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Key findings summary report
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
WORKSHOPS

Report prepared for NIE Networks

December 2019

Northern Ireland
Electricity
Networks

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 150[1] 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.

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[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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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