



Delivering a cleaner
energy future

Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

2024-2026



Contents

About us 7

Introduction 9

Our stakeholders17

Our engagement approach 37

Strategic themes..... 43

Fostering a culture of engagement..... 57



Foreword

Achieving Northern Ireland's renewable energy ambitions will require a further and deeper intensification of the collaboration that has made it a world leader in the past.

The targets to ensure 80% of all electricity consumed comes from renewable sources by 2030, and the UK's wider net-zero obligations, are hugely challenging in their scale, pace and complexity.

As critical enabling infrastructure, the Northern Ireland electricity transmission system (high-voltage electricity grid) needs to be transformed in an unprecedented way, both in a physical and operational context.

This transformation is essential to facilitate the integration of more renewable energy and an increase in the demand for electricity as our economy grows and we electrify our transport and heating.

This must all take place while maintaining a safe, secure and reliable supply of electricity for homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland.

This is the biggest change to the electricity grid since electrification itself.

As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, we are committed to transforming the power system for future generations. Our *Strategy 2020-2025* set out our core purpose to support Northern Ireland in meeting its renewable energy objectives.

But we know we can't, and shouldn't, do this by ourselves.

The decentralised and deeply interdependent nature of Northern Ireland's energy system means that we can only achieve this once-in-a-generation energy transition by working together as a whole system. Central to our primary purpose of transforming the power system for future generations are two vital enabling objectives: *Engage for better outcomes for all*; and *Working with partners for positive change*.

In response to the new 80% target set by the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, SONI published a revised version of our technical roadmap, *Shaping Our Electricity Future*, which sets out the actions required on the power system to enable the delivery of Northern Ireland's renewable energy goals.

Recognising the crucial role of collaboration across every level of the electricity system and the importance of ensuring local communities are at the heart of the energy transition, *Engagement* is listed as one of four key pillars.

With less than six years until 2030, SONI has recognised the need to further intensify our engagement across all areas of our work. That is why now is the time to publish our first public Stakeholder Engagement Strategy to coincide with the remaining years of our current five-year Strategy and current Price Control period.

As a Transmission System Operator, SONI is also going through a major transition.

The decision made by the Utility Regulator in August 2022 regarding changes to our licence to create further managerial and operational independence from EirGrid Plc means the future structure of our organisation will change. As such, this Strategy will create the space and flexibility for this transition while we develop future plans based on our enduring organisational model.

As our organisation embarks on an exciting new phase on its journey, this interim Strategy and its associated Annual Action Plans set out how we intend to play our part in a renewed, reenergised whole system, whole society effort to meet our collective ambition of a cleaner, more secure energy future.



Alan Campbell

Chief Executive – SONI





About us

SONI is Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator (TSO). That means we manage the electricity grid to ensure that power can flow from where it is generated to where it is needed.

Our team of experienced, expert engineers manage the electricity grid, second-by-second, every day of the year, to ensure power can flow safely, securely and reliably to homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland. We don't generate or sell electricity, rather we balance consumer demand with the generation made available by the companies who produce it.

We are licenced and regulated by the Utility Regulator and we work together to operate the All-Island Single Electricity Market with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

Electricity systems across the world are changing. At SONI, we also plan the grid to meet Northern Ireland's future energy needs. The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy and Climate Change Act set an ambitious and challenging legal target that 80% of all electricity consumed must come from renewable sources by 2030.

By working together, we can deliver a cleaner, more secure energy future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, we have made significant progress so far – Northern Ireland was among the first regions in the world to have 75% of electricity flowing through the grid at any moment in time coming from variable renewable sources. In 2023, approximately 50% of our electricity came from renewable sources.

To reach Northern Ireland's ambitious and challenge target, SONI has the crucial task of transforming the electricity system and how we operate it in an unprecedented way. This means we need to plan for more and different types of grid infrastructure to facilitate the flow of more renewable energy across Northern Ireland and an increase in the demand for electricity as our economy grows.

The more renewable generation we require in the form of wind turbines and solar farms, as well as energy storage facilities, the more, or different, grid infrastructure we need to transport it via underground cables, overhead lines.

