EIA Quality Mark Case Study

Increasing project efficiency and EA robustness by environmental gap-analysis
Purpose of the project:

The main purpose of the project was to demonstrate a robust understanding of the environment in the area, utilising as wide a data set as possible to validate current understanding and minimise the need to undertake additional surveys. The purpose of the environmental analysis was to inform a subsequent EA undertaken for the decommissioning of the pipeline.

The key aspects involved collaboration between the operator and Xodus to develop a methodology by which an in-depth understanding of the current environmental conditions could be demonstrated, allowing an appropriate and robust EA to be competed, satisfying the regulator without having to delay the offshore operations with the added benefit of contributing to the industries target of reducing decommissioning costs (OGUK, 2018).

Description of the project:

Given the location in the northern North Sea, the seabed conditions are relatively stable, and benthic habitats and communities are relatively consistent. An approach was devised to present a regional assessment of the field and neighbouring fields. The main approach involved:

- Summarising and mapping survey coverage along the proposed route;
- Identification of sensitive features;
- Outlining the patterns in distribution of habitats and communities;
- To source and review other data sources for the pipeline route including online data resources, mapping and knowledge of relevant published literature;
- Provide comment on the survey data that had been gathered to date in terms of spatial coverage;
- Agreement with the background context for the area, and suitability for use in EA studies; and
- Suggestions on requirements for future survey work.

A recent decommissioning project had been approved for a neighbouring asset and as part of its supporting evidence environmental surveys were undertaken. These surveys identified similar sediments to those in the vicinity of the current project and thus could be used to validate the general approach. This, in addition to the wealth of historic surveys undertaken by the operator in question and combined with the surveys in the vicinity undertaken by several other operators resulted in a comprehensive evidence base of the environmental baseline.

The evidence base suggested the environment to be relatively consistent and unchanged for decades. As a result, an agreement with the regulator was reached that limited additional ‘new evidence’ would arise from undertaking an additional survey in this instance.
This approach allowed the completion of the EA report without potential delays of between 6-12 months. This resulted in significant time and cost savings and subsequently benefited all the operators who contributed surveys as they in-turn developed their own decommissioning programmes with the created region evidence base. This sharing of knowledge could be used to present a greater understanding of the environmental conditions in the vicinity of specific assets allowing a better-informed assessment of potential impacts on surrounding communities and populations.

**Key Issues:**

Xodus was contracted to undertake an EA in support of a Decommissioning Programme (DP) for a 34 km pipeline located in the northern North Sea.

There was no project specific environmental survey data available along the pipeline route from the last five-year period, as stipulated in the current guidance for the decommissioning of offshore oil and gas installations and pipelines (BEIS, 2018). As a result, the operator faced the prospect of having to undertake surveys potentially delaying the project.

These delays would potentially have had knock-on effects for scheduling of further survey work and decommissioning operations across the wider field decommissioning programme.

**Lessons Learnt:**

- The early involvement of the regulator is key as it increases confidence, transparency and understanding in the methodology proposed;
- The project demonstrated how increased interaction and sharing between operators can increase the understanding of environmental conditions for multiple operators without increased survey requirement and can be used to inform subsequent operations;
- The project showed how operators could more efficiently leverage data within areas of the UCKS to increase efficiencies and minimise costs while delivering a more robust environmental assessment in the process.
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References


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