



**Phase 3: Consultation
research on business plan
investment options**

Report prepared for:

NIE Networks

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1.1 Key findings

Aim and approach

NIE Networks, in conjunction with the Consumer Council, the Utility Regulator and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), commissioned Perceptive Insight Market Research to undertake a comprehensive research study designed to ascertain the views and priorities of NIE Networks' consumers in relation to future network investment programmes and developments.

To facilitate this aim, the study was split into a number of phases:

- **Phase 1:** Qualitative research to explore the potential investment options and provide an understanding of the trade-offs that customers make when choosing their preferred approach to investment;
- **Phase 2:** Quantitative research to measure investment preferences and willingness to pay for investment among the various customer groups; and
- **Phase 3:** Review of the outline plan for future investment, which was based on the feedback provided at phases 1 and 2. The research during phase 3 consisted of:
 - Four reconvened focus groups with domestic customers;
 - Eight depth interviews with non-domestic customers;
 - A stakeholder workshop; and
 - Quizdom voting (stakeholders and domestic customers).

This report summarises the feedback from the Phase 3 research with domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders. Key findings have been summarised under the following headings:

- Maintaining current service levels;
- Improving customer service;
- Reducing unplanned power cuts;
- Increasing resilience to severe weather;
- Building a smarter network;
- Speeding up connections; and
- Willingness to pay and investment areas not included.

Maintaining current service levels

- There was strong support from domestic and non-domestic customers regarding the maintaining of current service levels. Indeed, almost all domestic and non-domestic customers reported that they were happy for NIE Networks to maintain their current service levels, as a minimum, until 2024.
- While most stakeholders agreed that service levels should be maintained, some suggested that they would prefer to review more detailed information before responding to the issue.

Improving customer service

- There was support for improving customer service levels across all three research groups (domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders). Notably, a

high proportion of domestic customers and all non-domestic customers agreed that improving customer service is something NIE Networks should focus on.

- Research participants made a number of suggestions as to how customer service should be improved. Suggestions included:
 - Improving customer service when it comes to planned power cuts by sharing information in a more timely matter (domestic customers and stakeholders);
 - Providing a multi-channel approach to enable more varied customer contact. This included support for the 'Powercheck' app (non-domestic customers);
 - Providing larger organisations with a dedicated staff contact from within NIE Networks (non-domestic customers and stakeholders); and
 - Working closely with energy suppliers to create an integrated system (stakeholders).

Reducing unplanned power cuts

- A high proportion of participants across all phases of the research (domestic customer focus groups, non-domestic customer interviews and the stakeholder workshop) were in agreement that NIE Networks should focus investment on improving the service for homes and businesses by reducing power cuts. However, it is worth noting that a number of participants (particularly from the stakeholder workshop) felt that the proposed investment was not enough.
- A high proportion of domestic and non-domestic customers chose Option two as their preferred investment option to reduce unplanned power cuts, while many stakeholders reported that they would be unwilling to pay towards the investment in tackling unplanned power cuts.
- A number of participants, predominantly domestic customers and stakeholders, noted that NIE Networks should only be charging those who live in rural areas, as they are more likely to be affected by unplanned power cuts.
- A small number domestic customers suggested that NIE Networks needs to increase the operational times of the dedicated fault and emergency services to 24/7 - not just during working hours as proposed.

Increasing resilience to severe weather

- Domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders felt strongly that NIE Networks should invest in resilience to severe weather.
- The majority of domestic and non-domestic customers preferred a bundle or hybrid of options to be offered, where the options would cater towards mixing and matching the specific areas to best suit the needs of customer. For example, non-domestic customers suggested that NIE Networks should invest in ice accretion from Option one, and substation defences and tree cutting from Option two. On the other hand, of the few stakeholders who were prepared to select a preferred investment option, Option two was favoured.
- A number of domestic customers expressed their concerns that a 15 and 20 year timeframe is too long to wait to see benefits from the investments.
- Meanwhile, stakeholders expressed concern over who should be responsible for the costs associated with this investment area. A few felt that it should come from the core, 'business as usual' budget or central government funding. Similarly, a small number of stakeholders felt that this was an issue that only affected rural areas, and as such,

investment should be focused in these areas only.

Building a smarter network

- Domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders agreed that NIE Networks should invest in building a smarter network.
- The consensus from domestic customers and non-domestic customers was that NIE Networks should carry out five trials. However, participants were keen to note that they do not have enough expert knowledge to know which options are the best. Meanwhile, stakeholders reported that between two and five trials would be considered appropriate for the RP6 period. In support of domestic and non-domestic customers, stakeholders also felt underqualified to comment on which trial(s) should be taken forward.
- Some stakeholders queried whether it was the responsibility of the customer to pay. A small proportion felt that those interested in the trials should pay, that the government should contribute, or it should be part of NIE Networks' core business as usual budget.

Speeding up connections

- Non-domestic customers reported that NIE Networks needs to improve their performance when it comes to speeding up connections. There was general agreement from stakeholder participants.
- Non-domestic customers noted that NIE Networks needs to do more than what is currently proposed - especially for the price customers will have to pay. Meanwhile, stakeholders' main concerns were with regard to better communication, speeding up connection times and introducing a competitive market.

Willingness to pay and investment areas not included

- Almost all domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders agreed that investments to underground lines in urban areas, areas of natural beauty, and investments to resolve bird fouling should not be the responsibility of NIE Networks, and were therefore happy to exclude these investment proposals.
- There was a willingness to pay toward investment from both domestic and non-domestic customers. Indeed, domestic customers reported that an extra £3 per year was a reasonably small amount to pay over the course of the year, with the exception of a few rural customers who weren't willing to pay anything extra per year. Meanwhile, some domestic customers expressed their concerns that an extra £3 per year was pitched too low. Similarly, the majority of non-domestic customers chose the more expensive options as they would 'help more people' or 'more customers would see the benefit'.
- On the other hand, there was a general unwillingness to pay from some stakeholders, who strongly conveyed their opinion that customers should not have to pay. They proposed that NIE Networks should be carrying out this work anyway.

1.2 Introduction and approach

NIE Networks agrees its network investment plans with the Utility Regulator and other industry partners. The current plan runs until 2017 and NIE Networks is currently developing their plans for 2017 to 2024.

Aim of the research

NIE Networks, in conjunction with the Consumer Council, the Utility Regulator and the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), commissioned Perceptive Insight Market Research to undertake a comprehensive research study designed to ascertain the views and priorities of NIE's consumers in relation to future network investment programmes and developments. To facilitate this aim the study was split into a number of phases:

- Phase 1: Qualitative research to explore the potential investment options and provide an understanding of the trade-offs that customers make when choosing their preferred approach to investment;
- Phase 2: Quantitative research to measure investment preferences and willingness to pay for investment among the various customer groups;
- Phase 3: Review of the outline plan for future investment, which was based on the feedback provided at phases 1 and 2.

This report summarises the feedback from the Phase 3 research with domestic customers, non-domestic customers and stakeholders.