At SONI, we have a plan to ensure the grid is ready to support Northern Ireland's cleaner energy future. *Shaping Our Electricity Future* is our roadmap for the changes we need to make across the whole power system.

This will be the largest body of work that SONI has undertaken and will match rural electrification in terms of its long-term impact on consumers and society.

As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, we understand that people must be at the heart of our energy transition. That's why we discuss our plans extensively with local communities to listen and understand their views before we develop any infrastructure project.

Introduction





Background and context to this Strategy

As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, SONI has always recognised the importance of engagement and collaboration with our key partners. Our people recognise and embrace the deeply interconnected nature of our energy system – we understand that we must work together on a whole-system basis to succeed.

A significant amount of engagement has always taken place across every team and at every level of our organisation. This engagement and collaboration is what led to Northern Ireland meeting the 40% renewable energy target set by the Strategy Energy Framework (2010) a year early. Deep collaboration, such as the joint working between SONI and NIE Networks on clustering, for example, was key to this success.

Furthermore, Northern Ireland's power system was among the first in the world to be able to accommodate 75% variable renewable energy at any one moment in time as a result of close collaboration with EirGrid on the DS3 Programme and System Operations Roadmap.

The publication of the Energy Strategy in December 2021 set a new, ambitious 70% renewable energy target by 2030. Following the significant 40% RES target milestone collectively achieved in 2019, SONI immediately commenced work on planning for a power system that could support 70% RES through our Strategy 2020-2025.

Following a deep and deliberative process of engagement, which included more than 100 events and 500 consultation submissions across Ireland and Northern Ireland, SONI, in partnership with EirGrid, published the *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap (Shaping Roadmap)* which set out the transformational change required to the power system to meet these new ambitious targets.

Recognising the importance of collaboration at every level to deliver on our collective ambitions, *Engagement* was included as a bespoke pillar within the *Shaping Roadmap*.

The passage of the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 set a new target of 80%, significantly increasing our collective policy ambition. In response, and following further engagement, SONI published a revised *Shaping Roadmap* in 2023 to account for the new, more ambitious target.

The *Shaping Our Electricity Future* Advisory Council, a consultative body of industry, academic and other representatives, has provided constructive challenge and oversight in the development and delivery of our work to transform the power system.

We also understand that local communities must be at the heart of our plans to develop the grid.

That is why we enhanced our ‘Three-Part Process’ for grid development through a ‘Public Engagement 2.0’ project between 2021-2023 to ensure local communities and consumers are meaningfully engaged in our grid infrastructure projects at the earliest possible stage.

This included the successful pilot of a deeper, more deliberative ‘Citizen Sounding Board’ model as part of consultation approach for the Mid Antrim Upgrade which was shortlisted for a Responsible Business Award in 2023 by Business in the Community.

However, while our engagement has transformed and intensified in recent years, we understand the context in which we are working has changed and that change requires a response.

How we developed this Strategy

Following engagement with our partners as part of the Evaluative Performance Framework process, SONI undertook an extensive, independent Stakeholder Needs Assessment exercise in 2023 to inform the development of our first public Stakeholder Engagement Strategy.

Through a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods, nearly 100 stakeholders across industry, government, business and civic society were invited to participate. An independent poll with a representative sample of 500 members of the general public was also undertaken to ensure the voices of local communities and consumers could inform our work.

The outcomes of this research indicated that stakeholders were largely satisfied (36% Very Satisfied, 50% Somewhat Satisfied) with their engagement with SONI and consumers who could correctly identify our organisation as the grid operator had a largely favourable view (65% net favourable rating).

The top issues facing the grid identified by our stakeholders were: meeting NI's renewable energy targets; developing enough infrastructure to manage more renewable energy and ensuring a safe, reliable, consistent supply of electricity.

The themes and areas of engagement our stakeholders felt were most important for SONI over the next five years included: having enough resources to do the job; having knowledgeable people and providing useful, accurate, consistent communication to all constituencies.

Figure 1: Stakeholder Engagement Strategy engagement and consultation timeline



The areas of engagement where stakeholders identified opportunities for improvement included: more consistent communication throughout the engagement process; more accessible and flexible approaches to consultation; and earlier and more consistent engagement throughout our workstreams.

