



Key findings report
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
WORKSHOPS

Report prepared for NIE Networks

December 2019



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Key insights: an executive summary

Background

Northern Ireland Electricity Networks (NIE Networks) commissioned Perceptive Insight, an independent market research agency, to undertake a programme of research designed to ascertain the views and perceptions of NIE Networks' customers and stakeholders. This report presents the findings from the stakeholder engagement workshops.

Overview of the research programme

The diagram below provides an overview of the research programme:



PLANNING AND DESIGN

- **Planning meeting**
 - Discuss scope of research
 - Agree timetable
 - Agree reporting outputs
- **Concise literature review**
 - Review secondary reports / supporting documents
 - Compile a short report on best practice in stakeholder engagement



PHASE 1

Phase 1: Identify priorities for key stakeholders and customers

- 2 engagement workshops with key stakeholders



PHASE 2

- **Bi-annual interviews with domestic customers**
 - 500 face-to-face interviews
- **Bi-annual interviews with business customers**
 - 200 telephone interviews

Approach to stakeholder engagement

Forums with key stakeholders

Two stakeholder workshops were hosted, aimed at gathering feedback from NIE Networks' stakeholders. These workshops were held in Belfast and Derry~Londonderry on the 14th November and 19th November (2019).

Perceptive Insight worked in partnership with the NIE Networks' project team to define the delegates to be invited to the workshops. A total of approximately 150¹ stakeholders were invited to participate.

NIE Networks' key role on the day was to primarily listen to the views of stakeholders, as well as provide information and clarification to any questions posed, and to network with stakeholders who were interested in future engagement. A full agenda is detailed in the main report.

The workshop, which was made up of various presentations throughout the day from senior management within NIE Networks and Perceptive Insight, Q&A sessions, open discussions, electronic voting and breakout sessions, meant that the format was interactive, collaborative and inclusive.

Perceptive Insight's role within the workshops was to independently facilitate this dialogue, capture the data and follow up with a report highlighting the key findings. The workshop provided a space whereby stakeholders could directly feed into and shape the engagement process. Every effort was made to record the feedback given. To encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals. Instead, notes have been made of the type of organisation that each stakeholder represents.

A total of 81 stakeholders were in attendance across both workshops (55 external stakeholders). A list of the organisations who attended the workshops is detailed in the main report.

Setting the context

Paul Stapleton, Managing Director, NIE Networks delivered a presentation entitled 'Where are we now?'. This presentation provided context to the audience in terms of NIE Networks' investment plans (2017-2024), their priority areas and an overview of the electricity market.

Key questions put forward to NIE Networks

The presentation was followed by a Q&A session, where workshop attendees had an opportunity to ask questions. This allowed NIE Networks to uncover top of mind issues, priorities, and experiences that were pertinent to stakeholders. An overview of the questions asked by stakeholders to NIE Networks have been themed into key areas of interest and are summarised below:

- Low carbon future and innovation;
- Customer service;
- Network reliability and resilience; and
- Promoting inclusiveness.

Feedback from stakeholders demonstrated that this was a valued element of the day, with access to NIE Networks' Managing Director and opportunities to link in with senior management about their particular issues and priorities. Likewise, it was extremely useful for NIE Networks to listen to stakeholders' views, experiences, and issues.

¹ While Perceptive Insight sent out the majority of invitations, NIE Networks sent out approximately 20 further invitations

Engaging with stakeholders

Developing a stakeholder engagement plan

The second session of each event was dedicated to discussion and exploration about the most effective way to develop a stakeholder engagement plan. This session was facilitated by Maureen Treacy, Director of Perceptive Insight Market Research. The session incorporated a presentation, with electronic polls and open discussions from the floor. The prominent themes voiced by stakeholders are outlined below:

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholders were firstly asked to record which customer or stakeholder group they were mainly representing at the workshop. External stakeholders attended from a variety of backgrounds including business representatives (16%), developers/planners (12%), policy/economy/regulator (12%), innovators/academia (10%), local councils (10%), domestic customers (10%), Generators/Supplier (7%) and the environment (6%).

What stakeholder groups are missing?

A range of stakeholders were invited to participate in the workshops across a wide range of sectors. Stakeholders were asked to reflect on the stakeholders in attendance and comment on any gaps they saw in relation to stakeholder representation. The word cloud below visually depicts stakeholder responses submitted through an electronic vote; asking 'is there anyone else that should be here that isn't represented today?'



In particular key groups to consider for further workshops include; young people, political representatives and additional representatives from the community.

Issues to collaborate on

Stakeholders were asked to reflect on their current issues and needs. There was a large focus on the future and the steps needed to achieve low carbon solutions, whilst acknowledging the issues that this might create for low income and vulnerable groups.

The following word cloud illustrates the key issues.



Format and level of engagement

A key aspect of this session was to explore the level of interest in the various forms of engagement and consultation. Positively, most stakeholders expressed interest and willingness to engage with NIE Networks on their ongoing engagement process. There was an appetite for further workshops, with stakeholders seeing the value in collaboratively working in partnership with NIE Networks and other key representatives. Although stakeholders were of the view that a range of engagement methods should be used, it was widely felt that face-to-face engagement is best overall, given the potential to network on particular areas of interest. It was suggested that there should be future workshops of this nature and the addition of smaller more focused, topical groups would also be beneficial moving forward.

Following up the consultation process

Stakeholders were asked their preferences about how they would like to be communicated with after the workshop. The feedback highlighted that there was a need to have various channels for providing information and to encourage information back from stakeholders. This could include a mix of email updates, stakeholder or information sessions and more informal meetings on an ad hoc basis.

Breakout sessions

The following breakout sessions were conducted with stakeholders:

- Customer service approach;
- Enabling developments/connections; and
- A low carbon future.

A summary of the key findings from each breakout session is reported below:

Customer service approach

- Quality customer service is typically characterised by effective communication, clarity for the customer, prominent brand identity and innovation;
- Brand awareness for NIE Networks should be a key focus in investment priorities;
- Big changes ahead indicates that consumers require education, support, and engagement during the transition;
- NIE Networks should continue to invest in a multi-channel approach to ensure customer satisfaction is maintained at all stages of the customer journey;
- NIE Networks has a role in supporting vulnerable customers;
- Community groups with an understanding of grassroots issues should be involved early in the engagement process; and
- There is a need for policy changes with a robust approach and a well-researched model/plan for everyone to work towards.

Enabling development/connections

- Customer service within connections has improved but the customer experience could be enhanced further;
- When looking ahead, it is difficult to plan for new connections;
- Whilst stakeholders are thinking about the future, some are experiencing a lack of support and a high level of risk in implementing innovative technologies;
- It was agreed that cross-collaboration and communication across different sector representatives is essential for stepping forward; and
- Various councils are at different stages of the planning process and therefore NIE Networks needs to build on the progress already made and formalise plans.

Low carbon future

- Affordability for vulnerable customers is a key consideration as there is a social dimension to the transition to a low carbon future;
- The current ownership model in Northern Ireland is problematic and may inhibit progress;
- There is opportunity for education and confidence building amongst consumers to create 'buy-in' to new low carbon solutions;
- A roadmap for the transition is necessary and collaboration is key to achieving this;
- Governance arrangements are creating a blockage to innovation. There is a need to create a favourable regulatory environment and to carve out a proactive role for NIE Networks in the transition to a low carbon future;
- There are concerns about reaching scale to meet government targets; and
- A review of building regulation is needed. This should focus on customer driven solutions and long-term sustainability.

Areas for consideration

The following summarises potential action points for NIE Networks to consider in further stakeholder consultations:



SETTING THE CONTEXT

- Emulating the Q&A format in future consultations would be welcomed by stakeholders and encourage attendance, given the value placed in opportunity to engage with the Managing Director of NIE Networks.
- It may be worth reviewing all questions submitted across the day to ensure a response has been provided. Whilst the majority were answered on the day, there were others submitted through the online platform, that weren't immediately addressed. A list of these questions has been submitted to the project team.
- Given how well the session with the Managing Director of NIE Networks was received, consideration should be given to alternative touchpoints and networking opportunities.
- There is an opportunity to build on NIE Networks' proactive image (relative to other utilities) and to position the company at the forefront of innovation for stakeholder engagement.



