

involve

Community Forum Framework

Dec 2025

Most people don't have enough say in the decisions that affect their lives.

Our current political system concentrates power in the hands of a few, and leaves many feeling powerless.

This can apply to the biggest global issues, right through to local decisions. Far too often, people feel decisions are made without their input.



Who are we?

We're the UK's leading public participation charity. We want to build a more vibrant democracy, where everyone can shape a society that works for all of us.

Since 2003, we have been working with governments, parliaments, civil society, academics and members of the public to create, advocate for and deliver new forms of public participation that revitalise democracy, improve decision making, and enable people to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

Background and context

Northern Ireland is moving towards a future where most of its electricity comes from renewable sources.

This is exciting but also challenging because it means building new power lines, substations, and other grid infrastructure. SONI, the organisation that operates the electricity transmission system, recognises that these changes can have a real impact on local communities.

That's why engaging with people early and meaningfully is at the heart of its Public Engagement Model.

Over the past year, SONI has listened carefully to people who are affected by their work. They have spoken to nearly 100 stakeholders across industry, government, and civic society and surveyed 500 members of the public.

They found that people want clear information, early notice about projects, and reassurance that their views will be listened to and will have an impact on processes and decisions. Communities want to feel heard, not just consulted.

SONI has identified three main groups of people who are affected by their work.

One of these groups is society, meaning local residents, landowners, councils, and community organisations. For this group, SONI is committing to principles such as transparency, accessibility, responsiveness, inclusivity, and consistency.

In practice, this means sharing information in plain language, offering multiple ways to engage, and making sure feedback is taken seriously.

To support their engagement with these groups, SONI has brought us onboard, as an independent engagement and public participation specialist.

SONI's Principles for Stakeholder Engagement

Inclusivity

We will seek to engage as widely as possible on our plans at the earliest possible stage, use accessible terminology and utilise methods of engagement proportionate to the needs of our stakeholders.

Transparency

We will seek to be open and transparent, act with integrity and be clear on the parameters of influence throughout our engagement. We will be clear about the need to balance the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders in addition to our legal and licence obligations.

Consistency

We will seek to be consistent in both the quality and quantity of our engagement.

Responsiveness

We will seek to be proactive and receptive to the needs of our stakeholders and respond in a timely manner.

Impact

We will seek to prioritise the areas that matter most to our stakeholders, proactively identify opportunities to co-develop balanced solutions and meaningfully incorporate input where possible.


How will SONI engage communities?

SONI will use a range of methods to connect with communities.

This includes public events, in-person and online consultations, and deliberative forums like **Citizen Sounding Boards***, where local people can have real influence on planning decisions.



Citizen Sounding Board: a place-based, randomly selected group of local residents who take part in deep deliberation to give considered community recommendations about project options and trade-offs.

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SONI's Stakeholder Engagement Strategy and supporting Public Engagement Model focuses on a few main ideas:

- First, SONI aims to involve local communities right from the start of planning, helping people understand why projects are necessary and what effects they could have.
- Second, they want communities to see the bigger picture—how electricity fits into the wider energy system, alongside gas and hydrogen, and how changes across these areas could affect them.
- Finally, SONI is committed to sharing clear information about their plans and future scenarios so that communities can follow how decisions are made and what the energy landscape might look like down the line.
- They will track how satisfied communities are with engagement, how feedback influences decisions, and whether trust and understanding improve over time. They know the process will need to adapt as the organisation and the regulatory environment evolve.

The strategy has real strengths. It's based on evidence, it emphasises early and meaningful engagement, and it uses innovative approaches like citizen sounding boards. But there are challenges too. Communities need to see that their feedback leads to real change, and if not, why not. SONI must balance the needs of different groups, and it must show that its engagement efforts have real impact.

For communities living near proposed electricity grid infrastructure, this strategy means they will get clear, timely information, the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives, and a commitment from SONI to listen and respond. It signals a move toward energy planning that is not just done to people, but with them.

How Involve will work with your community

Our work will build directly on SONI's commitment to meaningful community engagement.

Acting as independent facilitators, we will help ensure that local voices are heard clearly and safely early in the grid development process.

By designing and running participatory activities, we create spaces where local communities can share their views, ask questions, and help shape plans. Being independent allows us to act as a neutral bridge between SONI and communities, helping to foster trust, transparency, and open dialogue, so that engagement is not just a formality but a genuine part of shaping the energy future.