Following the completion of the Stakeholder Needs Assessment in October 2023 and an extensive desk-based review of approaches taken by other comparable organisations, SONI published a ‘Call for Views’ based on proposals for our first public Stakeholder Engagement Strategy in February 2024. This was underpinned by reviews of two further core enabling strategies: our Public Engagement Model; and our Landowner Charter.

This Call for Views was supplemented by a series of bilateral engagements and roundtable events with core partners to provide further opportunity for qualitative input and feedback.

36%

Very Satisfied

Stakeholders were largely satisfied (36% Very Satisfied, 50% Somewhat Satisfied) with their engagement with SONI

How we'll deliver this Strategy

This Stakeholder Engagement Strategy 2024-2026, designed to enable our engagement for the remaining years of SONI's current five-year Strategy (*Strategy 2020-2025*), Business Plan and Price Control period represents the culmination of this extensive consultation and engagement process.

In line with the approach we put forward to our stakeholders through a process of engagement and consultation, this Strategy sets out a multi-year strategic framework and approach to drive quality, consistency and purpose in the engagement that takes place right across our organisation.

This multi-year strategic framework will be supplemented by shorter, more succinct Annual Action Plans which will be published alongside our Forward Work Plan and reported on through the annual Performance Report.

We will develop a new Stakeholder Engagement Strategy to support the delivery of SONI's forthcoming new Strategy 2025-2031, Business Plan and Price Control period.

What's in this Strategy

As a multi-year strategic engagement framework, this document sets out the core pillars of the approach that will drive all the stakeholder engagement that takes place across our organisation.

This Strategy first sets out a strategic stakeholder map which identifies the core categories and groupings of our stakeholders and examples of organisations included within each. A full operational stakeholder map, and a series of team-specific stakeholder maps, will be developed to support the delivery of the Strategy.

We then set out our overall approach, which includes our principles of engagement, the approach we will deploy and the engagement tools that we will use.

The following section sets out the strategic themes which capture our key priorities for engagement and examples of multi-year activity that will take place.

The final section sets how we intend to deliver this Strategy and demonstrate success through an Engagement Evaluation Framework.

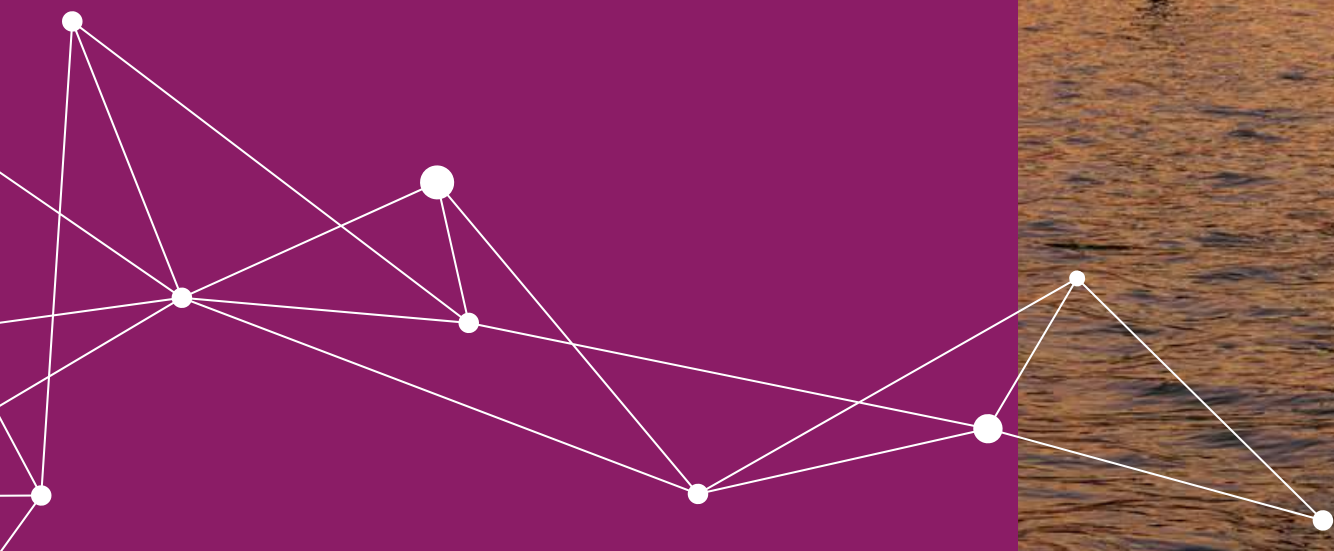


Figure 2: Stakeholder Engagement Strategy Structure





Our stakeholders





Following a detailed Stakeholder Needs Assessment and mapping exercise, and after further engagement and consultation with our stakeholders, we have identified three core stakeholder categories: Society, Industry and Statutory. Each core category has a series of sub-categories.