ENGAGING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

- It is recommended that NIE Networks should host similar stakeholder workshops in the future, as the format was well received by attendees.
- Using the database compiled for the workshops, there is opportunity to leverage interest from an e-mailing list to ensure continuous engagement, at an informative level.
- Build on the current database of engaged stakeholders and ensure the perceived gaps are filled.
 - For example, in ensuring a just transition and protecting vulnerable customers, it is important to make sure all consumer voices are heard. This message was a prominent theme throughout both workshops.
 - In addition, ensure communities are consulted with, that their 'buy-in' is gained, and their voices and issues are heard.
 - There is opportunity to engage with young people and ensure they are represented in future consultations.
- It would be worth taking into consideration other formats of engagement, for example, smaller, more focused, sessions. To help deliver this, it may be beneficial to categorise stakeholders within the database, with their area of specialism and/or level of interest.
- In addition to what NIE Networks has committed to in terms of stakeholder engagement (i.e. customer surveys and annual workshops), consideration should be given to how NIE Networks can tap into other touchpoints, to ensure engagement is ongoing and relevant. For example, is there scope in sending out mini surveys/online polls to stakeholders? A timeline for this engagement should also be considered. For example, quarterly online polls.
- There is recognition that there are different types of stakeholder groups to consult with. Attention should be given to aligning the engagement formats with different types of people. Thought should be given to how stakeholders and different customer groups prefer to be engaged with.
- Provide a range of channels of communication when following up stakeholder engagements. For example, there is wide appeal for an infographic summary and visibility of information on NIE Networks' website.
- Build on the engagement work with the councils and formalise that process so it is more integrated and universal across the various councils.



BREAKOUT SESSIONS

- These sessions were well received and encouraged deliberation and thoughtful debate. Therefore, consider using a similar approach in future engagement forums.



CUSTOMER SERVICE APPROACH

- Continue to invest in a multi-channel approach to ensure customer satisfaction is maintained at all stages of the customer journey for every customer type, and ensure that these methods keep pace with technological developments.
- Monitor usage to provide an understanding of what formats resonate with different customer profiles.
- Consideration should be given to awareness raising in terms of informing customers of the various contact points within NIE Networks, to further enhance the customer experience.



ENABLING DEVELOPMENT/CONNECTIONS

- Consideration should be given to addressing the communication issues some developers are having and the disconnect at site level, in comparison to customer experience received from account managers.
- Leverage the willingness of stakeholders to meet and collaborate on issues around connections, to look for ways to enable stakeholders to more effectively plan ahead and further enhance the customer experience.
- Given all councils are at varying stages of the planning process, consideration should be given to ensuring councils have equal opportunity to engage with NIE Networks and to be consulted.



LOW CARBON FUTURE

- There is potential to host ongoing engagements around a low carbon future and collaborate with stakeholders in this area.
- As this area of discussion is so topical and far-reaching, consider hosting smaller more focused sessions.

Introduction & background

Research background

Northern Ireland Electricity Networks (NIE Networks) has commissioned Perceptive Insight, an independent market research agency, to undertake a programme of research designed to ascertain the views and perceptions of NIE Networks' customers and stakeholders.

The project is being conducted by NIE Networks in partnership with the Consumer Council, the Utility Regulator and the Department for the Economy. Representatives from these organisations form the Consumer Engagement Advisory Panel (CEAP). This joint panel will provide advice and guidance throughout the research process.

This report presents the findings from the stakeholder engagement phase of the study.

Overview of the research programme

The diagram below provides an overview of the research programme:



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Phase 1: Identify priorities for key stakeholders and customers

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PHASE 2

- **Bi-annual interviews with domestic customers**
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- **Bi-annual interviews with business customers**
 - 200 telephone interviews

The findings presented in this report will be used to facilitate NIE Networks to determine from its stakeholders what their priorities are for future investment programmes and developments. It will also allow NIE Networks to understand the optimum format for engaging with stakeholders moving forward.

The full presentation used in the workshops can be found at NIE Networks' website, available at <https://www.nienetworks.co.uk/futureplanning>.

In the sections that follow we provide detail on:

- Our approach to meeting the terms of reference for phase 1 of the study;
- Setting the context from NIE Networks' perspective;
- Presenting the key findings from the stakeholder engagement phase of the research; and
- Setting out areas for consideration for NIE Networks.

Approach & attendees

The main objective of this strand of the research was to qualitatively explore and identify priorities for key stakeholders and customers and to determine their preparedness for engagement in the future. To uncover these insights, two stakeholder workshops were hosted at the following venues:

- The Playhouse, Derry~Londonderry (Thursday 14th November 2019)
- Clifton House, Belfast (Tuesday 19th November 2019)

These workshops marked the beginning of what is intended to be an ongoing engagement process in the years to come.

Recruitment of stakeholders

Perceptive Insight worked in partnership with the NIE Networks' project team to define the delegates to be invited to the workshops. These included:

- Business representative groups (Chamber of Commerce, FSB, CBI, NFU, Manufacturing NI, NIIRTA, NIHF, CEF, etc.);
- Domestic consumer/vulnerable consumer representative groups (Age NI, Gingerbread, Disability Action, CAB, Advice NI, Rural Community Network etc.);
- Public administration (Health, Education, Local Councils, Government Departments etc.);
- Emergency planners (PSNI, NIFRS, NI Ambulance Service, NI Water, Transport NI etc.)
- Planners (Inst of Civil Engineers, Building Control, Architects, Town Planners);
- Environmental groups (NI Environment Link, Friends of the Earth); and
- Future customers (students in relevant disciplines).

A total of approximately 150 stakeholders were invited to the workshops. All invitees were sent an electronic invite by Perceptive Insight and signed off by Paul Stapleton, Managing Director of NIE Networks. Perceptive Insight took responsibility for sending out reminder emails and telephone calls leading up to the event and the overall organisation of both events.

Format of the workshops

The workshops incorporated best practice for encouraging deliberation across the groups. To inform this process, Perceptive Insight undertook a short literature review to determine effective techniques for engaging with different key stakeholder groups. Based on these learnings, and before undertaking the workshops, Perceptive Insight developed an agenda in conjunction with NIE Networks for the discussions along with associated stimulus materials. Each workshop lasted for approximately four hours and incorporated various presentations from senior management within NIE Networks and Perceptive Insight, Q&A sessions, open discussions, electronic voting and breakout sessions where attendees had the opportunity to share their views and collaborate on key discussion points.

The generic agenda for each of the workshop events is outlined below:

Registration, tea/coffee

Welcome & introduction

- Edel Creery, Head of Communications and Stakeholder Engagement, NIE Networks
- Maureen Treacy, Managing Director, Perceptive Insight

Where are we now?

- Paul Stapleton, Managing Director, NIE Networks
- Followed by Q&A session

Engaging with stakeholders – what does this look like?

- Maureen Treacy, Managing Director, Perceptive Insight

Morning coffee break

Looking ahead

- Senior management, NIE Networks

Breakout sessions

- Customer service approach
- Enabling development / connections
- Low carbon future

Lunch & close

Note: the Belfast workshop included a historical presentation delivered by Clifton House, which was not provided at the Derry~Londonderry workshop.

Moderation of the forums

Perceptive Insight's role within the workshops was to independently facilitate this dialogue, capture the data, and follow up with a report highlighting the key findings. NIE Networks' role at the events was to listen to the views of customers, provide information, and where appropriate, answer any questions stakeholders had in relation to NIE Networks' current and future strategy.

Every effort was made to record the feedback given. In order to encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals. Instead, notes have been made of the type of organisation that each stakeholder represents.

Online real-time polling software was used as the interactive tool for the workshops which allowed live polls, interactions from the audience and an ongoing opportunity to submit questions throughout the day. The data from this software has been incorporated into this report.

Attendance

A total of 81 stakeholders were in attendance across both workshops. This includes:

- 35 stakeholders who attended the Derry~Londonderry workshop, comprising of 19 external stakeholders and 6 internal stakeholders; and
- 46 stakeholders who attended the Belfast workshop, comprising of 36 external stakeholders and 10 internal stakeholders.

The representatives from NIE Networks who attended the workshops were there to provide further information, expertise and to answer questions for customers who attended. This included three executive directors and one board member.

