report available via website or as CD or hard copy
- Continuing development of the methods for the consideration of cumulative and synergistic effects

Responsibility for the publication of the Environmental Report rests with the DTI. Members of the Steering Group, as individuals and through their organisations, may comment on the proposed draft plan and the consultation materials (including this document) during the consultation phase, and encourage others to comment.

2.2 Objective

The overarching objective for SEA 6 is to facilitate exploration and production of UK offshore hydrocarbon resources without compromising the biodiversity, ecosystem functioning and the interests of nature and heritage conservation, and other users of the sea. The subject of SEA objectives and indicators was discussed at the Assessment Workshop (see Appendix 3) and the derived subsidiary objectives and metrics are listed in Section 9.15.

2.3 Scoping the SEA

A key purpose of scoping is to identify key issues of concern at an early stage so that they can be considered in appropriate detail in the SEA. Scoping also aids in the identification of information sources and data gaps that may require to be filled by studies or surveys to underpin the assessment.

For SEA 6 process the principal purposes of scoping were to:

- Promote stakeholder awareness of the SEA initiative
- Ensure access to all relevant environmental information
- Identify opportunities for potential collaboration and the avoidance of duplication of effort
- Identify information gaps so these could be evaluated and filled if necessary
- Identify stakeholder issues and concerns which should be considered in the SEA

Initial scoping consultation with a range of academics and conservation organisations focussed on ascertaining seabed survey and other study needs. This part of scoping was conducted early because of the timescale needed to organise, collect and analyse offshore seabed information and samples. The conclusion of that consultation was that additional information on specific seabed habitats and fauna was needed and consequently a survey of targeted areas of SEA 6 was conducted in the summer/autumn 2004.

A scoping opinion was formally requested from the environmental consultation authorities and bodies for Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. Responses received are given in Appendix 4 and have been considered in the SEA.

2.4 Studies and surveys

A preliminary review, with input from the SEA Steering Group, of the availability of information to support preparation of the environment description for this assessment (Sections 5-8) concluded that a number of studies were required. These studies were commissioned either to provide expert reviews or data syntheses in areas for which synoptic overviews were not published or readily available.

2.4.1 Studies

As part of the SEA 6 process a series of independent studies and syntheses were commissioned. These reports underpin the assessment documented in this report and are available from the DTI's SEA website (www.offshore-sea.org.uk).

Identifying recreational cruising routes, sailing and racing areas within the SEA 6 area – prepared by the Royal Yachting Association (RYA).

The distribution and extent of methane-derived authigenic carbonate – summarises the available information relevant to methane-derived authigenic carbonate (MDAC) in the SEA 6 area and includes the results of the field survey work conducted as part of SEA 6. Prepared by AG Judd.

Synthesis of information on the benthos of area 6 – prepared by SAMS Research Services Ltd, and summarises information on benthic communities and habitats in SEA 6 in the context of hydrography and sedimentology.

Synthesis of information on the benthos of SEA 6 Clyde Sea area - prepared by SAMS Research Services Ltd.

Assessment of the status of horse mussel (*Modiolus modiolus*) beds in the Irish Sea off the NW Anglesey – this report by EIS Rees documents SEA surveys to assess the status of horse mussel beds in the Irish Sea off the north and north-west of Anglesey.

An overview of cephalopods relevant to the SEA 6 area - prepared by the Department of Biological Science, University of Aberdeen, provides an overview of the distribution and ecology of cephalopods (in particular squid, cuttlefish and octopus) in the SEA 6 area.

SEA 6: Conservation – summarises local, national, European and international designations and sites (statutory and non-statutory), which occur within the SEA 6 area. Produced by Coastal Assessment, Liaison and Monitoring.

Underwater ambient noise - produced by QinetiQ, looks at potential sources of underwater noise that combine to form background noise levels in the SEA 6 area.

Provision of fishing activity data for the DTI Strategic Environmental Assessment No. 6 – prepared by CEFAS and provides spatial and temporal descriptions of major fishing fleet activity in the SEA 6 area.

Gas-related seabed structures in the western Irish Sea – report prepared by Croker, Kozachenko and Wheeler which evaluates the distribution and extent of methane-derived authigenic carbonate ('submarine structures formed by leaking gas').

DTI Strategic Environmental Assessment area 6, Irish Sea, seabed and surficial geology and process - report by the British Geological Survey which gives an overview of the hydrocarbon geology, seabed geological formations, bedforms and sediment transport.