Approach

The research during phase 3 consisted of:

- Four reconvened focus groups with domestic customers;
- Eight depth interviews with non-domestic customers;
- A stakeholders workshop; and
- Quizdom responses (Stakeholders and domestic customers).

Reconvened focus groups

Four reconvened focus groups were conducted with those who had previously attended discussions as part of the Phase 1 research in Craigavon, Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Ballycastle. The focus groups were split into four categories; an older family (Craigavon), a young family (Derry/Londonderry), people living in rural areas (Ballycastle) and a mixed group which consisted of future students; knowledgeable customers; those on the critical care list; and those living close to pylons (Belfast).

Depth Interviews

A total of eight reconvened in-depth interviews were conducted with non-domestic customers throughout phase three of the research. Bearing in mind the various types of organisations and their level of electricity usage, the following organisations were chosen for interview:

Table 1.1: Phase 3 in-depth interview structure with non-domestic customers

| | Size | Sector | Location | Service usage |
|---|--------|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1 | Small | Agriculture | Rural | Generation |
| 2 | Large | Manufacturing | Rural | High |
| 3 | - | Sports Club | Rural | Med |
| 4 | Small | Personal service | Urban | Med |
| 5 | Small | Manufacturing | Urban | Med |
| 6 | Large | Utility | Urban/Rural | High |
| 7 | Medium | Construction | Urban | Med |
| 8 | - | Voluntary / Charity | Urban | Med |

The reconvened interviews were conducted with the person within each organisation that had responsibility for electricity services. Each interview took between 45 to 90 minutes to complete.

Stakeholder workshop

A stakeholder workshop was conducted with various stakeholder groups on Thursday 12th November 2015. Overall, 88 representatives were invited to attend the workshop, where NIE Networks presented details of their draft outline business plan and options for investment proposals. Those who attended (25 attendees) were provided with an opportunity to discuss the extent to which these proposals reflected their previous feedback at phase 1 of the research and met their expectations, prioritisations and preferences. Representatives from the following industries were in attendance;

- Business representative groups;
 - (Manufacturing NI, Smartgrid Ireland, Bryson Group, Phoenix Natural Gas);
- Domestic consumer/vulnerable consumer representative groups;
 - (Commissioner for Older People NI, Consumer Council, Energy Saving Trust, National Energy Action);
- Public administration & emergency planners;
 - (Belfast HSCT, PSNI, NI Ambulance Service, Invest NI, NIHE);
- Environmental groups;
 - (NI Environment Link, NI renewables Industry group);
- Suppliers;
 - (System Operator for Northern Ireland, Power NI, SSE Airtricity, Energia, Electric Ireland, Vayu).

It should be noted that while we attempted to include as many stakeholders as possible who had participated at Phase one, a number of those attending at Phase three had not taken part in this previous research. As such they will not have gone through the deliberative process exploring the rationale for investment.

Quizdom

Quizdom is an audience response hardware system (sometimes known as clickers, voting tools or voting systems) that allows the user to gather feedback, measure understanding and response, gauge opinions and collect votes and produce instant reports all while increasing interactivity and audience engagement. The consultation questions were used with Quizdom to gather an overview of opinion from stakeholder and domestic customers who participated in the focus groups

Structure of report

Feedback from each of the customer groups is structured under the following headings:

- 1.3 Maintaining current service levels;
- 1.4 Improving customer service;
- 1.5 Reducing unplanned power cuts;
- 1.6 Increasing resilience to severe weather;
- 1.7 Building a smarter network;
- 1.8 Speeding up connections to the network;
- 1.9 Willingness to pay and
- 1.10 Feedback from the online survey.

Each section begins by outlining the proposed investment strategy options and the consultation questions that were posed to customers. The remainder of the section presents the key findings for each type of customer grouping.

1.3 Maintaining current service levels

NIE Networks' proposal

From 2017-2024 NIE Networks will continue to:

- Keep the network safe and provide a reliable service for homes and businesses;
- Inspect & maintain the network to identify and deal with problems;
- Develop the network to meet increasing demand from existing and new customers;
- Repair faults and keep customers up to date with information over the phone and online; and
- Replace and upgrade equipment due to age and condition.

From 2017 to 2024 about 6.5% of the network will need to be updated due to age and condition. In addition, new legislation recently introduced increases safety requirements particularly with respect to clearances from overhead lines. Some additional expenditure will be required over the next ten years to achieve compliance.

Consultation question:

- Do you agree that NIE Networks' investment programme should, as a minimum, aim to maintain its current service levels until 2024?

Key findings

Participants in the Phase 3 research were presented with the proposal for maintaining current levels of service as a minimum and asked if they agreed with this or if they would be willing to accept a lower level of service if it meant that their bill would be reduced.

It should be noted that discussion around this topic was limited given the high level of agreement with the proposal and the unwillingness of customers to accept lower service standards.

Domestic customers

When discussing the issue of maintaining current service levels as a minimum, domestic customers across all focus groups echoed the findings from Phase1, confirming that they are satisfied with the service levels they are receiving from NIE Networks. All agreed, and most felt strongly, that the service levels should not be lowered under any circumstance.

100% of domestic customers who took part in the focus groups agreed that current service levels should be maintained

*"The service you are getting is grand, basically it's keeping us going."
(Young family, Derry/Londonderry)*

“I never had any bother with them [NIE Networks]. They send someone in straight away when something goes wrong - they seem to be doing well. Everything was grand with regard to when electric was off. It was not even the Housing Executive [that came to fix the issue], it was NIE Networks.”
(Rural, Ballycastle)

Non-domestic customers

Almost all non-domestic customers who participated in the reconvened discussions stated that they were happy for NIE Networks to maintain their current service levels, as a minimum, until 2024.

However, at this early stage of the discussion one customer stressed that maintaining the current level of service did not go far enough and that continuous investment in the network should be ongoing.

“NIE also need to take into account that continuous investment is needed. They shouldn’t just maintain. We would be willing to pay a bit more for a better service.”

Stakeholders

During the stakeholder workshop participants were quizzed as to whether they agreed that NIE Networks should, as a minimum, maintain current levels of service. There was no round table discussion of this topic, rather a few comments were gathered from the floor.



The majority agreed with the investment proposal (83%). However a number of observations were made. One was that customers are not aware of their current service levels and do not appreciate the current standard of service. For example, one stakeholder noted:

“Customers don’t appreciate or understand what kind of service they have at the minute, so if the standard drops they will gain a better perspective and appreciation of what they once had.”

Another highlighted that they did not have enough information on how much customer service would decrease relative to the costs of maintenance or an improved service. They requested that additional information should be provided in order for them to make a fully informed decision.

1.4 Improving customer service

NIE Networks' proposal

Throughout RP6, NIE Networks plans to provide a new multi-channel communication approach that will allow customers to:

- Report a power cut;
- Receive up to date information on the progress of the repair teams;
- Receive notifications about planned work on the network;
- Submit their own meter reading; and
- Receive up to date information about their application for a connection to the electricity network.