The organisations represented across both workshops are shown below:

<p>Developers / Planners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Windsor Developments Strategic Investment Board NIHE Apex Choice Housing Ireland Taggart Homes Lagan Homes Translink Warrenpoint Harbour Authority SWS JV N & R Devine 	<p>Policy / Economy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dept. for the Economy District Councils Utility Regulator Consumer Council 	<p>Generators / suppliers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phoenix Gas Electric Ireland Budget Energy NI Power NI Go Power Energy
<p>Domestic customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advice NI National Energy Action NI NICVA 	<p>Business customers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manufacturing NI Ulster Farmers Union Institute of Directors Centre for Competitiveness 	<p>Educators / Innovators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Queen's University Belfast Ulster University CASE Power On Technologies
<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ulster Wildlife RSPB NI NIEL 	<p>Employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NIE Networks 	<p>Emergency planners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NI Water Red Cross

In the sections that follow we identify the key messages from each workshop, based on the following structure:

- Setting the context;
- Engaging with stakeholders;
- Breakout sessions:
 - Customer service approach;
 - Enabling development / connections;
 - Low carbon future;
- Areas for consideration; and
- Workshop feedback.

Setting the context

Paul Stapleton, Managing Director, NIE Networks delivered a presentation entitled 'Where are we now?'. This presentation provided context to the audience in terms of NIE Networks' investment plans (2017-2024), their priority areas and an overview of the electricity market. More specifically, the presentation communicated the following:

- Their focus on safety;
- Reducing power cut targets;
- Response to storms;
- Major projects;
- Renewables; and
- Driving efficiency in their business and next steps.

Key questions put forward to NIE Networks

The presentation was followed by a Q&A session, where workshop attendees had an opportunity to ask questions. This allowed NIE Networks to uncover top of mind issues, priorities, and experiences that were pertinent to stakeholders in both regions. An overview of questions asked by stakeholders to NIE Networks have been themed into key areas of interest and are summarised below:

Low carbon future and innovations

- How is NIE Networks planning to finance the use of smart network technologies/smart metering? [Derry~Londonderry]
- How does NIE Networks plan to prepare the cable network for new housing and developments to ensure that future use of Electric vehicles (EV), electrification of heating does not necessitate the digging up of cabling? [Derry~Londonderry]
- A lot of renewable energy is lost with an inability to store power. Is NIE Networks undertaking any actions in this area? [Belfast]
- How is NIE Networks planning to deal with increases in future network demand in the Strabane/Letterkenny line? [Derry~Londonderry]
- The point was made that Government issues needs to change and NIE Networks needs to push and promote in terms of networks in the future energy system. [Belfast]
- Is the development of metering technologies i.e. smart in residential markets, part of future investment planning? [Belfast]
- As we electrify heat, how do we limit the winter peak? [Belfast]

- How are you dealing with the transition to EVs and how cognisant are you of developments in alternative sources, e.g. hydrogen? [Belfast]
- Would a nationalised or semi-state network be better able to handle the climate change challenges ahead? [Belfast]
- What supports can be given to communities to enable their participation in energy transition & minimize conflicts around the location of large wind farms? [Belfast]
- The motor industry needs to be involved to get an idea of the projected increase in demand for electric vehicles. [Derry~Londonderry]
- Housing Associations have to install electric heating and EV charging stations in new developments without existing network capacity to use them – is there acknowledgement/ awareness of this by NIE Networks. There has been a stop-start process in the trialling of batteries due to poor communication from NIE Networks. [Derry~Londonderry]
- The point was made that there appears to be technical issues around the use of domestic batteries in NI but there is no problem across the border. A private contractor has had to work closely with NIE Networks on this to bring it close to fruition. [Derry~Londonderry]

Customer service approach

- The contact point that the organisation had with NIE Networks left with only an email to inform them. The organisation was not told who the replacement would be. Can this be resolved? [Derry~Londonderry]
- Is there a process for electricity suppliers and others to engage with NIE Networks on innovative projects focused on customer solutions? [Belfast]

Network reliability and resilience

- What will the outcomes be of the ongoing assessment of the network (Coolkeeragh/Magherafelt line) for areas of high demand in the North West? [Derry~Londonderry]
- Is the North-South Interconnector still a priority? [Belfast]

Promoting inclusiveness

- How can we actively involve communities? [Belfast]
- Will community planning at local government level be at the core of dialogue around planning and expansion of generation? [Belfast]



REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The Derry~Londonderry workshop generated a lot of spontaneous discussions around the future of energy, which carried forward to the breakout sessions later in the day. Whilst the future was topical in Belfast, significant emphasis was also placed on the *'bread and butter'* services delivered by NIE Networks.

Engaging with stakeholders

Developing a stakeholder engagement plan

NIE Networks has committed to engaging with stakeholders on an ongoing basis. The main reason for this is so that they can continually improve their service delivery for their customers. The stakeholder workshops marked the start of an on-going process of engagement and provided stakeholders with an opportunity to shape how that engagement might look in the future.

A session within each event was dedicated to discussion and exploration of the most effective way to develop a stakeholder engagement plan. This session was facilitated by Maureen Treacy, Director of Perceptive Insight Market Research. The session incorporated a presentation, with electronic polls and open discussions from the floor. The main objectives were to:

- Understand who should be involved in the stakeholder engagement process;
- Explore the issues experienced by stakeholders;
- Identify the optimum format and level of engagement for stakeholders; and
- Uncover the most effective approach to follow up communication.



**Stakeholder
mapping**



**Issues to
collaborate on**



**Format and level
of engagement**



**Follow up
communication**

This section outlines prominent themes voiced by stakeholders throughout the session.

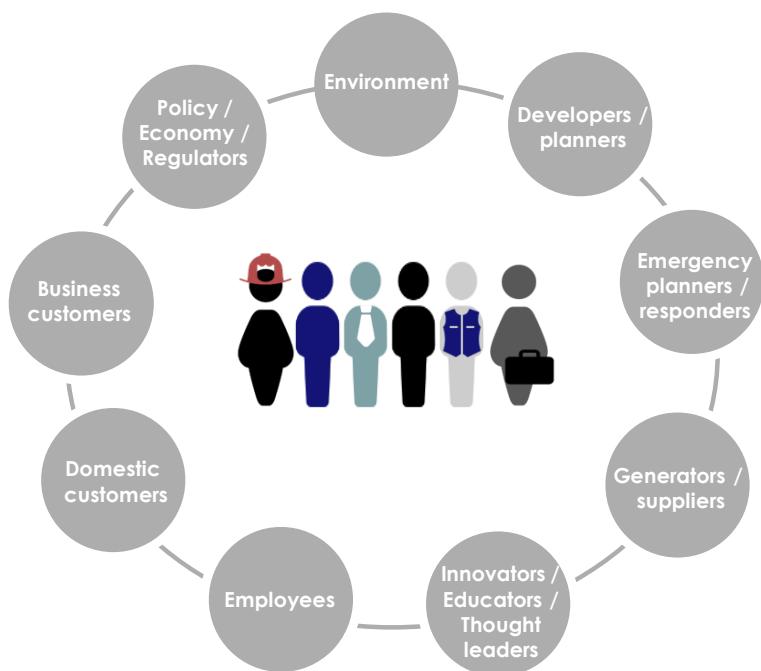
Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholders were firstly asked to record which customer or stakeholder group they were mainly representing at the workshop. External stakeholders attended from a variety of backgrounds. The audiences were made up of 16% business customers, 12% developers/planners and 12% policy/economy/regulator. Innovators/Academia, local councils, and domestic customers were represented by 10% each whilst smaller proportions represented generators/suppliers (7%), and the environment (6%).

Figure 1.1: Electronic results for stakeholder representation



For an effective stakeholder engagement plan, it is crucial to begin with a mapping process to ensure all stakeholders are given an opportunity to be represented and ensure balance. Stakeholders present at the workshop were asked to comment on the following:



- What types of stakeholders should be involved in the consultation?
- Is there anyone else that should be here that isn't represented today?
- What is the best way for NIE Networks to categorise the various types of stakeholders?

What stakeholder groups are missing?

A range of stakeholders were invited to participate in the workshops across a wide range of sectors. Stakeholders were asked to reflect on the list of stakeholders in attendance and comment on what gaps there were in relation to stakeholder representation.

The word cloud below visually depicts stakeholder responses submitted through an electronic vote; asking 'is there anyone else that should be here that isn't represented today?'



There were several suggestions of other stakeholder groups that NIE Networks should seek to engage with. The key findings are summarised below:

- Across both workshops, elected political representatives were mentioned as a gap in attendance.

- A key theme voiced, particularly in the Belfast workshop was the need to ensure local community groups are represented to act as 'lay experts'.
- There was a suggestion put forward that there should be wider government representation e.g. Department of Finance and Department for Communities as they both have a role to play in energy provision.

Other groups that were thought to be under-represented in the workshop attendance included:

- Motor industry/car manufacturers;
- Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) as the overall representative body for housing associations;
- Health sector;
- Investment communities;
- Young people;
- Vulnerable groups;
- Translink;
- Education sector;
- Renewable sector; and
- Invest NI.