In this section, we set out our strategic stakeholder map. As part of the delivery of this Strategy, more detailed stakeholder mapping will take place across every team within SONI to embed a consistent approach to engagement at every level of our organisation.



Society

As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, we understand the importance of ensuring that local communities and electricity consumers are at the heart of the energy transition. Our *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap* identifies Engagement as a key pillar in decarbonising the power system.

Not only must we acknowledge that it is electricity consumers who fund our activities and key projects, but it is also crucial that we engage meaningfully with local communities in relation to our

network development projects, affording them an opportunity to shape our plans, build trust and confidence and encourage community buy-in.

That is why we have sought to further enhance our public engagement model and three-part grid development process, which already far exceeds our statutory pre-application community consultation obligations, to ensure SONI continues to strive for an industry-leading standard of local community engagement.





We also recognise the crucial role that landowners play in hosting the infrastructure required to deliver a safe, secure and reliable supply of electricity for everyone in Northern Ireland in the present and future.

Our new Landowner Charter will set out our steadfast commitment to open, transparent, consistent and meaningful engagement with landowners now and in the future.

In addition to local communities and electricity consumers, we also understand the importance of working closely with their elected representatives and other civic society organisations.

The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy also emphasises the huge economic opportunity represented by the energy transition. As such, our Strategy seeks to ensure we continue to work closely with business and their representative organisations to ensure they shape our plans, as non-domestic energy consumers, and we work together to maximise the opportunities to decarbonise our economy and our green growth potential.

Case study

Mid Antrim Upgrade Citizen Sounding Board

Local communities

In 2022, SONI commenced a pilot of a deeper deliberative participation model of engagement working with independent public participation charity, Involve, for the Mid Antrim Upgrade project.

The pilot involved the creation of two fora – a Community Forum consisting of local community leaders and a Citizen Sounding Board made up of a random, demographically weighted selection of 24 people from the local area.

Working intensely with subject matter experts from SONI, NIE Networks, RPS and RenewableNI, members of the local community spent time developing their knowledge and understanding of the project and developed a report which included a series of recommendations to inform SONI's three-part grid development process.

This 'mini public' was among the first to be used in Northern Ireland in the energy and utilities industry and was shortlisted for a Responsible Business Award by Business in the Community Northern Ireland.

Following the successful pilot, SONI has incorporated this type of approach into its Public Engagement Model for future complex network development projects.

100%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"I was given enough information to form opinions on new subjects"

100%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"I can see clearly that my views were taken into consideration throughout this process"

83%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"I understand how the Mid Antrim Upgrade will help Northern Ireland meet its 80% renewable energy target by 2030"

100%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"Processes like these should be used more by SONI to inform their decision making"

Case study

Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and SONI Energy Forum

Business and Industry

In 2023, SONI continued its partnership with the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce to run the Energy Forum. A series of quarterly thought-leadership events, the Energy Forum brings the business community and industry together to discuss the opportunities and challenges in delivering Northern Ireland's 2030 renewable energy goals.

Recent themes included topics such as planning reform, the importance of meaningful community engagement and updates on the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy Action Plans.



266

Attendees

9

Speakers

95%

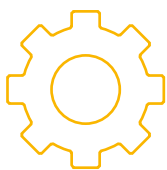
Attendees furthered their knowledge of the energy landscape in Northern Ireland

85%

Attendees made connections to widen their business network

100%

Attendees were satisfied that the Energy forum met their business priorities



Industry

Given the deeply interdependent nature of the electricity system in Northern Ireland and the interface between a wide range of industry stakeholders, it is crucial that engagement and collaboration takes place on a whole system basis and at every level.