In addition, they are planning to:

- Increase their social media coverage to allow people to contact them via twitter on a 24/7 basis;
- Proactively promote their critical care list to raise awareness of the list's benefits amongst customers who depend on electricity operated healthcare equipment; and
- Provide a dedicated contact at each local incident centre for their critical care customers to contact during weather events that cause widespread power cuts.

Consultation questions:

- How can NIE Networks make it easier for customer to communicate with them?
- Do you agree with NIE Networks' strategy for improving overall customer service?
- Are there other areas that NIE Networks haven't considered?

Key findings

Domestic customers

All domestic customers agreed that NIE Networks should focus its investment programme on improving customer service.



Domestic customers confirmed that it was very important to them to be able to speak directly to an advisor, who would be helpful and would act effectively on their matter, particularly in the case of reporting an initial power outage or during an emergency situation.

While stressing the importance of being able to talk to someone about their initial query, customers confirmed that they are willing to consider other channels of communication for follow-up contact. These include the options to obtain information through email, social media (e.g. twitter) or text messages.

As such, domestic customers were positive about the proposed strategy for customer service in the next investment period.

“As long as they will be in addition to the telephone, all these additional methods are great. Still I would prefer telephone.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“I would have liked to get through to an advisor at the start rather than waiting on the automated service.” (Rural, Ballycastle)

A few highlighted the changing nature of interaction between young people and those providing services. They suggested that younger customers may be more comfortable with and trusting of newer forms of electronic communication, again highlighting the appropriateness of a multi-channel approach to customer service provision.

“I think it’s very much to do with the age of the person who is reporting the fault. A person of a certain age may want to talk to somebody. Younger people are more into technical methods, and they would prefer text messages, email or twitter.” (Older family, Craigavon)

Domestic customers were asked their views on whether they would register their telephone number or email to receive service updates from NIE Networks. Most confirmed that they would provide this type of information.

“It makes sense - if people want to be kept updated, you need to register your mobile number with them. If you knew the number beforehand, you could program it into your phone so you know it’s NIE” (Close to pylons, Belfast)

However a few expressed concern over how the information might be used. This concern came from previous experience of providing personal details to other businesses.

“I prefer e-mail, as you don’t have to open it if you don’t want to. You get tortured all the time if you give out your mobile number.” (Young family, Derry)

“I thought that would have been a ‘no’ to be honest. Companies would be prone to giving telephone numbers to other companies. I would be wary of that. Probably a text message would be good, but again you would have to register your mobile number. I am a bit sceptical.” (Young family, Derry/Londonderry)

A small number of domestic customers expressed concern at the way in which they are being notified. Some respondents felt strongly that they should be notified in advance of a planned power cut and that NIE Networks should share information in a timely manner, which is of high quality and easily accessible especially in emergency situations. These domestic customers reported that this was the key to good customer service. For example, one respondent noted:

“I got a letter last week to say that I will have a power cut for 8 hours from 9am to 4pm. It could have easily got thrown out with the rubbish. It’s a just slip of paper. When they are reading your meter it’s planned - they read meters every month. Why

can't they tell you that your electric is going to be out in advance? (Young family, Derry)

Non-domestic customers

All non-domestic customers interviewed agreed that NIE Networks should focus on improving customer service. Specifically, a number of respondents reported that the "Powercheck" app would be of great use to them because it is an efficient way of accessing up-to-date information that helps to manage their expectations.

"All I want to know is that someone is trying to fix the problem and how long they think it will take."

"I really like the idea of Powercheck app."

"I know what the Powercheck app does, it's great."

Others felt the multi-channel approach to customer service was a great idea, especially communications online, as they have a number of different mediums they can use which are all easily accessible.

"Multi-channel communication is important"

However, there was a small proportion of non-domestic customers who stated online information would be of no use to them as they cannot connect to social media on work technology.

When non-domestic customers were asked if there was anything NIE Networks had not considered, the majority stressed that personal contact through the telephone was still extremely important, particularly in emergency situations. One non-domestic customer stated:

"The last time there was a power cut and I tried to ring NIE and I kept getting an automated service, it was so frustrating. It would be good to speak to a real person."

On seeing the proposals for a dedicated contact for critical care customers, a few non-domestic customers, particularly those from larger organisations or from emergency organisations, reported that it is important for their organisation also to have a dedicated contact within NIE Networks for emergency situations. On the other hand, others noted that a dedicated contact would be good for all situations as they have a lot of contact with NIE.

"A dedicated person would be extremely helpful; it would save time on both sides. For example, when sending in application forms for connections I ring a dedicated person in NIE and they find out the information from whoever they need to and get back to me."

"We are a large organisation and need an emergency contact similar to the critical care scheme."

Stakeholders

Stakeholders were asked if there was anything NIE Networks could do to make it easier for customers to communicate with them. Most stakeholders were in agreement with the NIE Networks proposal for improving customer service, although some noted that more could be done. A number of suggestions were made as to how customer service could be improved, such as providing a dedicated member of staff, timelier sharing of information, and ensuring that information is easily accessible for all members of society and of a high quality.



83% agree with the customer service strategy

Some stakeholders suggested that having key member of staff for business customers to contact in the event of a service problem would be helpful. They also noted that it would provide time savings as well as to give them peace of mind by knowing that they are talking to the right person, instead of *“being passed through everyone.”* It was also highlighted that having a key contact within NIE Networks would assure customers that they are speaking to someone at the appropriate level.

“From a health point of view, I want to speak to someone at an appropriate level. For example I want to go to a communications manager and speak directly to them, no one else. We aren’t interested in how you’re going to fix it just when it’s going to happen and how long.”

Stakeholders used the platform provided at the stakeholder workshop to express their views on the importance of information sharing. They reported that the timely sharing of high quality and easily accessible information is a key attribute of good customer service.

Stakeholders also expressed the view that a greater level of assistance and thought should be given to vulnerable customers when it comes to information sharing. It was suggested that telephone lines should be made available and kept clear in emergency situations to ensure that all customers can get through by providing a call back service.

“In storm situations it is pivotal that the right information is given - and that honesty and being up-front with customers is part of the ethos.”

Participants agreed that NIE Networks are going in the right direction with their customer service proposals by providing an out-of-hours service that will offer accessible information. However, there were a small number of concerns about some more technical communication methods such as using online platforms or social media.

“I’m still wary of Twitter, so I wouldn’t use it.”

“They need to think of other ways to contact customers if there is an outage. All the things on the list are electronic.”

“They are talking about different methods such as online, phone etc. but also keep in mind the face-to-face communication opportunities the operatives have when they are out on the street. When they are on the scene they should communicate and interact with consumers. That face-to-face channel is very important, particularly for consumers who don’t have the option to use the multi-channel methods. It also emphasises the personal touch.”

A number of stakeholders reportedly felt that they are not customers of NIE Networks, but customers of their energy supplier. They reported that NIE Networks would not be their first point of contact, and instead would contact the company they pay their bill to. Some stakeholders also indicated that they were uncertain as to when the supplier and/or NIE Networks should be contacted.