How can NIE Networks categorise the stakeholders?

Attendees were asked to comment on how NIE Networks should categorise the various types of stakeholders. It was mentioned that because of the overlapping of roles and the 'different hats' that stakeholders wear, NIE Networks should be mindful of this when categorising organisations into groups.

"Manufacturers are also power generators and planners. How do we frame the conversation, so we are not putting organisations in boxes?" [Derry~Londonderry]

Ensuring balance

In ensuring a just transition to a low carbon future and in order to protect the vulnerable, it was regarded as important to make sure all consumer voices are heard. This message was a prominent theme throughout both workshops. Furthermore, involving communities in consultations was highlighted as a priority to ensure their voices and issues are heard.

Issues to collaborate on

Stakeholders were asked to reflect on their current issues and needs in relation to electricity networks, as well as thinking about how these needs may change in the future. This part of the discussion identified which topics and areas stakeholders and NIE Networks can best collaborate on. Given this was an early stage of stakeholder engagement, and the focus of the workshops was mainly to listen to stakeholders and capture their views, findings also provided a useful starting point for NIE Networks to begin to think about how they should prioritise these varying issues.

The following word cloud illustrates key issues that were voiced by stakeholders across both workshops:



The future of the energy market and the transition to a low carbon future featured heavily across both groups of stakeholders. Within this broad topic of discussion, governance was a perceived barrier in moving towards a low carbon future in the context of innovation, trialling new technologies, decision making and providing a clear road map for businesses in Northern Ireland. Also discussed within the theme of a low carbon future was affordability and cost to the consumer, in particular vulnerable customers. Feedback also suggested an education piece is needed in order to reach low carbon targets. Collaboration came through strongly as a top of mind issue and/or priority for stakeholders across both workshops.

“Digitalisation is a key enabler in changing energy. We are the perfect system to demonstrate that. We are 20 years ahead of GB in terms of various renewables, but we haven’t got policy or revenue frameworks to leverage or unleash the value that smart technologies have. That is the biggest piece that is missing. Governance issues around this needs to change urgently. This is something NIE Networks should be pushing and promoting.” [Belfast]

“One of the key issues is how do we actively involve communities...in different ways. In policy decisions, planning decisions, it is really important to not exclude communities around that. What are their issues and how can we actively involve them?” [Belfast]

“International Energy Agency has reported an overall reduction in energy efficiency worldwide. There needs to be coordination/ clarity in terms of connection to the smart grid to meet 2050 targets.” [Belfast]

“Maybe it’s about behavioural change – get people to change early, signal them early, people just aren’t aware.” [Belfast]

“Mental health/ welfare reform are major concerns in Northern Ireland. People have no money to invest in energy efficiency measures.” [Belfast]

“Smart metering and the smart journey are going ahead over the next 2 – 3 years. NIEs grid investments to enable this will be a potential game changer for energy efficiency.” [Belfast]

Format and level of engagement

A key aspect of this session was to discuss and explore the level of interest in various forms of engagement and consultation. Also covered in the session were the topics that stakeholders would like to discuss, how often they would like to share their views and how NIE Networks can ensure balance.

Engaging with stakeholders

Positively, most stakeholders expressed interest and willingness to engage with NIE Networks in their ongoing consultation process. There was an appetite for further workshops (similar in size, scope, and format), with stakeholders seeing the value in collaboratively working in partnership with NIE Networks and other key representatives.

Although stakeholders were of the view that a range of engagement methods should be used, it was widely felt that face-to-face engagement is best overall, given the potential for partnerships and networking on particular areas of interest.

Stakeholders felt the addition of smaller, more focused, topical groups would also be beneficial moving forward. The opinion was conveyed that meeting like-minded individuals and relevant representatives, with a common goal in a face-to-face format is the most valuable way of engaging.

“Nothing beats meeting people.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“Stakeholders need to meet at more things like this, these are very beneficial for everyone. All groups need to see everyone else’s issues and concerns.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“The reality is the reason we are sitting here today as it’s important to us. We’re taking time out of our day, and we are busy... we want to be here because we see problems existing. Survey information will give you another engagement point - to try and understand what is the concerns then we can start to get to a real level of detail that we are maybe not at just now.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“Workshops need to be smaller and more regular to facilitate more people with busy schedules attending.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“Open events with community groups with lay experts. That is the space to include those voices.” [Belfast]

“I was at an event – a world Cafe with tables and kept mixing people during the event. Bigger organisations should host those things and get people talking. Need people to form partnerships. They have got to do it themselves.” [Belfast]

Level of engagement & aligning the format to meet these needs

Whilst NIE Networks is already engaging with groups in different ways, it was important to identify with stakeholders:

- Alternative formats that might be beneficial;
- Any areas that are being missed;
- What has worked well with NIE Networks (or not); and
- Any experiences or models elsewhere that we can take learnings from.

Perceptive Insight presented the diagram depicted below to highlight a suggested approach to engagement. Generally, there seemed to be an acceptance of this model.

Comments made by stakeholders are summarised below:

- It is important to filter the knowledge down from the experts to the laypeople;
- Including laypeople into the discussions: it is important to capture and hear their grass roots experiences;
- Opportunities for stakeholders and NIE Networks to learn together are useful; and
- Varying degrees of knowledge amongst NIE Networks’ customers should be accommodated.



“The model is drifting upwards...it is about how we feed the knowledge back down to result in more ideas.” [Belfast]

“Some people are paid to be more informed on this than others. Workshops are good as a kick-off point as they allow stakeholders to learn from a diverse representation. Different organisations are coming from very different perspectives e.g. domestic consumers in NI have the third cheapest energy prices in Europe while manufacturing has the second highest prices. But there may be a need to have deeper more detailed discussions at a later date and smaller workshops would be best for this. [Derry~Londonderry]

“More partnership working between NIE and other industry stakeholders e.g. generators and suppliers.” [Belfast]

“Do the general public know about the increased use of renewables/ about electrification and changes that are being made by NIE? Will they understand this if costs go up?” [Belfast]

“I think survey information will give you another engagement point, and I think if there were surveys (given) to key stakeholder groups to try and understand what are their concerns then those could be grouped, and then we can start to get to a real level of detail that we are maybe not at just now.” [Derry~Londonderry]

Following up the consultation process



Website



Email / mailing list



Phone call



Presentation



Full report



Infographic

Stakeholders were asked their preferences in relation to how they would like to be communicated with after the workshop. Various channels of communications were discussed, with a combination of approaches agreed on.

A significant number were interested in being added to an electronic mailing list for further communication.

Stakeholders welcomed the idea of submitting all materials from the day (i.e. presentations, agenda etc.) as well as follow up communication and documentation (i.e. reports, updates on further consultations etc) on NIE Networks’ website and stakeholders in attendance particularly liked the message of transparency this conveyed.

Stakeholders expressed the view that typically they would be more motivated to read an infographic report rather than a full report. Nonetheless, there was a group of participants that would like a more detailed report to be made available.

The feedback highlighted that there is a need to have multiple channels for getting information out to stakeholders and to encourage feedback and information sharing from them in return. This could include a mix of email updates, stakeholder or information sessions and more informal meetings on an ad hoc basis.

Breakout session: customer service approach

Breakout sessions – format

Event attendees were briefed on the breakout workshops when they were registering on the morning of the event. They were given the option of selecting which breakout session they would like to join. Each breakout session lasted one hour (with 10/15 minutes at the end for each subgroup to feed back to the wider group). The moderators used a pre-agreed topic guide for each of the breakout sessions.

The themes of the breakout sessions were:

- Customer service approach;
- Enabling development/connections; and
- A low carbon future.

The key findings from each breakout session are reported below:

Customer service approach

Quality customer service is typically characterised by effective communication, clarity for the customer, prominent brand identity and innovation

Stakeholders were asked to summarise what quality customer service means to them, before discussing this in the context of NIE Networks. The general consensus was that communication determines the overall customer experience. Most participants cited the need for an easy-to-reach and responsive customer service department. Some business representatives talked about the need to have an account manager to personally deal with their queries. Above all, it was reported that the customer service representative needs to be knowledgeable in dealing with their queries.

“The customer service point of contact needs to be knowledgeable; they need to be able to answer the questions I have.” [Belfast]

“One main point of contact, an appointed person is the most important aspect of customer service. As long as I have one person to deal with whether this is through email, telephone or whatever.” [Belfast]

“You need the customer service to be responsive.” [Belfast]

In the context of NIE Networks, feedback within the customer service workshops showed that transparency and clarity of communication is key for customers. Stakeholders talked about the need for NIE Networks to communicate with transparency.