Intense collaboration and innovation in areas such as distribution clusters between SONI and NIE Networks, and the joint working with EirGrid, generators and the Distribution System Operator on the DS3 Programme, was critical to meeting Northern Ireland's 40% renewable energy target set by the Strategic Energy Framework in 2010.

Meeting the 80% renewable energy target set the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act will require an intensification of that collaboration and engagement to avail of the opportunities and meet the challenges ahead.



Northern Ireland TSO and Republic of Ireland TSO

SONI works on an all-island basis as part of the Single Electricity Market with our partners, EirGrid – the Republic of Ireland Transmission System Operator and Market Operator (MO). Intense collaboration between the two TSOs and Market Operators is crucial for the successful running of the Single Electricity Market.

In 2021 and 2023, SONI and EirGrid published the *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap* which set out the key changes required to the power system to meet Northern Ireland and Ireland's renewable energy ambitions. In 2020 and 2024, SONI and EirGrid published *Tomorrow's Energy Scenarios* – a key thought leadership intervention which

establishes potential pathways to a net zero power system by 2050.

This collaboration was essential in delivering recent key successes. For example, the joint delivery of important initiatives within the *Shaping Roadmap* System Operations Programme was key in ensuring our power systems could facilitate 75% electricity from variable renewable sources in 2021 – among the first power systems in the world to achieve this significant milestone.

Despite changes to the relationship between SONI and EirGrid, due to modifications to our licence made by the Utility Regulator, close collaboration will remain a key priority for SONI, particularly in key areas such as all-island scheduling and dispatch and Future Arrangements for System Services.





TSO-DSO

As the Transmission System Operator, SONI has a deep and vitally important relationship with NIE Networks as the Transmission Owner (TO) and Distribution System Operator (DSO). In addition to the Transmission Interface Arrangements which governs the TO-TSO relationship, SONI and NIE Networks continue to identify opportunities for further collaboration.

Working together to deepen the collaboration with NIE Networks will be a priority for SONI in the delivery of this Strategy and our wider Business Plan priorities.

Notable recent success includes the formation of the Transmission Development Plan Working Group to accelerate the delivery of key network infrastructure projects, joint working on connections policy reform in relation to small-scale renewable generation, and the TSO-DSO Future Operating Model.

Case study

Working together with NIE Networks on small-scale generation connection policy

To keep the Northern Ireland power system stable and secure, SONI must be able to balance generation against system demand in line with statutory operational standards. Maintaining this balance requires careful scheduling and control of the generation portfolio.

In recent years, there had been increasing occurrences of very low overnight and early morning demand. This correlated with increased energy efficiency and the considerable volume of small-scale generators (each less than 5MW) connecting to the distribution system which has the effect of eroding the demand seen at system level. The output of this small-scale generation was not able to be controlled and presented challenges for SONI in balancing the system securely.

SONI first raised the need to carefully monitor this challenge together with NIE Networks and industry through engagement on the Alternative Connection Application and Offer Process (ACAOP) in 2016. In 2022, SONI advised NIE Networks, as owner of the distribution connection process, that the volume of small-scale generation connected to the distribution system had reached a critical point with regard to system security in Northern Ireland and that collective action was required.

Both organisations recognised the concerns raised by industry and those wishing to connect small-scale renewable generation in relation to timescales and their ability to secure a connection offer.

As such, SONI and NIE Networks held a series of workshops to scrutinise the operational challenges and consider a range of potential

mitigations available. Both organisations understood the importance of enabling further small-scale generation to connect to the grid to support the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy.

SONI and NIE Networks worked together to develop a solution that would help address system security concerns while enabling further small-scale generation to connect to the distribution system. SONI and NIE Networks engaged with a number of organisations, including the RenewableNI Small-Scale Working Group on the issues and potential solutions. The identified solution included a range of procedural changes between SONI and NIE Networks. It also included a change to the NIE Networks Distribution Connection Agreements for small-scale generation going forward, which entitled NIE Networks following direction from SONI to instruct the generator to cease or reduce parallel operation for a period of time in circumstances where system security is at risk. This risk would be identified by SONI as the TSO, and passed to NIE Networks, based on agreed criteria and procedure.