Hydrography of the Irish Sea – prepared by Proudman Oceanographic Institute which describes the physical oceanography of SEA 6 waters.

Background information on marine mammals for Strategic Environmental Assessment 6 - report prepared by the Sea Mammal Research Unit which describes the distribution and abundance of marine mammals, their ecological importance, sensitivity to disturbance, contaminant loads, disease, by-catch etc.

SEA 6: Other users - compilation of information on human activities in the SEA 6 area which may impact on, or themselves be affected by, further oil and gas developments in the region by Coastal Assessment, Liaison and Monitoring.

Plankton ecology of the Irish Sea - report prepared by the Port Erin Marine Laboratory which compiles data on the planktonic community of the region, including phytoplankton and zooplankton populations, and processes affecting them.

Maritime archaeology – prepared by Wessex Archaeology, the report covers the legal and policy framework, a brief history of maritime activity in the Irish Sea and previous investigations in the area.

The scope of Strategic Environmental Assessment of Irish Sea Area SEA 6 in regard to prehistoric archaeological remains – report prepared by N Flemming which summarises the known and likely occurrence of prehistoric coastal and submerged marine archaeological remains in the SEA 6 area.

The potential socio-economic implications of licensing the SEA 6 Area - this study, by Mackay Consultants, provides an assessment of the possible socio-economic implications of licensing the SEA 6 area in relation to oil and gas production/reserves, capital, operating and decommissioning expenditure, employment, tax revenue and social impacts.

A review of inshore seabird distribution and abundance in SEA areas 6, 7& 8 – undertaken by Cork Ecology to assess the abundance and distribution of inshore seabird species in the region and to significant identify data gaps.

2.4.2 Offshore Survey

The SEA 6 survey was carried out during the summer/autumn of 2004 from the *SV Lia*, *SV Meridian* and the *SV Kommandor Jack*. A variety of features of potential conservation interest were surveyed, chiefly in the central and northern Irish Sea areas. The work comprised geophysical and biological sampling, video and still photographs collected using a drop camera system.

2.5 Assessment workshop

An Expert Assessment Workshop was held over two days in April 2005. The workshop brought the expertise of the SEA Steering Group, the authors of the SEA 6 underpinning technical reports, and the SEA team to bear on the assessment process for SEA 6 – see Appendix 2 for further information.

For oil and gas licensing the objectives of the assessment workshop were to:

- Consider the key objectives for SEA 6
- Identify the main environmental issues that should be considered further in the SEA 6 Environmental Report
- Review areas, sites and features of the SEA 6 region to identify any requiring additional protection over and above that available through existing mechanisms
- Identify any gaps in information and understanding, and assess their influence on the confidence with which the SEA 6 assessment of likely effects and necessary mitigation can be made
- Consider the re-offer of blocks for oil and gas licensing within areas previously subject to SEA (SEA areas 1 through 5)

2.6 Stakeholder workshop

A stakeholder workshop meeting was held in Manchester on 23rd August 2005, facilitated by the SEA team on behalf of the DTI. A wide variety of potential stakeholders, drawn from UK and other regulators, government advisers, local authorities, other industry representatives, academics and NGOs were invited to the session.

Prior to the workshop, a background document was prepared and placed on the website providing an overview of:

- Proposed draft licensing plan
- Activity levels that might follow licensing
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment process
- An overview of the SEA 6 environment
- Further consultation to be conducted as part of the SEA process and how to input to the process

The objectives of the SEA 6 stakeholder workshop were to provide stakeholders with updates on:

- UK oil and gas supply context
- The outcome of “scoping” consultation
- How issues raised in scoping are being addressed in the SEA process and consultation document
- The outcomes of the assessment workshop
- Initial conclusions of the overall assessment

The workshop included a poster session covering the SEA process and context, overview of the SEA 6 physical, chemical and ecological environment and human interests, main issues and controls and re-offering of previously licensed blocks. Delegates were invited to provide input through a structured feedback form and in a plenary session. Stakeholder input is reported in Appendix 3.

2.7 Further consultation process

The SEA 6 Environmental Report and supporting documents are available for review and public comment for a period of 90 days from date of publication in October 2005. The documents are being made available from the SEA website (www.offshore-sea.org.uk) or on CD or printed copy. Comments and feedback should be marked “SEA 6 Consultation” and may be made via the website or by letter or e-mail addressed to:

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The DTI will consider comments received during the public consultation in their decision making regarding the draft plan. A Post Consultation Report will be prepared and placed on the website collating the comments and DTI responses to them.