“Transparency is key. We want to see what NIE are doing to meet customer needs for now and in the future.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“NIE Networks going forward needs to communicate more and let businesses know what is happening.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“If someone leaves or if someone has a day off, the next person in line needs to know what is happening. If someone has been dealing with a customer issue and leaves, the person taking over needs to be informed. This is key to building good communication and relationships between NIE and customers.” [Derry~Londonderry]

Moving forward we need a cultural movement to a more customer centred future. There needs to be a cultural change from network-centred to customer centre. This is going to be key work for the next couple of years.” [Belfast]

Brand awareness for NIE Networks should be a key focus in investment priorities

Echoing a comprehensive research programme conducted by Perceptive Insight on behalf of NIE Networks in 2016, stakeholders acknowledged that there is confusion amongst many customers about the role of NIE Networks. As such, domestic representatives recommended that brand awareness for NIE Networks should be a key priority for investment. The point of contact for the customer is typically the supplier. Therefore, stakeholders believed that customers need clearer information to ensure increased awareness about when/under what circumstances to contact NIE Networks.

It was suggested that there are opportunities for suppliers and NIE Networks to work together to educate customers. Stakeholders reported that this collaborative approach between the suppliers and NIE Networks would enhance the understanding of the role of NIE Networks and in doing so improve the customer journey.

“If the providers could assist the transfer of customers from them to NIE Networks or the reverse in a ‘warm introductory’ manner, this would improve customer service and assist with the raised profile of NIE Networks and the understanding in their role within the energy sector.” [Belfast]

“There needs to be investment in customer service. It must be directed at the response time. There needs to be investment so that when you ring a particular line you are actually getting through to the correct person.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“There needs to be investment in brand awareness.” [Derry~Londonderry]

Big changes ahead and consumers require education, support and engagement

In the context of moving towards a low carbon future, it was felt that customers require education now more than ever. Similar to findings reported in the previous paragraphs, there were perceived opportunities for suppliers and NIE Networks to work together to educate consumers on what NIE Networks can deliver and in relation to the urgency of the energy crisis.

The view was expressed that customers only contact NIE Networks when there is an issue, and this does not help to forge a positive relationship. Therefore, it was suggested that open discussions and continuous engagements would help move this forward in the future.

Continue to invest in a multi-channel approach to ensure customer satisfaction is maintained at all stages of the customer journey

Stakeholders recommended a multi-channel approach to enable contact with NIE Networks. The domestic representatives stressed the need for supplementary contact channels alongside traditional contact methods. It was suggested that more research was required into how consumer profiles resonate and respond to different methods of contact and communication.

“For simple enquiries use a text or online/email service. You don’t want to have to speak to someone personally for simple enquiries. However, that is fine for people of a certain age. I know no matter what the issue, the likes of my mother would want to speak to someone personally. You have to have different options available for different people.” [Belfast]

“With simple enquiries like a meter reading then people are not going to want to wait about to let someone into their home they are going to be happy to just email or text NIE this information.” [Belfast]

“I do think personally that telephone is the best approach and I am impressed that you still do so much with telephone.” [Belfast]

“It depends on what the issue is. For something simple you can just check the internet, then for something more complex you might want to ring but again having the variety of options is key.” [Belfast]

“Those people who are experiencing a power cut or any other complex issue for the first time need to be educated as to what to do when this happens. It does not matter with what approach they use they just need to know who and where to contact. It is NIE Networks’ responsibility to educate and inform their customers about methods of communication.” [Belfast]

With regards to their experience of NIE Networks, comments were mostly centred around account management. There was a perceived small pool of key account contacts who can resolve an issue, impacting on responsiveness and overall customer experience. An opinion was expressed that one of the biggest issues their members had relating to customer service with NIE Networks was the

various departments they speak to, to get their query dealt with. Stakeholders stressed the importance of a personal account manager to deal with their queries.

“Different groups want different things.” [Belfast]

“From a business perspective there needs to be one point of contact like an accounts manager.” [Belfast]

Stakeholders also commented that preference for different types of communication channel depends on the complexity of the query. For example, the following scenarios were given:

- A text or email service for a meter reading was deemed acceptable;
- An automated service for a power cut was regarded appropriate;
- However more technical queries would require a personal telephone call.

Underpinning this all, was the need for responsiveness.

“It doesn’t matter what method is used, it just needs to be responsive and informative.” [Belfast]

NIE Networks has a role in supporting vulnerable customers

Stakeholders discussed the importance of vulnerable customers obtaining the relevant support through the customer service experience. The vulnerable groups considered were older people and people with disabilities or an illness. Vulnerable customers within the business setting were defined as schools, hospitals and care homes. However, it was mentioned that the issue here is how to identify the vulnerable as they may not proactively identify themselves.

There was some discussion amongst stakeholders around telephone calls. It was thought that they are not necessarily the preferred method of communication for vulnerable people. One stakeholder outlined how research had shown that telephone calls in dealing with the elderly or vulnerable was not well received. Often these individuals use family, friends or a responsible person to deal with their energy queries. Text messaging was felt to work well for this consumer group. Nonetheless, it was highlighted that whilst digital and automated channels can be effective, telephone is still important and waiting times should be optimised. Stakeholders also reflected on the benefits of personal interaction in preventing isolation, particularly for the elderly or those living in remote areas.

It was suggested that opportunities exist to develop online interaction with the consumer. Digital access for older people was a project Advice NI was working on to remove the barrier of digital tools.

“A [telephone call lasting] 3 minutes to get through to the correct person is not acceptable but especially for a vulnerable customer. Vulnerable customers need to make sure they do not feel neglected, they need to feel that they are being listened to more than any other groups.” [Derry~Londonderry]

Community groups with an understanding of grassroots issues should be involved early in the engagement process

It was pointed out that instead of NIE Networks and selected stakeholders making decisions on behalf of lay people, it would be more beneficial to go direct to the lay people themselves. Examples were provided of the health service consultation and the recent design of the Glider bus project, where vulnerable users and other community groups were involved at the planning stages. A more informal setting with transport access was discussed.

“Community sector - with community groups with lay experts. That is the space to include those voices. All stakeholders have to be involved.” [Belfast]

The need for policy changes with a robust approach and well researched model for everyone to work towards

Echoing other workshops, it was suggested that because there is currently no energy policy and therefore no one has a ‘model’ to work towards, there is a definite need for a robust approach to guide stakeholders moving forward in their businesses and organisations. This was thought to be more beneficial than a number of smaller ‘reactive’ schemes with no long-term plan. There was frustration and confusion articulated, in that stakeholders felt there was no access to a roadmap for moving forward.

“How can we communicate what the target model should be?” [Belfast]

“Is it improving costs, raising investment, improving connections, reducing carbon emission; the point was made that schemes were provided in recent years for government departments to install solar panels. Many homeowners did this with additional costs to them. Now the scheme has ended, the providers are no longer in business and the customer has a product which they cannot get repaired, replaced or removed without significant cost to themselves.” [Belfast]

Breakout session: Enabling development/connections

This section outlines key findings from the breakout workshops focusing on enabling development and connections. In total two of these workshops were conducted in Belfast and one in Derry~Londonderry.

Enabling developments/connections

Customer service within connections has improved but the customer experience could be enhanced further

Developers within this workshop spoke about their experience with NIE Networks in relation to customer service and any issues they had experienced. There were issues reported in relation to setting up an electricity connection for new builds and a lack of communication during the process (e.g. closing dates, schedule of activity). This was described as a stressful situation for developers in managing the front-facing relationship with homeowners.

In saying this, there was agreement that the level of service provided by NIE Networks has improved over the past few years. This has been largely driven by a small team of key account contacts. However, it was noted that there is a very small team of key contacts within NIE Networks who are responsible for major infrastructure projects. This was considered as problematic for stakeholders, particularly if a key account contact moves on or is unavailable. Based on feedback, there appears also to be some disconnect in terms of filtering the knowledge and information from the key account level to other NIE Networks' team members.