A consultation paper setting out the above proposal was published on 31st March 2023 with a further decision paper then issued 31st August 2023. The new process went live on the 7th November 2023 enabling new small-scale generation projects to connect to the distribution system with additional procedures implemented between SONI and NIE Networks to manage any system risk.

Whole system approach – Electricity and Gas working together

Collaboration between the electricity and gas transmission system operators is crucial to maintain the whole-system approach required to realise Northern Ireland's renewable energy ambitions. Green hydrogen and biomethane will play an important role in decarbonising Northern Ireland's society and economy, particularly when it comes to maintaining security of supply and supporting large energy users.

As such, deepening our collaboration with Mutual Energy and Gas Networks Ireland, the Gas Transmission System Operators for Northern Ireland, will be a key engagement priority for SONI over the coming years. By working together to share information and analysis and collaborate to jointly solve problems, we can realise the potential of a whole system approach for achieving our collective goals.

Working with industry

The electricity industry plays a crucial role in meeting Northern Ireland's current and future energy needs. Without investment in the conventional generation that has historically served Northern Ireland with a stable, reliable, and secure supply of electricity and the new forms of renewable generation that will enable us to decarbonise our economy and society, there can be no energy transition.

As the Market Operator, SONI engages closely with market participants on an ongoing basis to ensure the smooth running of the all-island market for electricity, underpinned by the Single Electricity Market. The Market Operator User Group and Future Power Markets Workshops meet throughout the year and bring together market participants to discuss performance and areas of mutual interest. Our system operations team engages daily with the generators who ensure a secure, stable and reliable source of electricity for homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland, working together on issues such as outage planning.

As the Transmission System Operator, SONI continues to deliver on our licence obligation to issue connection offers to customers seeking to connect to the grid.

To ensure the best customer experience, we prioritise early, meaningful engagement to explain the connections process and support customers through the journey.

In the last number of years, we have seen a significant increase in connections applications, and we anticipate this to continue with the introduction of a Renewable Energy Support Scheme.

We recognise that our Connections Policy must evolve with the increase in demand for connections to the transmission system. That's why revising our Connections Policy and customer engagement processes will be a key priority for SONI in the coming years.

In 2021, SONI, in partnership with EirGrid, published *Shaping Our Electricity Future* – our roadmap to meet the initial target 70% renewable energy target by 2030 set for Northern Ireland. A vast body of engagement took place to inform the

Shaping Roadmap including over 500 consultation responses, over 100 virtual consultation events and several civic society and industry fora.

To support and guide the delivery of the *Shaping Roadmap*, an Advisory Council made up of subject matter experts from industry, academia and public policy, was formed and has been meeting regularly over the past number of years.

In response to the revised target of 80% set by the passage of the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, a revised *Shaping Roadmap*, supported by the Advisory Council, was published in 2023. The *Shaping Our Electricity Future* Advisory Council has been a key pillar of our engagement with industry.

At a strategic level, SONI works closely with RenewableNI, the representative body for the renewable energy industry in Northern Ireland, to ensure the voice and expertise of industry informs key policy developments. As we continue to develop the technical roadmaps, such as *Shaping Our Electricity Future*, and operational tools, in areas such as Long Duration Energy Storage, we welcome the invaluable experience, knowledge and expertise offered by industry partners. We are committed to working together to develop balanced solutions to the challenges we face.

Case study

Shaping Our Electricity Future 1.1 briefing with RenewableNI members

In October 2023, SONI facilitated a briefing for RenewableNI members on the revised *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap*.

At the virtual event, SONI's Head of Power System Insights and Research, Dave McGowan, and Future Networks Senior Engineer, Michael McClure, delivered a short briefing presentation followed by a Q&A session.

85%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"The engagement met my expectations and added value to my role"

85%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"The information provided was accessible and proportionate to my needs"

85%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"I have a better understanding of SONI's role and the relevant subject matter"

85%

Agreed/Strongly Agreed

"There was sufficient opportunity for me to engage and ask questions"





Statutory

As Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, SONI is independently licensed to operate and plan the development of the grid. This means we can act as a trusted adviser to government at every level on the development and implementation of energy policy.