“If I have a problem, I am going to call the company I pay my money to as it’s the number on the top of my bill. NIE Networks could work more closely with energy suppliers.”

“I think they [NIE Networks] need an integrated system; for example, I call my energy supplier, select that I have an outage or a problem with connection and they automatically transfer me to NIE.”

These suggestions were echoed by energy suppliers:

“People are phoning the supplier and the supplier has no way of getting information faster than the customer if they contacted NIE Networks directly.”

1.5 Reducing unplanned power cuts

NIE Networks' proposal

For the period 2017-2024, there are two options of investment with regard to reducing unplanned power cuts:

Option 1

| Service Improvement | How? | RP614 Cost (£m) | Domestic Customers | Small and Medium I & C Customers | Large I & C Customers |
|--|--|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Reduce the number of customers per year who are experiencing power cuts over 10 hours in duration by 25% | 1. Investment in low voltage generation and associated technology to resupply customers whilst the fault is located. | 11.48 | 1.15 | 11.05 | 668 |
| | 2. Increasing the number of dedicated resources available for fault and emergency response by approximately 80% | | | | |
| Total | | 11.48 | 1.15 | 11.05 | 668 |

Option 2

| Service Improvement | How? | RP614 Cost (£m) | Domestic Customers | Small and Medium I & C Customers | Large I & C Customers |
|--|--|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Reduce the number of customers per year who are experiencing power cuts over 10 hours in duration by 25% | 1. Investment in low voltage generation and associated technology to resupply customers whilst the fault is located. | 11.48 | 1.15 | 11.05 | 668 |
| | 2. Increasing the number of dedicated resources available for fault and emergency response by approximately 80% | | | | |
| Reduce the number of customers who experience 6 or more power cuts in an 18 months period by 20%. | Investment in the 20 worst performing rural circuits through a mix of: | | | | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circuit reconfiguration • Targeted network reinforcement • Application of distributed automation to automatically locate and isolate faulty sections of network (self healing network). | 5 | 0.18 | 1.70 | 103 |
| Total | | 16.48 | 1.33 | 12.75 | 771 |

Consultation questions:

- Do you agree that NIE Networks should focus its investment programme on improving the service for homes and businesses by reducing power cuts?
- Which of the investment options do you support?

Key findings

Domestic customers

Domestic customers across all focus groups were asked whether NIE Networks should focus its investment on improving the service for homes and businesses by reducing power cuts. Although 96% of respondents voted that NIE Networks should focus its investment in this area, after in-depth discussion the one participant who voted 'no' changed their vote. As such, all domestic customers were in agreement with this investment plan.

100% agreed NIE Networks should focus on improving the service by reducing power cuts

"In today's age we shouldn't be experiencing power cuts. We should have no power cuts. People should not be experiencing long power cuts for more than 10 hours, especially in the rural communities. Elderly and the most vulnerable people shouldn't be experiencing that at all." (Knowledgeable, Belfast)

A couple of points noted during the discussions. One group highlighted the footnote which pointed out that the operational resource would be increased during office hours. They suggested that NIE Networks needs to increase the operational times of the dedicated fault and emergency services to 24/7, and not just during working hours as proposed.

"When you look at the small print, it seems these plans are not ambitious enough. The small print says 'we are only concentrating on office hours'."
(Knowledgeable, Belfast)

"You can have increased resources for dedicated fault finding between the hours of 9am and 5pm, but it's no good to you if you are an elderly person in a rural community experiencing an emergency at 9pm night. It should be the other way around. They should be increasing the number of dedicated resources available out of office hours rather than in office hours." (Knowledgeable, Belfast)

There was a small number of domestic customers who felt that NIE Networks should only be charging customers who live in rural areas for these improvements, as they are more likely to be affected by power cuts.

"It's not just the 18p per customer as much as it's the total figure of £5 million - and it doesn't seem like a lot of people. Why is everyone else covering the cost when people living in the countryside aren't willing to cover their own costs themselves? The rural areas will be affected by this problem as opposed to [those in urban areas]"

that aren't. The £5 million should be invested in something better.”
(Future student, Belfast)

Domestic customers were subsequently asked to provide their opinion on which of the investment options proposed by NIE Networks they support. A large proportion selected Option two as opposed to Option one. When asked to clarify the reasons behind their choice, a range of factors came to play including price and whether they live in an urban or rural location. The small number who opted for Option one generally did so because of the lower cost associated with this option.



“I chose Option two as it's only an extra 18p.”
(Older family, Craigavon).

“I chose Option two as you get more out of it.”
(Older family, Craigavon).

“I chose Option one because it's cheaper.”
(Young family, Derry)

A small number of domestic customers expressed the view that they should not be paying for these options at all.

“I don't really see why they would need to ask us [to pay]. Businesses are always trying to improve. Most companies have to invest with their own money, but they are investing with our money basically.” **(Young family, Derry)**

“I think that people who are affected by it more are probably more willing to pay. It wouldn't really happen to people like us who live in and around Belfast, so we probably would not be willing to pay.” **(Future student, Belfast)**

Non-domestic customers

Almost all non-domestic customers interviewed agreed that NIE Networks should focus on reducing power cuts.

“This is not an issue for the larger sites as they are all protected against power cuts with a generator, but smaller sites are severely affected by power cuts.”

“This is something that severely affects our organisation; the biggest issue in a power cut is that the telephone lines go down and we have no helpline.”

A small number of non-domestic customers felt that NIE Networks should not focus on reducing power cuts. This was because they considered it to be a rare issue as they are rarely impacted by power cuts, given that they are located in urban areas.

“No they aren't [issues] - we have only had one power cut in the last four years.”

Most non-domestic participants indicated that Option two would be their preference because it seemed to provide greatest value for money. They also expressed the view that a larger amount of investment is needed with regard to reducing power cuts.

“The price isn’t much more, so I would be happy to pay a bit more to get more.”

“Option two seems like the better option – constantly having power cuts is annoying.”

“Option two seems to be better value and they may as well do it properly for the sake of an extra £1.70.”

There was a small proportion who reported that Option one, in their view, was the better of the two options. Indeed, one participant noted the second strategy in Option two (reduce the number of customers experiencing six or more power cuts in an 18 month period by 20%) was vague, and they would require more information before they would feel qualified to decide. Another participant felt that Option one was better because unplanned power cuts rarely affect their organisation. Of those participants who chose Option one, most reportedly did so because it was the cheaper option. Comments about the cost of reducing unplanned power cuts included:

“NIE Networks needs to be more selective over who they charge. For example, the large sites won’t benefit from this investment, but the smaller sites would; especially in rural areas.”

“We are not willing to pay for unplanned power cuts because we are not affected.”

“It’s quite a lot of money for a large organisation to be paying, especially when it’s very unlikely to be them experiencing unplanned power cuts. It is more likely to be those in rural areas with a bad supply. Large organisations will more than likely have generators. This seems very unfair.”

Stakeholders

Stakeholders were asked if they felt NIE Networks should focus its investment programme on improving the service for homes and businesses by reducing power cuts. There were a number of views expressed in response to this question.