"We have never been let down by NIE to be fair but by god it goes close to the wire...we are waiting with baited teeth right up to the last month." [Belfast]

"But still on the site there is problems. If you have a date for completion, there is no guarantee that is going to happen." [Belfast]

"It has improved. Our guys on the ground don't know who they need to be talking to. Sometimes people who they are talking to don't even know and it's just a mess. So now...for me I now have a go to person if I'm not getting through the channels I need to be going through – which have become clearer." [Belfast]

"There's really two people within NIE that look after major infrastructure projects. They could be working full time between us (and other developer in group). Never mind what else is happening in the country... these people are working evenings, weekends." [Belfast]

"The engagement is improving, definitely." [Belfast]

When looking ahead, it is difficult to plan for new connections

Looking ahead, there was discussion and agreement within the group that it is the responsibility of the government to implement appropriate legislation to drive the change to have the infrastructure in place for new types of connections. There was discussion around it being difficult for developers and other planners to prepare for the future because it is unclear what the future will look like.

From a planning point of view, it was suggested that there needs to be more strategic and collaborative conversations with NIE Networks to enhance the customer experience within the context of enabling development/connections.

“Need to make sure the infrastructure is there...critical in development plans and growth strategies.” [Belfast]

“We know the road but don’t know what it looks like’ ...Planning is where it all starts, and it is difficult to plan.” [Belfast]

“We can’t plan for the future because we don’t know what the future looks like. In the absence of government, no one can make policy.” [Belfast]

Whilst stakeholders are thinking about the future, some feel a lack of support and a high level of risk in implementing innovative technologies

Discussions revealed an immediacy of support is needed relating to how low carbon technologies can be utilised in new connections. Issues were also considered around the practicalities of implementing new technologies for developers. For example, the storage and wastage that had been seen by developers associated with the uptake of heat pumps (e.g. higher than expected customer bills).

Stakeholders had different views of the value of incentives. For example, most developers saw incentives as the way forward in encouraging the uptake of new technologies in new connections. It was also noted that incentives for domestic uptake of solar panels could be a potential way to strengthen the network (e.g. ROI household grants to generate kilowatts). However, one stakeholder held the view that incentives are ineffective and can limit creativity in relation to new technologies.

“There is no incentive (for developers to invest for the future). There are absolutely no incentives.” [Belfast]

“The government needs to re-structure the process so that non-environmental solutions are less cost.” [Belfast]

“In the Belfast City Council area, it took us 14 weeks to upload (a connection application) onto their portal. There are certain things in a wider context within the city centre that can get nearly through planning within 12 weeks, while we haven’t even been able to get stuff uploaded onto the system... its very disheartening.. you have to be dealing with the here and now, and you want to be leading the way for the future, but the support is not there.” [Belfast]

“From a private sales point of view for us to sell those houses we have to have to be confident that heating systems are going to be suitable and that they are going to work and there are issues with them. There is nobody independently verifying what those heating solutions are. I think having to sell houses privately, you’d be very reluctant to go down that route until you are happy they are a good heating solution. So that’s one thing then the next thing is getting the gas to go electric and the capacity requirements to offer all those different solutions on one site. And we are building houses that are supposed to last for 100 years so you want to be putting the infrastructure in now that is going to accommodate that down the line..” [Derry~Londonderry]

“I think incentives are anti-innovation in that it just moves the bare minimum. I think what we need to do instead of incentives, add more value to different parts of the supply chain so it doesn’t need incentives to get a project over the line. If that involves making technologies that are not green more expensive, then that is the policy government should implement.” [Belfast]

“Do you try and change behaviour or set some sort of direction by incentivising and by regulation.” [Belfast]

“In ROI they have a domestic grant for storage with solar PV.. I think there is a real caveat around that at the minute and how functional that is. If you’ve got a battery at 1.6 kilowatts for example and you get a grant of 2000 euro – what are you going to get out of 1.6 kilowatts to make that viable... but interestingly they do have government support and they do have an incentive there to go and purchase 2 kilowatts of battery and 4 kilowatts of solar. That’s hugely prevalent at the minute in ROI. There’s numerous solar panel companies basically after NIRO finished the up-shipped from here in NI and set up in ROI.” [Derry~Londonderry]

It was agreed that cross-collaboration and communication across different sector representatives is essential for stepping forward

Many stakeholders across the workshops expressed a willingness to work with NIE Networks and other stakeholders collaboratively towards preparing for the future. There was a desire to learn, understand and hear the varying issues and priorities.

“Developers shouldn’t be taking all of the risk, unless there is an obvious financial benefit somewhere down the line, and that is why the legislative framework needs to be there and I know you are saying no incentives, but I kind of think some incentives are sometimes needed to do that.” [Belfast]

They recommended that a holistic approach is needed to progress to a network that is more environmentally friendly.

“NIE have a responsibility to educate and inform, however all groups need to be involved in the discussions.” [Belfast]

“One of the things we have been considering is around carbon offsetting. With NIE Networks, NI Water, Translink...those businesses come with significant land holdings. There is a potential around, yes, the low carbon future, but also around carbon off-setting - the typical one...is around trees and bird fouling and all these issues. Tree planting is the first thing in terms of carbon offsetting.” [Belfast]

“Need to be joined up from the innovators to NIE Networks.” (Belfast)
“It’s about working closely with NIE to see how we can alter and resolve those connections to facilitate things like energy storage, battery storage, increased flexibility, and ability to provide demand response.” [Belfast]

Various councils are at different stages of the planning process

Councils are looking at distribution and network capacity in a strategic context to enable development. Some stakeholders voiced that they have not had the same level of engagement with NIE Networks as with NI Water and DFI Roads. It was described as important to note that as each council moves forward with their own development plan and growth strategies they need to ensure the infrastructure is there.

“Within the next 4 years private investors and public authorities are going to move rapidly to develop more which will put a strain on the existing network.” [Belfast]

“A lot of developments happening at an organic level which impacts what’s being done with the network.” [Belfast]

Breakout session: Low carbon future

This section outlines key findings from the breakout workshops focusing on a low carbon future. In total two of these workshops were conducted in Belfast and one in Derry~Londonderry.

Low carbon future

Affordability for vulnerable customers: the social dimension to transition

While recognising the economic and technological aspects to the transition to a low carbon future, participants were keen to acknowledge the social dimension. This was thought to be central to achieving a just and inclusive transition that does not leave behind vulnerable consumers, or the public in general.

There was concern from the housing associations and suppliers present that, for consumers choosing between “heat or eat”, low carbon energy may not be a priority. At the same time, housing associations and suppliers are experiencing increasing responsibility to install new low carbon technologies and source power from renewable generation. Stakeholders stressed the point that this must be balanced against costs to the consumer to avoid detriment to vulnerable tenants.

Whilst ensuring those customers in fuel poverty are protected, this must be balanced against the need for innovation and early adopters to move forward towards a low carbon future.

“All really valid points but we have to make sure they are protected. What we can’t do is say that a vulnerable person can’t have that today as they can’t afford it so no one can have it. You need early adapters to pay over the odds for stuff and pay for the research to be able to get the prices down.” [Belfast]

“End users are not concerned with low carbon. They are not going to pay premium for green.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“The reality of living with poverty has to be a priority. Funding should be available to insulate houses.” [Derry~Londonderry]

The current ownership model in Northern Ireland is problematic

The current ownership model was felt to be a significant barrier in relation to a low carbon future in Northern Ireland. Low carbon technologies were described as more capital intensive than traditional oil/gas. It was reported that the existing model makes it difficult for consumers to enter the market to change to a low carbon solution.

In saying this, there were discussions around there being opportunities for third party organisations to enable consumers to adapt and enter the market by setting entry as a service. Consumer participation in the market was seen as key in achieving low carbon targets as “everyone needs to come on the journey.”

“That question who can afford it? Not many people because the ownership model is wrong. It is based on cheap fuel as a lifetime resource ..so that needs to change. Is that owned by the consumer or does a third party own that and manage energy for the consumer?” [Belfast]

“Different ownership model...do we need to be thinking about the DNO being a private company? Is this something that private companies are able to carry through?” [Belfast]

“We have set up a company to see if there’s a market for something that is known as behind the meter domestic battery storage. So, we are testing to see if customers would like to participate ..in a way that they will get better service, better value and that they can contribute to low carbon future. We are working in collaboration with NIE Networks on that...for us low carbon future is people participating in better outcomes for them and their families.” [Belfast]

Opportunity for education and confidence building amongst consumers

Education was seen as a way to promote attitudinal behavioural change in terms of energy efficiency and reducing energy consumption. It was also viewed as a way to inform communities about the options open to them in relation to, for example, district heating or community transport, to empower them to be part of the solution. A role for community development workers in this was noted.