The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy and its associated Action Plans set the substantive policy direction at a macro-level. As the Transmission System Operator, SONI's role is to support government as a trusted adviser while also delivering the changes required to the transmission system as important enabling infrastructure.

Northern Ireland met the 40% target set by the Strategic Energy Framework (2010) a year early in 2019. This was a significant milestone and the result of an extensive body of work and collaboration across the whole system.

However, since meeting the 40% target, SONI has been acutely aware of the need for further decarbonisation of the power system in Northern Ireland to meet the UK's future net zero goals.

Since then, we have been publishing key roadmaps to advise and inform government policy on the next steps in delivering the changes to the electricity system required to meet Northern Ireland's short, medium and long-term renewable energy goals.

This included publishing a revised *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap* in 2023 to support the upwards revision of the target to 80% through the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. Most recently, SONI published a new *Tomorrow's Energy Scenarios* analysis in 2024 detailing four possible scenarios for a net-zero power system by 2050.

Since the publication of the Energy Strategy, we have worked closely with government and other industry and regulatory partners on various workstreams and working groups on topics such as the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan and Security of Supply.

As 2030 approaches, intensifying our collaboration with government to accelerate progress and develop policy in areas such as smart systems, demand flexibility, interconnection and other areas will be a key priority in the coming years.

With significant responsibility at a local level, we value the importance of our engagement with local government in Northern Ireland and work closely with Councils in relation to our plans to develop the grid at a local level.

As the closest tier of government to local communities, Local Councils play a vital role in supporting Northern

Ireland's decarbonisation ambitions. As our network development plans unfold, working closely with local councils to enable further meaningful engagement with communities will be an important focus.

As a regulated organisation, we recognise the importance of maintaining the confidence and trust of consumers. As such, close engagement with the Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland remains crucial in areas such as our Business Plan, the funding requirements for network development projects and the smooth running and design of the markets which ensure Northern Ireland has the electricity generation it requires.



We engage regularly with the Utility Regulator in several different settings and the Evaluative Performance Framework process affords an opportunity for SONI to deliver added value to consumers over and above our core licence obligations and business as usual activities.

As a statutory body, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland also plays a key role in advocating on behalf of consumers on energy.

We understand that consumers must be at the heart of the energy transition to achieve our collective ambitions.

As the Transmission System Operator, we see further opportunities to utilise the research, expertise and insights offered by the Consumer Council to guide our mission to support the delivery of a cleaner energy future for homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland.

Case study

A timeline of key thought leadership publications from SONI

2019

Strategy 2020-2025

Plans to further decarbonise the power system

2020

Tomorrow's Energy Scenarios (TES)

Three pathways for energy use out to 2040

2021

TES Needs Assessment

The impact of the TES scenarios on the transmission system

2021

Shaping Our Electricity Future

A technical roadmap to enabling the power system to meet 70% RES

2023

Shaping Our Electricity Future 1.1

A revised roadmap to meet Northern Ireland's new 80% target

2024

Tomorrow's Energy Scenarios

Four scenarios for how electricity demand and generation may evolve out to 2050

Case study

Minister Conor Murphy visits the SONI Control Centre

In April 2024, SONI welcomed Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, for a visit to SONI's Control Centre. During the Control Centre visit, the Minister was able to hear first-hand from our experienced grid control engineers about the challenges of managing a power system in transition.

The Minister also received a briefing and participated in a roundtable discussion

with SONI's Chair and Senior Leadership Team to discuss further opportunities for collaboration to accelerate the delivery of the Energy Strategy.

As a trusted adviser, SONI remains committed to working closely with the Department for the Economy to support Northern Ireland's renewable energy ambitions.