43% agreed NIE Networks should focus on improving the service by reducing power cuts

Some stakeholders felt that the objective to reduce unplanned power cuts was a valid one, and therefore action is needed to support the electricity network.

A number of respondents agreed that reducing unplanned power cuts is worth investment from NIE Networks, but were concerned that the investment they are proposing is not enough.

“There will still be people suffering, so it seems rather unambitious. Reduction by 25% is pretty weak.”

However, a few participants felt that reducing unplanned power cuts was not a significant issue. Stakeholders noted that many business customers have generators, and as such, are unlikely to be negatively impacted by an unplanned power cut if the electricity is back on in a short period of time. Some thought that investment in the reduction of unplanned power cuts was only going to benefit a small number of customers, and in particular, those living in rural areas.

A number of stakeholders reported that they would get no benefit out of reducing unplanned power cuts, unless they moved to a rural area. Similar to the non-domestic findings, some stakeholders suggested that NIE Networks should only be charging those who live in rural areas, as they are usually the ones who are affected by unplanned cuts.

“In rural areas people can’t expect to have the same provision as those in the city.”

“It’s just affecting those in rural areas, so they should pay.”

During the discussions with stakeholders, cost appeared to be the most prevalent factor when deciding which option for investment to choose. A large proportion of stakeholders reported that neither option is suitable (70%), while some chose not answer the question as they are unwilling to pay (20%). Indeed, a large proportion of stakeholders stated that NIE Networks should not be charging the customer at all.

“Customers said they aren’t prepared to spend more. We are asked to make a simple decision between Option one and Option two when they have already said that they won’t pay more.”

“£1.33 is not a huge ask - but when you get up to £700-£800 for businesses, it’s a lot.”

“For 12,000 homes and businesses - not an investment well made. There is no more money to be spent by business customers.”

“I would select neither option because these options are aimed at consumers of electricity and not generators of electricity - we don’t get anything out of this so why should we pay.”

Of the few stakeholders who were willing to choose an option, Option two seemed to be favoured (10%). This was mainly due to respondents feeling that Option two would have a greater impact on service improvement.

1.6 Increasing resilience to severe weather

NIE Networks' proposal

To lessen the impact of severe weather on the power network NIE Networks has suggested two options, one of which they hope to carry out during the 2017-2024 period.

Option 1

| Service Improvement | How? | RP614 Cost (£m) | Domestic Customers | Small and Medium I & C Customers | Large I & C Customers |
|---|--|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Reduce the likelihood of power cuts during severe weather | Upgrade 20% of the 11,000 volt network over a 15 year period to increase resilience to ice accretion. This will reduce the risk of power cuts for 20,000 homes and businesses between 2017 and 2024. | 21.87 | 0.77 | 7.42 | 449 |
| | Protect 9 major substations and 200 local substations from flooding from 2017 to 2024. This will reduce the risk of power cuts caused by substation flooding for 53,000 homes and businesses. | 4.4 | 0.16 | 1.49 | 90 |
| | Cut tree back on a 20 year programme to reduce the likelihood of power cuts during the storms. Over 2017 – 2024 | 7.57 | 0.27 | 2.57 | 155 |
| Total | | 33.84 | 1.20 | 11.48 | 694 |

Option 2

| Service Improvement | How? | RP614 Cost (£m) | Domestic Customers | Small and Medium I & C Customers | Large I & C Customers |
|--|---|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Reduce the number of customers per year who are experiencing power cuts over 10 hours in duration by 25% | Upgrade 20% of the 11,000 volt network over a 20 year period to increase resilience. This will reduce the risk of power cuts for 15,000 homes and businesses between 2017 and 2024. | 14.09 | 0.5 | 4.78 | 289 |
| | Protect 9 major substations and 400 local substations from flooding from 2017 to 2024. This will reduce the risk of power cuts caused by substation flooding for 73,000 homes and businesses. | 7 | 0.25 | 2.38 | 144 |
| | Cut trees back on a 15 year programme to reduce the likelihood of power cuts during storms. Over 2017 – 2024, this will address 43% of the main network. | 11.36 | 0.40 | 3.85 | 233 |
| Total | | 32.45 | 1.15 | 11.01 | 666 |

Consultation questions:

- Do you agree that NIE Networks should increase investment in this area to improve the networks' resilience to severe weather?
- Which of the investment options do you support?

Key findings

Domestic customers

Domestic customers were asked to discuss whether they think NIE Networks should increase investment to improve resilience to severe weather. The general consensus was that this is an appropriate area for investment given the apparent increase, and predicted increase, in severe weather events.

"The way things are going, we need them to. The weather is going to get worse. Investment is worth it because if there is no electric due to snow or bad weather, even for a day, you are lost." (**Younger family, Derry/Londonderry**)



92% agreed NIE Networks should increase investment to improve network resilience to severe weather

A number of points were made in relation to the proposals. For some the timeframe of 15 to 20 years was considered to be too long, and they would prefer the investment to take effect much faster.


"I know this is talking about the future, but there are people who are vulnerable now, who are experiencing these issues now, but are having to wait 20 years. Then they are asking why - I paid for that." (**Knowledgeable, Belfast**)

"20 years is a long time." (**Younger family, Derry/Londonderry**)

Again, a small number of respondents felt that this is an issue that only impacts upon those in rural areas, and as such, those living in urban areas should not have to pay.

"If people lived in the Sperrin's, you get your investment, but I am sitting paying the same amount of money as you are." (**Knowledgeable, Belfast**)

Domestic customers were asked which of the investment options proposed by NIE Networks they support. Three quarters (74%) initially chose Option two. This was mainly due to the perception that flooding is becoming increasingly an issue and Option two provided the greater level of investment in this area.



76% of domestic customers chose Option two

However, during the in-depth discussion about the options, many participants changed their mind about the option they had chosen, saying that they would prefer a

combination of key areas for investment from both Option one and Option two to be put together to create a hybrid 'Option three'. Domestic customers reported that ice accretion from Option one and substation defence and cutting back trees from Option two should remain key areas for investment. That is they chose an even greater level of investment than that proposed in the options.

"Its £1.35 overall. It makes sense, what's an extra 30p?"
(Younger family, Derry/Londonderry)

A small number of domestic customers noted that the options for investment were not clear enough. They suggested that they would require a further break down of how their money would be spent before they would be willing to make a decision.

"I just don't think it's clear where they are spending the money. Where are the nine major substations? Is that money going specifically to those areas on the map that are circled? A bit more of focus would make it easier to judge."
(Knowledgeable, Belfast).

Non-domestic customers

All non-domestic customers interviewed believe that increasing resilience to severe weather is something that NIE Networks should focus on, with only a select few stating that they believe NIE Networks should have already been tackling this issue.

"We can't afford a generator. We only have a battery pack that lasts 30 minutes, so this can be a real issue for us."

"Yes they should invest. Definitely in the top three priorities for me."