“A key part of the transition is about localisation and trying to reinvigorate rural communities – looking at how we can have localised energy production, by and with communities. We have seen a tendency over the last number of years for large scale energy production to leave communities behind...so we want to see an inclusive transition period. People have to feel part of the solution [Belfast]

Beginning the education early, at school age, was seen as vital in ensuring there was an early established understanding of the move towards a low carbon future.

A number of stakeholders noted the prevalent perception that electricity may not be the best way to heat your home, particularly as heat pumps have been problematic. However, it was stressed that the energy market has changed and there is a need for education in the use and conservation of energy if the 2050 targets are to be met.

In addition, feedback provided showed that stakeholders believe there should be honesty, clarity and transparency with how much new technologies are going to cost. Furthermore, it was advised that data is needed to help to project these costs

Roadmap for the transition is necessary and collaboration is key to achieving this

As previously mentioned, a key theme running throughout both workshops was that NI businesses require a roadmap for the transition towards a low carbon future. There was a consensus that from

a policy context, the strategic energy framework is 'out of date', and this needs to be addressed so businesses are clear in how they move forward.

There was agreement that collaboration is key in order to effectively provide a roadmap for the transition. It was voiced further that all consultations towards a low carbon future need to be fully inclusive and policies need to be cross-departmental. Stakeholders provided models of best practice and examples that Northern Ireland can learn from. Examples put forward included: the ROI model of the Joint Committee on Climate Action and EGO (University of Exeter).

"I represent a business view. I think it's that policy background...strategic energy framework is now out of data. There has been a void there and we need to fill that void. I need someone to paint the picture of what that looks like for NI. What technologies are we going to invest in. I can see quite clearly in ROI their vision and Teresa May's targets which were slotted in before she left which was good but what does that mean for businesses? We have these targets for 2050 but no one is really telling us what that means." [Belfast]

"There is a model for this developed by an organisation called EGO, an energy policy group in University of Exeter. They, for government, created a model for an energy transmission commission. Weren't just civil servants. It recruited people from network companies, system operators but also consumer reps, innovators, instructors and academia." [Belfast]

"There has to be a framework there but there has to be some sort of mechanism where decisions can be made...could be done in a more collaborative approach where we bring in experts and academics and help make decisions and from an investment perspective where am I going to invest." [Belfast]

Governance issues are a block to innovation - creating a favourable regulatory environment and carving out a proactive role for NIE Networks

Participants recognised that the current legislative and regulatory environment is not conducive to NIE Networks taking a proactive role in the transition to a low carbon future. For example, stakeholders considered that they are unable to make long-term investments that are speculative in nature as they expose the ordinary consumer to risk. This was described as problematic in relation to renewable energy generation and low carbon technology innovations; and stakeholders held the view that it will not work as a model over the next ten years if emissions targets are to be met. While the Utility Regulator's current mandate is to keep the cost of electricity as low as possible, it was argued this will have to change to enable a shift towards low carbon at the pace required. There was some discussion around innovation and encouraging innovative technology to meet the low carbon target.

It was also suggested that NIE Networks could do more through its corporate policy to influence change at the legislative and regulatory level and to ensure that the electricity network does not become a 'blocker' when the market began to demand change. One stakeholder further proposed

"THE NI Assembly should explore the possibility of alternative low carbon targets for Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, to reflect progress made through the PV and gas boiler replacement schemes /conversion from oil to natural gas in order to secure better value for customers." [Belfast]

development of a business stream parallel to NIE Networks regulated activities, focused on promoting decentralised and more local networks integrating decarbonisation elements and designed to ultimately be connected to the wider network by 2050. It was thought that progress under such a model could be persuasive in influencing or changing the priorities of the regulator.

Participants felt that NIE Networks and the energy industry more widely should be providing evidence and solutions to organisations on the effectiveness of new technologies. The view was expressed that the onus should not be on organisations to trial new technologies without this support. For example, housing organisations would like to trial batteries but this is proving very difficult as few batteries are regulated for use in Northern Ireland.

The point was noted that as customer decisions become more unpredictable, there are more opportunities to invest, but there is a need for better insight and innovation to do that.

“We have more limited scope here for innovation than GB because of the network we have - innovation is regarded as a risk and innovation projects are expected to deliver...that is not research. If you try something that works that is useful knowledge and is not wasted money.”
[Belfast]

“If you try something that doesn’t work that can be learning too. If it tells you something useful it is worth doing. Very conservative approach to innovation. You can’t be a blocker to trials.” [Belfast]

The perceived urgency of the crisis was highlighted to further accentuate the above points.

“We need to act now..” [Belfast]

“The reality is if we don’t collectively do this we are all stuffed. Whether you are rich or poor this has to happen. We are talking about this like it’s an option...we are the only people in the world that is talking like it’s an option.” [Belfast]

Concerns about reaching scale to meet government targets

The issue was raised around NIE Networks’ preparedness should market demand for Electrical Vehicles (EVs) (or other low carbon technology) rise suddenly driven by *‘the right vehicle, available at the right price and the right time’*. Stakeholders noted the pressure this could place on the existing electricity network (should a high proportion of consumers quickly acquire EV technology) and questioned whether NIE Networks would be able to respond at the speed required.

More broadly, participants questioned whether new technologies, renewable generation, decarbonisation of transport and buildings, and localised energy efficiency schemes could reach the scale required to meet government emissions targets. In this regard, the importance of ambitious pilot projects to trial and demonstrate where new opportunities, as well as challenges, lay was emphasised. This was not only felt to be important for testing new technologies but assessing what would be required in terms of collaboration and partnership working to make such projects are replicable at scale. A number of those present noted the complexity of such collaboration in this area.

A second factor to pilot projects which was discussed, was their potential to encourage and motivate private finance to 'lean in' through offering practical examples of investment opportunities. Given the expense of new technologies and low carbon solutions, feedback illustrated that investment from the private sector will be crucial to achieving official targets.

“The other thing that struck me when we tried to put these consortiums together was the sheer number of companies and organisations that we’ve had to engage with, to pull together like minds with a clear goal. Not just talking shops but an action plan with a clear output.” [Belfast]

“Pilot projects are essential, but they suddenly require five or six organisations working together...being able to support those initiatives and having people that have seen this before and have a way of working, you’re [NIE Networks] not a blocker anymore [Belfast]

Review of building regulation is needed - customer driven solutions and long-term sustainability

There was a discussion around the need for a review of building regulations. The point was highlighted that the reality of living with poverty must be more fully acknowledged and funding made available to super insulate housing as part of this. It was considered that planned changes to building regulations would motivate changes in the practices of architects and building contractors to change the mindset - *“we have always built this way”* – to encourage design and building of passive housing/buildings and improved insulation as standard. One stakeholder suggested that NI can look to examples of good practice in ROI, for instance the “passive house standard” for all new builds in Dun Laoghaire, Rathdown outside Dublin.

Stakeholders highlighted the view that solutions around low carbon future must be tailored to the needs of customers to ensure that investments made now will be sustainable long term. Workshop participants offered examples of where this has not been done; namely, the domestic RHI scheme and instalment of heat pumps. In the case of heat pumps, housing organisation explained that experiences have been negative both in Northern Ireland and ROI. They discussed how targets have been put in place for the instalment of heat pumps in new housing without the industry or regulations to support them; resulting in high bills and inconvenience for the end user.

It was advised within this discussion that Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) should be fully involved in future stakeholder consultation given the key role they will play in changing standards in social housing and in order to bring clarity to key planning consideration.

“Priority would be PV installation in council buildings and new buildings. They are not energy efficient. Only meeting basic building regulations.” [Derry~Londonderry]

“NIFA should play a key part in driving standards for social housing..” [Derry~Londonderry]

Areas for consideration

This section of the report outlines areas that NIE Networks may consider for future engagement with stakeholders. The key points presented in this section are structured in the following order:

- Setting the context;
- Engaging with stakeholders;
- Breakout sessions (format)
- Customer service approach;
- Enabling connections/developments; and
- Low carbon future.

Setting the context - led by the Managing Director

Feedback across both workshops highlighted that access to NIE Networks' senior management was an extremely valued element of the day. Hearing directly from NIE Networks' Managing Director and the ability to have their questions directly answered was perceived as beneficial by stakeholders who attended the workshops. In addition, having senior management present throughout the day, and their active role in the workshops, meant that there were many opportunities for stakeholders to put forward questions and for NIE Networks to provide clarification when required.