We want to work with you openly, respectfully, and practically.

Below, you'll see two opportunities for participation. They are designed to be local, easy to see, and truly meaningful.



1. Community Forums: local spaces for people who are active in the community near a project to talk with SONI, surface local knowledge, and find out more about the Citizen Sounding Board.
2. Citizen Sounding Board: a place-based, randomly selected group of local residents who take part in deep deliberation to give considered community recommendations about project options and trade-offs.

Both are independently facilitated, open about their remit, and set up so community views can shape decisions — not just ‘tick a box’

Community Forum

Community Forums provide a structured space for dialogue with those who play an active role in their local community.

Examples may include:

- coach of a local sports team.
- a volunteer member of a local organisation or club.
- a school leader.
- community activist.
- a local business owner.

Their purpose is to:

- create a channel for early, transparent conversation about projects.
- enable communities to raise concerns, share local knowledge, and provide feedback on plans.
- build mutual understanding between SONI and place-based stakeholders.

Approach

- Forums will be established in areas where SONI is bringing forward major grid projects.
- Membership will be self-selecting and represent diverse voices across the community.
- Meetings will be independently facilitated to create a fair, balanced environment.
- The format will combine information-sharing with participatory methods such as mapping, scenario testing, and dialogue.
- Forums will be convened throughout the life-cycle of projects, ensuring continuity and follow-through.

Key features

- Place-based: rooted in the particularities of local geography, values, and community life.
- Inclusive: open invitations, accessible formats.
- Responsive: clear feedback loops on how input has influenced decision-making.
- Respectful: acknowledging lived experience alongside technical expertise.

Overview

Who this is for: people who live, work, run businesses, or represent groups near the project.

Purpose: we explain clearly what project the Forum will cover, its scope, what the members can influence, and what decisions lie outside its remit.

How will you hear about it: You'll see public notices (leaflets, adverts in community spaces, social media, newspaper advertisements and notices). Local organisations will be invited and asked to nominate people.

Is there anyone who can't join the Community Forum? We ask that elected representatives (MPs, MLAs, Councillors) engage with SONI through dedicated political engagement channels.

Overview

How will the Forum work?

- Set the ground rules together: At the first meeting we'll agree a simple code of conduct: listening, respect, confidentiality where needed, and how we will handle disagreements.
- Independent facilitation and accessible materials: the Forum is run by Involve as an independent facilitator. SONI brings plain-English briefings, maps, and options; materials are sent in advance in accessible formats (print, large-print, easy-read).
- Listening and learning: We start by listening to you: your concerns, local knowledge and priorities. We'll work with SONI to present the technical picture in straightforward terms and agree on the topics for future sessions.
- Accountability: After each Forum meeting, we will share an Action Log that records what was raised and what SONI will do (or why not). This makes it easy to see how your input is being used.
- Transparency: When the Forum's role is complete, SONI publishes a final report showing what changed because of the Forum, and what will continue (monitoring, maintenance, community benefits).
- Evaluation: Forum members will be asked if they felt the Forum process was fair, balanced and transparent.

Citizen Sounding Board

The Citizen Sounding Board will provide a representative and deliberative voice on SONI's projects and priorities at the local level.

It complements Community Forums by ensuring that perspectives are broadened to include those who don't typically participate in consultations, bringing fresh voices into the conversation in areas where the development of infrastructure may be especially sensitive.



Approach

- For each relevant project or regional issue, a group of citizens will be **randomly selected** using stratified sampling to reflect the local community in terms of age, gender, background, and geography.
- Participants will meet in facilitated sessions to deliberate on questions such as local infrastructure design, trade-offs in project options, or principles for community benefit.
- Sessions will follow deliberative best practice: participants receive accessible, balanced information, hear from experts and stakeholders, and have time to weigh trade-offs before forming recommendations.
- Findings will be reported publicly and formally fed into SONI's planning and engagement cycle.

Key features

- Deliberative: structured to enable informed, considered dialogue rather than surface-level opinion.
- Representative: ensuring voices from across the local population are present, including those who are less likely to engage with traditional methods of consultation.
- Transparent: clear about remit, influence, and limits.
- Trust-building: demonstrating visibly how citizen recommendations shape decisions.



Overview

Who this is for: a cross-section of people who live in the locality. The Citizen Sounding Board deliberately broadens participation beyond people who normally speak up.