The majority of respondents felt that a mixture of the two options would be the best way forward. They chose Option one because of the level of investment in ice accretion and Option two for the substation defence and tree cutting investments. The reason given for this included that it would protect more homes and businesses.

"Mix and match to get the most and the best service for customers."

"The more they do the better as long as we (the customers) see the benefit."

"Mix and match to get more for your money."

A small number of participants felt that Option two would be the better option because they are not affected by ice accretion, but they are more vulnerable to the impacts of trees falling on the lines. One respondent reported that they are not affected by any of these issues as their lines are underground, and therefore feel that they should not have to pay.

Stakeholders

76% agreed NIE Networks should increase investment to improve network resilience to severe weather

Stakeholders were asked to discuss whether they think NIE Networks should invest in resilience to severe weather. The general consensus was that NIE Networks should increase investment in this area, with 76% agreeing with the proposal. A further 14% were unsure about whether investment was needed in this area and 10% considered that there was no need for additional money to be spent in this area.

Again, some stakeholders felt that this was an issue that only impacted upon those in rural areas, and that NIE Networks should be concentrating on these areas. A

number spoke about the severe weather in Northern Ireland in recent years, recognising that increasing resilience to severe weather is something that needs to be addressed.

“Emergency planning is what I focus on for my organisation. Failure to maintain electricity can have a big impact”

However, some had an issue with NIE Networks asking the customers to pay for these investments, with a number of stakeholders stating that the associated costs should have been in NIE Networks original plan or in the ‘business as usual’ document.

“Now under our third increase in price, this cost should not be passed on to the customer. It should have been in the original plan.”

“I wouldn’t choose any of these options. I agree we need them but the customer shouldn’t pay.”

“Yes we should [increase resilience to severe weather], but it’s how it’s going to be funded is the issue.”

A small proportion felt that this work should already be being carried out and that the funding should be coming from the core budget - not the customers.

“These costings should be coming from the core that customers already pay into, so why should we be forced to pay more?”

Other stakeholders expressed the view that the money required to protect the network against severe weather should come from other places, for example, central government funding, NI Water (with regard to flooding issues), or through a multi-agency approach. Some stakeholders also suggested that tree cutting responsibilities should fall to the individual who owns the land on which the tree is located.

Of the few stakeholders who were willing to consider the potential investment options, one participant felt that Option two was the best choice as it was cheaper, while another reported that it would be a conducive to mix and match the choices to get the best fit for the customer

- but only if the customer is willing to pay. Others felt that they needed more information before being able to make a choice between the potential investment options, instead reporting that there was a lack of clarity and detail on how they money would be spent. Indeed, one stakeholder commented:

“There is a total lack of transparency – the load is being put onto people who don’t have a voice i.e. small businesses.”

1.7 Building a smarter network

NIE Proposal

NIE Networks' plans for 2017 – 2024 are to explore a range of technologies and approaches which potentially could be rolled out across the network in the future. One of the ways that they propose to do this is by carrying out a number of discrete network trials.

| Trial Name | Description | Customer Benefit | Category |
|--------------------------|---|---|------------------------------|
| A - Network Capacity | Install technologies to monitor both low voltage and high voltage networks and re-configure in real time to release more capacity to support renewable generation and reduce peak demands on the network. | Will help to facilitate the on-going connection of new technologies such as wind, demand side generator units, photo-voltaics, heat pumps and electric vehicle charge points. | Connecting Renewables |
| B - Active Fault Level | Investigate technologies that could potentially solve network fault level issues caused by increasing levels of renewable generation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the increased connection of renewable generation • Releases network capacity faster and at a much lower cost than traditional re-enforcement | |
| C – Battery Technology | Participate in collaborative research that will facilitate the connection of battery technologies used for energy storage. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the increased connection of renewable generation by releasing network capacity. • Provide valuable research on the connection of battery technology that will be applicable to domestic and commercial customers. | |
| D – Smart Fault Location | Investigate technologies that will help NIE Networks to locate faults faster. | Lead to faster restoration times during power cuts. | Getting the power back on |
| E – Condition Monitoring | Install more technologies that will help NIE Networks to manage substation assets such as transformers. | • Will optimise the life of existing network assets ensuring customers get full value for money. | Making your money go further |

Consultation questions:

- Do you agree that NIE Networks should invest in exploring new technologies and approaches that could be used to solve network problems and avoid costly reinforcements in the future?
- How many trials of this type of network do you think NIE Networks should carry out – 3 or 5?
- What are the top 2 projects from this list that you would like to see NIE deliver and why?
- Are there other trials that we should also be considering?

Key findings

Domestic customers

96% agreed NIE Networks should invest in exploring new technologies and approaches for the future

Domestic customers were asked their views on whether NIE Networks should be spending money on exploring new technologies to help to future proof the network. Overall, there was agreement that NIE Networks should be focusing investment in this area.

“Yes everything is changing. To keep up to date we need to invest.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“It’s struck me that the network assets are over 30, 40, and 50 years old, so it’s getting potentially towards its end of its life. Things are changing - technology is advancing at a greater rate, so it makes sense to look into that.” (Close to pylons, Belfast)

“I am stunned that there was no provision at all for renewable energies, or for electricity to be taken back in, or to be redistributed. I just think it’s crazy.” (Knowledgeable, Belfast)

When asked how many trials they thought NIE Networks should take forward, the most were in favour of the greatest level of investment proposed i.e. five trials.

72% chose 5 trials

“I chose five. You always have to look to the future, because as NIE improves, you save money in the long run.” (Young Family, Derry/Londonderry)

“I chose five trials - as long as they are accommodating something.” (Rural, Mixed)

There were a smaller number of domestic customers who felt that three trials would be the best choice.

“Overall I think there will be more important things. Is there money for it? Yes. But there are more important things.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“I said three. I thought B covers D and E anyway. You are repeating yourself in Trial D and Trial E.” (Critical care, Belfast)

“Yes I chose three trials because, it’s a lot less money than the five. If they did 3 they might realise ‘ok its fine’, rather than digging the other £5 million elsewhere.” (Future student, Belfast)

Some participants felt constrained in giving an opinion due to their lack of knowledge/expertise of the need for this type of investment. There was a consensus that NIE Networks should be making these decisions, as domestic customers do not have enough knowledge about the best way to build a smarter network.

“They should know how many options they would need to go for, because they did the planning work. They should know what is right, rather than asking me how many chances they should get before they would get it right.” (Close to pylons, Belfast)

“I agree that the trials needs to be done, but I don’t know how many trials should be done. There are five of those trials - does that mean that just try one each? If one doesn’t work then do you say ‘no it’s not for Northern Ireland’? Surely we should be looking at these things, and there will be locations specific to things like that. But it’s not for me to decide.” (Knowledgeable, Belfast).

Due to their lack of knowledge/expertise of the need for the investment areas, participants were unable to prioritise which type of trial should take place.

Non-domestic customers

Non-domestic customers agreed that NIE Networks should focus on building a smarter electricity network.

“There has and will be an increase in demand, so yes they definitely should.”