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- Emulating this format in future consultations would be welcomed by stakeholders and encourage attendance, given the value placed in opportunity to engage with the Managing Director of NIE Networks.
- It may be worth reviewing all questions submitted across the day to ensure a response has been given. Whilst the majority were answered on the day, there were others submitted through the online platform, that weren't immediately addressed. A list of these questions has been submitted to the project team.
- Given how well the session with the Managing Director of NIE Networks was received, consideration should be given to alternative touchpoints and networking opportunities.
- There is an opportunity to build on NIE Networks' proactive image (relative to other utilities) and position the company at the forefront of innovation for stakeholder engagement.

Engaging with stakeholders

This section of the workshop demonstrated that there were perceived gaps in stakeholder attendance and suggestions were put forward to NIE Networks with regards who else stakeholders thought should be included in future consultations. There was a recognition that there are different types of people to consult with. Discussions uncovered insight into the varying issues stakeholders have, and therefore what they would be interested in collaborating on with NIE Networks on. They also showed that there are a combination of formats of engagement that NIE Networks should consider when they consult with different groups. In terms of how NIE Networks can move forward with their stakeholder engagement plan, thought should be given to the optimum ways with which they can connect with the various types of organisations.

Key areas for consideration are summarised below:



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- It is recommended that NIE Networks should host similar stakeholder workshops in the future, as the format was well received by attendees.
- Using the database compiled for the workshops, there is opportunity to leverage interest from an e-mailing list to ensure continuous engagement, at an informative level.
- Build on the current database of engaged stakeholders and ensure the perceived gaps are filled.
 - For example, in ensuring a just transition and protecting the vulnerable, it is important to make sure all consumer voices are heard. This message was a prominent theme throughout both workshops.
 - In addition, ensure communities are consulted with, that their buy in is gained and perhaps more importantly their voice and issues are heard.
 - There is opportunity to engage with young people and ensure they are represented in future consultations.
- It would be worth taking into consideration other formats of engagement, for example smaller, more focused sessions. To help deliver this, it may be beneficial to categorise stakeholders within the database, with their area of specialism and/or level of interest.
- In addition to what NIE Networks has committed to in terms of stakeholder engagement (i.e. customer surveys and annual workshops), consideration should be given to how NIE Networks can tap into other touchpoints, to ensure engagement is ongoing and relevant. For example, is there scope in sending out mini surveys/online polls to stakeholders? A timeline for this engagement should also be considered. For example, quarterly online polls.
- There was a recognition that there are different types of stakeholder groups to consult with. Attention should be given to aligning formats with different types of people. Thought should be given to how stakeholders and different customer groups prefer to be engaged with.
- Provide a range of channels of communication when following up stakeholder engagements, for example, there is wide appeal for an infographic summary and visibility of information on NIE Networks' website.
- Build on the engagement work with the councils and formalise that process so it is more integrated and universal across the various councils.

Breakout sessions - format

The targeted breakout sessions were a well received aspect of the day, with stakeholders using the opportunity to voice their views on the particular topic they had an interest in. Given the success of the format of the first workshop (Derry~Londonderry), it was decided by the project team to allow more time for this element for the Belfast event. The format of the breakout sessions worked well because they were independently moderated by Perceptive Insight, yet each featured relevant NIE Networks' senior management who provided expert knowledge of the different topics.



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- These sessions were well received and encouraged deliberation and thoughtful debate. Therefore, consider using a similar approach in future engagement forums.

Customer service approach

Stakeholders explained that they value a multi-channel approach to customer service. The channel of communication very much depends on the type of customer as well as the nature of the query. There was a lot of discussion around a gap in consumer knowledge with regards to the NIE Networks' brand. The question for NIE Networks may be where the balance of investment should be placed on:

- 1) Building brand awareness; or
- 2) Ensuring customers are aware of the various contact points when they have a query.

Also discussed was the importance of customer relationship management, for example, if a staff member leaves the company, there should be a clear process whereby the customer does not experience a drop in service levels as a result.



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- Continue to invest in a multi-channel approach to ensure customer satisfaction is maintained at all stages of the customer journey for every customer type and ensure that these methods keep pace with technological developments.
- Monitor usage to provide an understanding of what formats resonate with different customer profiles.
- Consideration should be given to awareness raising in terms of informing customers of the various contact points within NIE Networks, to further enhance the customer experience.
- Ensure there is a clear communication procedure for customer relationship management and/or account management if staff leave the company.

Enabling development/connections

This breakout session revealed that whilst the customer experience in relation to connections has improved significantly over the last few years, based on feedback, further improvements can be made. This was the case particularly around the current disconnect between experience received at site level versus from an account management perspective. A pertinent theme also discussed was from a planning point of view. Many held the view that more conversations and joined up working between stakeholders and NIE Networks would help enhance overall customer experience and result in better planning.



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- Consideration should be given to address the communication issues some developers are having and the disconnect at site level in comparison to customer experience received from account managers.
- Leverage the willingness of stakeholders to meet and collaborate on issues around connections, to look for ways to enable stakeholders to more effectively plan ahead and further enhance the customer experience.
- Given all councils are at varying stages of the planning process, consideration should be given to ensuring councils have equal opportunity to engage with NIE Networks and to be consulted.

Low carbon future

Affordability for customers was important to note upfront for workshop attendees in terms of achieving a just and inclusive transition. Whilst ensuring those customers in fuel poverty are protected, this was also balanced with the need for innovation and digitalisation.

There is recognition that the current ownership model creates issues for those on low incomes to take advantage of low carbon solutions. Some held the view that there is an opportunity for third party companies to enable consumers to enter the market.

A roadmap for the transition was described as crucial in moving forward and meeting 2050 targets. Another key point discussed was that governance is a current blocker of innovation. A final significant theme from a housing association perspective was the need for a review of building regulations, focusing on customer driven solutions and long-term sustainability.



OUR KEY POINTS FOR NIE NETWORKS TO CONSIDER INCLUDE:

- There is potential to host ongoing engagements around a low carbon future and collaborate with stakeholders in this area.
- Because this area of discussion is so topical and far reaching, consider smaller more focused sessions.

Appendix: workshop feedback

This section outlines key findings from an electronic survey that was sent out to event attendees after the workshops.

Those who attended the workshops were sent a short email questionnaire after the event, asking them to provide their feedback about the day. A total of 15 responses were received from the following types of stakeholders:

- 3 x local council representatives;
- 2 x housing developers;
- 2 x social housing representatives;
- 2 x transport company representatives;
- 1 x environmental group;
- 1 x energy storage innovation group;
- 1 x energy supplier;
- 1 x charity representative; and
- 1 x government representative.

Note: One respondent requested to remain anonymous and is therefore excluded from this list.

Satisfaction with experience on the day

Attendees were asked to rate their experiences on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 10 is very satisfied). Overall, the following ratings were given regarding:

- The facilities – mean score of 8.13/10;
- Format of the day – mean score of 7.87/10; and
- Opportunity to have your views heard – mean score of 8.47/10.

Interest in attending future events

93% of those who filled out the feedback questionnaire (14 respondents) said that they would be interested in attending a similar event hosted by NIE Networks in the future. Particular areas of interest for more detailed workshops include:

- Collaboration opportunities with NIE Networks and other stakeholders (11 respondents interested);
- Supporting the move towards decarbonisation (9 respondents interested);
- Innovations, such as batteries or heat pumps (8 respondents interested);
- Affordability and vulnerable customers (6 respondents interested);
- Customer service and industry standards (7 respondents interested); and
- Another topic* (6 respondents interested).

*Includes: housing developments and new connections, local area energy planning, community involvement in power challenges, decarbonisation of transport and the electrification of heat and developments in smart metering.

Other comments

“A good event, with a number of different stakeholders taking to the opportunity to actively engage at various points in the course of the day. The opportunity to use interactive technology is great as it offers some anonymity for those who wish to engage, but not necessarily speaking out in front of the gathered group. Also, an excellent opportunity to engage with NIE senior management.” – Government representative, Derry~Londonderry workshop..

*“In some ways the event felt more about the process of the engagement rather than the outputs from the engagement in relation to strategic challenges.” – Energy supplier, Belfast workshop.
“Well organised, however the strict time keeping of the day meant that not all views were heard; and this being a stakeholder engagement event, that seems to jar a little.” – Transport company representative, Belfast workshop*

“Perhaps the subjects covered were too wide ranging meaning many attending may have had no knowledge or meaningful comment to make about some of the topics. Perhaps the focus workshops mentioned above may provide for better discussion /feedback.” – Local council representative, Derry~Londonderry workshop

“(Grouping) stakeholders from the same area of the business might be beneficial.” – Housing developer” [Derry~Londonderry workshop.