Typical size & timing: A Citizen Sounding Board is usually 15–30 people and meets across a short series of sessions at moments when SONI needs to make a decision.

Clear remit: We tell you exactly what question(s) the Sounding Board will advise on (for example: “Which route options best balance landscape and cost?”) and the local area it covers.

Random selection: if you live in an affected area, your address may be randomly selected to receive an invitation in the post. The invitation explains the time commitment, the topic, the independency of the process, and the support available: payment for your time, travel and care costs, accessible material. If you receive an invitation, you can choose to opt in. If you opt in, you may be selected to take part. We will select a group based on diversity criteria, so it reflects the local area in terms of age, background, gender, etc.

Orientation and induction: Before deliberation we hold an orientation session: meet the facilitator, learn how sessions work, tell us if you need any extra support, and receive a plain-English information pack and FAQs.



Overview

Balanced briefing and expert input:

Participants get balanced briefings (written and verbal). Independent experts present facts and a range of viewpoints. You can question experts in small groups, and you will have an opportunity to tell us if there is any further information you want us to provide.

Small-group deliberation with facilitation:

Much of the work happens in small groups with trained facilitators to make space for everyone to talk, weigh trade-offs, and test alternatives.

Time to reflect and form recommendations:

You will be given time across sessions to reflect and form collective recommendations. The process emphasises considered judgement, not instant opinion.

Transparency: Your recommendations are published in full, in plain language. The report includes minority views and the reasoning behind choices.

Formal SONI response: SONI provides a formal, written response to the Citizen Sounding Board: what will be taken forward, what will not, and why, with explanations of how recommendations were used in final plans.

Feedback loop: SONI commits to tracking which recommendations were acted on and reporting back after key decisions.



Practical support for all participants

- Accessibility: local, step-free venues; hybrid/online access; language translation; easy-read materials.
- Costs: travel, caring and childcare expenses paid; small honorarium for Citizen Sounding Board participants.
- Independence: impartial facilitators and, where appropriate, an independent chair or observer.
- Recording and privacy: sessions are not recorded without consent; personal data is handled according to GDPR compliance.
- Safeguarding and behaviour: clear safety and dignity rules; a named contact to raise any concerns.
- Food and timing: meetings scheduled at times that suit local rhythms; food provided for in-person meetings.

How your input will shape decisions

- Every Community Forum and Citizen Sounding Board has a Decision Map: a simple diagram that shows what decisions are coming, when, and where community input feeds in.
- After each key meeting SONI publishes a short “You said, We did” note showing what actions the organisation will take in response.
- For major reports and planning submissions, SONI includes a summary of community inputs and the Board’s recommendations as part of the public record.
- Where SONI cannot follow a recommendation, it will explain the reasons plainly (legal, safety, cost, or technical constraints).

How we'll know it worked

We'll use practical measures that matter to communities, for example:

- Representation: did participants reflect the local population?
- Influence: how many recommendations were taken forward or changed design?
- Experience: participant satisfaction and perceived fairness (quick post-session surveys).
- Transparency: timely publication of materials, action logs and SONI's formal responses.



Quick checklist for residents of affected areas

- Expect clear invitations and simple materials.
- You'll be supported to attend (money, care, travel).
- Independent facilitation means everyone gets space to speak.
- You will see public notes after each meeting showing how your input was used.
- If you're randomly invited to a Sounding Board, accepting helps make sure the process truly reflects the whole community.

Glossary of terms



Community Forums: local spaces for people who are active in the community near a project to talk with SONI, surface local knowledge, and find out more about the Citizen Sounding Board.

Citizen Sounding Board:
a place-based, randomly selected group of local residents who take part in deep deliberation to give considered community recommendations about project options and trade-offs.

participation

the ways that members of the public engage with structures and institutions of democracy, including when that engagement is led by the public.

power

the ability to influence an outcome.

principle

a guide for behaviour and actions.

sponsor

initiating partner who supports and resources process.

standard

agreed way to benchmark and measure quality.

trauma informed practice

An approach grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

Glossary of terms



engagement

the practice of involving the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organisations and institutions, when that involvement is initiated by the organisation or institution.

lived or living experience

someone who has been impacted by the issue.

mindset

a way of being and thinking.

minoritised voices

the voices of those who do not belong to a majority.