“It is bound to help in the long run throughout the network. Seems to be money well spent.”

Almost all non-domestic customers interviewed felt NIE Networks should take forward all five trials listed. The reasoning was if NIE trial all five they might find one or two that could be rolled out over the next regulatory period which would benefit all customers. Of the small portion who chose three trials, they reported that they did so because it was the least expensive option. The larger organisations, in particular, felt they were not getting value for money.

“All five trials would cost my organisation £86,000 for the larger sites only; that is far too expensive.”

The larger organisations also reported that they would not mind paying if it managed to reduce electricity bills in the longer term, and if it meant that NIE Networks would be more efficient.

When non-domestic customers were asked if there were any trials on the list that should not be taken forward, respondents agreed that all of the trials were important. They also could not think of any other potential trials to add to the list, deeming that NIE Networks had covered all important areas.

When respondents were asked their opinion on which options were most important, there were mixed reviews. Some felt renewables were most important while a couple of non-domestic customers reported that smart fault location was extremely important.

Non-domestic customers suggested that NIE Networks should be working with other groups, for example their equivalent in ROI, or applying for European funding to cut the cost for themselves. Respondents believed that this approach would result in more renewables being trialled in a more realistic timeframe.

Stakeholders



90% agreed NIE Networks should invest in exploring new technologies and approaches for the future

During the workshop, stakeholders were asked to provide their views on whether NIE Networks should spend money on exploring new technologies. The majority agreed that NIE Networks should focus on this as a strategic area for investment. Participants noted that it is extremely important to future proof the grid.

“There should always be new technologies and approaches. If you are going to buy into new technologies are you going to avoid future issues?”

There was a small proportion of participants who felt that Northern Ireland was too small and is in no position to be a trial area. Instead, stakeholders suggested that Northern Ireland should be “fast followers” by copying what other countries are doing.

Stakeholders were then given a list of potential investment options and costings for each to enable them to choose which smarter network areas they would like to see NIE Networks take forward. Again, a large proportion of stakeholders were keen to note that the customer should not be paying for these investments.

“There have been levies before, but again, it is the willingness to pay.”

“Again, why is the customer paying?”

A number of stakeholders reported that if they were to have to pay for these investments, the costings were considered to be too high for what they were getting in return. Stakeholders felt that there would not be a great improvement to the network for the amount of money

being spent. Others requested to know how they would save money over time if any of the trials were implemented.

A small proportion of stakeholders felt that only the customers who have interest in the trials should pay. For example, it was suggested that any customer interested in trials A-C, or any customers who are interested in connecting renewables should pay for the trials rather than to charge every customer. Stakeholders also mentioned that building a smarter network is being driven by the government and new policy. As such, NIE Networks should be entitled to help and funding to take these investments forward.

Most stakeholders were unsure which trials they would choose. A high proportion noted that they would require more information to decide as it is unclear which investment would benefit the customer the most.

“I need to see more of what the customer will save long term from incorporating these projects.”

“I agree that the two projects that should be priced are those that could benefit the customer most. I think project D and E should be chosen.”

When asked how many trials they thought NIE Networks should take forward, stakeholders reported that anything between two and five trials would be enough. However, it is worth noting that a high share of stakeholders would not be willing to pay for these investments. Some expressed the view that cost responsibility should fall to NIE Networks as it is their responsibility to future proof the network. One stakeholder noted that there is no budget for renewables, and should trials go ahead, customers will have to wait until 2024 for these to be rolled out and to absorb the benefits.

“We can’t afford to wait until 2024 for a roll-out of successful trials with the amount of new people coming onto the renewable energy network.”

1.8 Speeding up connections

NIE Network's proposal

Going forward, NIE Networks plan to:

Provide a faster and more efficient connections service.

- They are aiming to reduce their key process cycle times during 2016 by 20% for demand connections. This includes:
 - The average time taken to quote; and
 - The average time to provide a completed connection.

Enhance engagement with customers seeking a connection to the network.

- Work with customers to identify where processes can be improved and then quickly implement changes.
- Host quarterly workshops for connection customers to allow better understanding of the processes.

Facilitate a competitive market.

- Work closely with the Utility Regulator to ensure that we meet the agreed timescales for a fully contestable market.

Consultation question:

- What aspects of the new connections process would you most like NIE Networks to focus on?

Key findings

Domestic customers

Domestic customers were asked their views on connections and whether they had any experience with regard to this area. Across all focus groups, domestic customers felt that this section would be more appropriate for businesses rather than domestic customers and therefore the discussion was limited.

"This is isn't something that I would be interested in." (Critical care, Belfast)

"I would say it's more for business customers." (Close to pylons, Belfast)

"I have no experience with regards to connections." (Older family, Derry/Londonderry)

Non-domestic customers

Non-domestic customers agreed that NIE Networks needs to focus their attention and investment on speeding up connections to the network. Some noted that the NIE Networks proposal was 'a bit late' and others said they would like to see the proposal in action as the connections process can be frustrating.

Non-domestic customers who have applied for an electricity connection agreed that the application process is lengthy, costly and frustrating. The majority also felt that NIE Networks could do more around improving connection. Suggestions for doing more included:

“They need to be totally honest with customers - e.g. give them a realistic time frame for their application, instead of continuously telling them ‘18 days’.”

“The application process is very complicated. You go through the whole process and are refused anyway. It needs something at the start of the process where you could email or chat to someone who has knowledge about connections or who could advise you of your chances. Even a questionnaire that allows you to make sure you have everything for your connection application, if you can get a connection or not and how long you will need to wait would be useful. This would cut the number of applications dramatically - saving time and frustration for customers.”

Stakeholders

Stakeholders were asked what they would most like NIE Networks to focus on in relation to speeding up connections. The main points raised included better communication and speeding up the time taken for a connection.

“If I was setting up a business I would want to go to one person and they should sort everything, including paperwork.”

“It’s not just the connection – it’s the complex advice.”

“Provide a faster and more efficient connection service.”

The cost of connecting to the network, and the issues with not having a competitive market, were also considered to be key factors for consideration amongst the stakeholders.

“I don’t want to question the quote in case it will take even longer to get a connection.”

“NIE Networks can do whatever speed or cost they want because they have no competition, this is needed.”

When stakeholders were asked what could be done to improve the service, stakeholders agreed that a simple online application process would be beneficial.

1.9 Willingness to pay and investment areas not included

In this section we highlight the views that were expressed in relation to the overall cost to customers of the investment options. It should be noted that those who took part in this phase of the research were presented with the overall costs in relation to each of the proposed investment options, and the maximum amount per year that various types of customer would have to pay based on the highest levels of investment proposed.

We also explore the options that NIE Networks is no longer considering due to a lack of support for investment highlighted by the previous phases of research. These options were:

- Investments to underground overhead lines in areas of outstanding natural beauty.
- Investments to underground overhead lines in urban areas.
- Investments to resolve bird fouling issues.

Key findings

Domestic customers

Most domestic customers expressed the view that they were willing to pay an extra £3 per year for the highest level of investment. They felt that an extra £3 a year is a reasonable amount to pay, and acknowledged that in determining this figure NIE Networks had taken heed of the findings from the quantitative Phase two research.

