Experiences gained from delivery of offshore wind energy in the UK that could inform the environmental assessment of Portuguese projects

Offshore wind consenting and development is developing within Portuguese waters, but an understanding of likely impacts has yet to be established to inform the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process. The UK has a more mature offshore wind industry, and as a consequence, EIA practitioners and stakeholders have developed a greater understanding of impacts arising from the construction and operation of the infrastructure. In particular, the process has matured to provide confidence that some routes to impact will not cause a significant effect and thus can be scoped out of the environmental impact statement (EIS). In addition, impact methodologies have been developed to enable assessment of impacts at a population level. This latter development has proved particularly important within the Habitat Regulation Assessments necessary under the Natura 2000 legislation. There is great interest in identifying the lessons learned from UK to inform the consenting process in Portugal.

Critical review of the consenting procedures for EIA of offshore wind energy projects in Portugal were compared to UK practices, including the analysis of guidance, public participation, stakeholder’s engagement and EIA requirements. Interviews with authorities, experts and developers were conducted to identify different expectations.

Scoping is a key component of the EIA process in both Portugal and the UK. It is undertaken in the early stage of the project planning/design to agree the environmental receptors present in the proposed area that should be considered further during the EIA process. In the UK, the scoping process also includes agreement of methodologies of site specific surveys that should be utilised to fill knowledge and data gaps. This reduces the potential for expensive surveys that stakeholders consider inadequate to address the requirements of the EIA process.

Portuguese determining authorities potentially see offshore energy projects as having numerous unquantified or uncertain impacts. Uncertainty within impact assessments usually results in the adoption of the precautionary principle, and thus conservative assessment outcomes and over-prediction of impacts. Within the UK, post construction monitoring is helping to reduce some of the conservatism that has arisen within assessment methodologies as a result of these uncertainties. Survey data has provided stakeholders with the confidence to allow developers to scope out potential impacts that are unlikely to result in significant effects in UK waters.
Lessons from development of survey plans within UK waters also provide evidence that there is little to be learned by repeating baseline surveys as post-construction monitoring campaigns. Baseline surveys provide general information on the site specific use of the site. They are generally not sufficient to allow the detection of significant change in a population density of a species (i.e. the actual impact) following the introduction of a wind farm into the environment. Lesson learnt from the UK show that post consent monitoring of impacts should to be questions driven, and robustly designed to be effective at answering such questions.

Using the lesson learnt from the UK will probably mean that potential impacts will continue to be conservatively assessed, but it may help to limit some of the precautionary principles to reflect realistic scenarios, and limit EIAs to potentially significant effects.