“To pay over a year, I don’t think it’s that much.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“You have gathered enough information about it with regard to the price. If NIE Networks are coming back saying a lower rate, knowing that when it comes to families they can deal with it, I think it’s pretty reasonable.” (Young family, Derry/Londonderry)

“You wouldn’t really see it if you spread the cost.” (Older family, Craigavon)

However, a small number of domestic customers from rural areas initially protested about any increase to their electricity bill, stating that they could not afford it. One participant expressed a view that NIE Networks should carry out all of the work suggested at their own expense, rather than at the expense of the domestic customers.

“I don’t think customers should be paying anything at all. These big companies making multi-million pounds every year. They should be dipping into their profits to provide better service to the customers. It isn’t really fair, because here you have small businesses. We are struggling - this is a small community.”
(Rural, Ballycastle)

“A lot of people struggle with the energy costs as it is. So anything at all which makes it higher, it’s going to put people under strain. It does not match wages, so it’s harder for people.” (Rural, Ballycastle)

Some domestic customers felt that pitching an extra £3 a year was too low, and articulated their suggestion that NIE Networks should pitch an extra £5 a year, based on the Phase two survey findings for low income households.

“I was quite surprised by that I have to say, surprised that it’s as little as that. I know you have a lot of people to please, but it’s too low.” (Knowledgeable, Belfast)

“I think they could have went for £5, then reduce the amount over the years over to do everything. I think even £5 or £6.” (Future student, Belfast)

Domestic customers were asked their views on the areas not included in the document, such as investments to underground lines in urban/areas of natural beauty, and investments to resolve bird fouling. Overall, domestic customers agreed that these areas should not be included due to the cost. Some expressed the view that these types of investments are the responsibility of other organisations rather than NIE Networks.

“Businesses ought to prioritise. The cost of undergrounding is far too expensive.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“I remember in the last group that I was in, the group said that funding should come from the government if it’s an area of outstanding natural beauty. It should not come at a cost to the customer and NIE Networks.” (Knowledgeable, Belfast)

“The underground cabling was at a very high cost for very little coverage.” (Close to pylons, Belfast)

“I would rather money went into things other than undergrounding cables.” (Older family, Craigavon)

“You would be knocking people off their jobs who fix the overhead cables. I would say leave it as it is.” (Rural, Ballycastle)

Of the small number of domestic customers who expressed the view that underground lines should be included in the plan, many felt that there would be secondary benefits such as a reduction in the impact of extreme weather.

“I did want the underground cable because there were so many problems with the trees and everything. When overhead, if there was a fault in the line you wouldn’t know where it was, whereas the underground seems to solve quite a lot of problems. The main problems are in areas in the country, we could focus there.” (Future student, Belfast)

“I was all for underground cabling. You wouldn’t get anything to do with severe weather bringing cables down and you wouldn’t have power poles falling down. It would avoid all knock on effects if you have underground cables - it’s going to be beneficial, even if there is a high cost. There is technology for underground cables. So it can be easily done.”
(Rural, Ballycastle).

Non-domestic customers

Non-domestic customers reported that they were happy with what NIE Networks were choosing not to take forward. Although it is worth noting that one respondent felt that NIE Networks should be undergrounding new lines or replacement lines as they go along. Another respondent felt that all three options (undergrounding overhead lines in areas of outstanding natural beauty, undergrounding overhead lines in urban areas and resolving bird fouling issues) should be taken forward.

Non-domestic customers were confident that there was nothing else NIE Networks should be doing, or could do, to improve their proposals for regulatory period 6. They were reassured that NIE Networks had listened to their views. However, they again stressed that NIE Networks could do more to improve customer service. Ideas included better communication, being honest and more transparent with customers, and access to timely information throughout severe weather conditions and throughout the connections process. Some also highlighted the need for a designated contact person within NIE Networks for larger organisations to contact for day-to-day situations, and also to put in place a critical care list for emergency organisations to include charities or other services where an electricity fault could be detrimental to their organisation and their clients/customers.

Overall, there was some level of willingness to pay across non-domestic customers, with the most favourable options often being the more expensive options given that these would ‘help more people’ or that ‘more customers would see the benefit’. However, there were a number of concerns with regard to the costs for large organisations. A number of non-domestic customers, including those representing small-medium sized organisations, felt large organisations were potentially going to be charged a disproportionate fee.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders were asked if they were happy with the three options not being taken forward in RP6. A high proportion of stakeholders agreed with this approach, with the exception of one respondent who suggested that while cabling and bird fouling should be excluded, smart meter reading should have been included. Similarly, another stakeholder suggested that contributions of electrification in carbon economy should be taken into consideration. Another participant noted that NIE Networks should be focusing some of their attention on companies responsible for generation to ensure they have a suitable working relationship with them, and also to ensure a reasonable level of attention on demand generation is provided.

Although there was not a specific discussion on willingness to pay for investment options, a number of stakeholders made their opinions clear that the customer should not have to pay

anymore for electricity believing that NIE Networks should carry out these investments at their own expense.

1.10 Feedback from the online survey

In addition to the qualitative programme of research, NIE Networks published the 'Have your say' document on their website, along with the research reports and a feedback form to collect the views of customers who wanted to respond. There were seven responses in total, with most of views echoing what had already been discovered through the stakeholder workshop, focus groups with domestic customers and depth interviews with non-domestic customers. However, there were a few comments about improving customer service, building a smarter network and speeding up connections that had not been mentioned before.

One of those who completed the online survey felt that NIE Networks should on improving customer service for those seeking to connect small scale renewables to the grid. They also stated that if there was work being carried out on the lines, NIE Networks should communicate with those who own the land as they have local knowledge of where lines are and how long they have been there. This could speed up the repairs but also allow locals to feel involved and educated about the work of NIE Networks and how faults are repaired.

“Educate the customers on how it all works and how it is repaired so they know what they can do to help with the repair efforts so they don’t feel excluded from the utilities they pay for.” **Feedback form public sector customer or representative**

Other customers echoed what had been stated previously in the research; that NIE Networks needs to involve and keep the public up to date with what is happening throughout a power cut.

“An update online would help; just a list of outages and estimated time of repair.”
(Anonymous)

“More electronic updates on twitter, Facebook and NIE Networks website.” **(Anonymous)**

One response noted that NIE Networks should do more with regard to building a smarter network.

“NIE Networks need to make sure any work on building a smarter network does not duplicate that of Project 40.”

“NIE Networks and SONI need to work together on strengthening the transmission network”

It was also suggested that NIE Networks should consider two scales of storage; utility scale and on-farm size. Similarly, they would appreciate consideration for micro-grids if small scale renewables are to have a future. They suggested that trialling of integrated renewable energy storage to small scale generators should be given priority. Another customer felt NIE Networks should be active in the wind energy sector by installing wind generation at all their

large transmission substations – ultimately helping to increase wind generation and meet the green target generation.