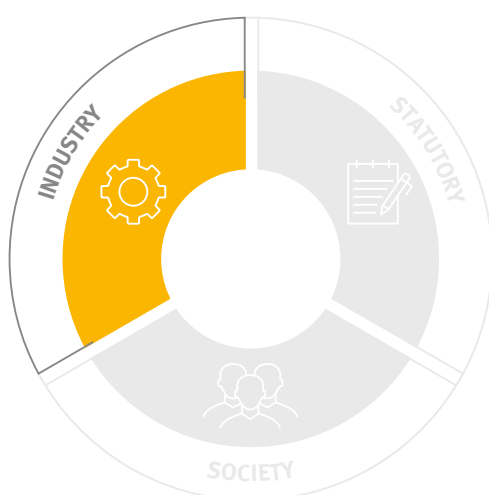




Key Stakeholders

Examples

Local communities	Local communities
Landowners	Local landowners
Elected representatives	MPs, MLAs, Councillors, Parliamentary Committees
Civic Society Groups and Academia	Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, Ulster Farmers Union, Rural Community Network, NICVA, Community Places, Action Renewables, EnergyCloud, Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy
Businesses and Business Representative Groups	Confederation of British Industry NI, Federation of Small Businesses, NI Chamber of Commerce, Manufacturing NI, Retail NI, NI Retail Consortium, Hospitality Ulster, Business in the Community, local Chambers of Commerce



Key Stakeholders

Examples

Customers	Potential investors, Developers, Generators, Suppliers
Market Participants	Generators (current and future), Demand Side Units, Mutual Energy
Industry Partners	EirGrid, NIE Networks, Mutual Energy, Gas Networks Ireland, RenewableNI, National Grid ESO, European Network of Transmission System Operators (ENTSO-E), Energy Association of Ireland, Federation of Energy Response Aggregators, Major Energy Users Council



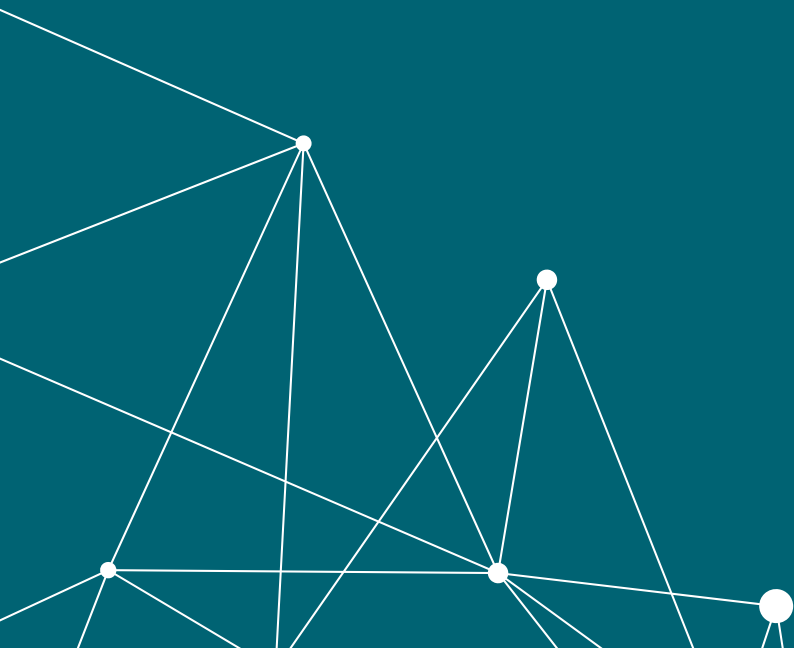
Key Stakeholders

Examples

Government	Government Ministers Department for the Economy Department for Agriculture, Environment, Rural Affairs Department for Infrastructure Northern Ireland Office Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
Regulatory Partners	The Utility Regulator Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) SEM Committee
Local Government	Local Councils NILGA SOLACE
Other statutory partners	Consumer Council for Northern Ireland



Our engagement approach





To develop this Strategy, SONI undertook a body of desk-based research to understand best practice in stakeholder engagement.

Coupled with the findings of the comprehensive Stakeholder Needs Assessment undertaken in 2023, and following further engagement and consultation with partners, we have developed a new engagement approach.

This section sets out our principles for engagement, our overall engagement approach and an engagement toolbox which will guide delivery across our organisation to ensure a quality, consistent and purposeful offer.

Our principles for engagement

The energy system in Northern Ireland is complex, including the integration of a private market, and involves a wide range of stakeholders each with different and often competing priorities in relation to the energy transition.

As the Transmission System Operator, SONI's key priority must be facilitating the flow of a safe, secure, reliable supply of electricity from those who generate it to the homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland who need it.

In seeking to transform the power system at the scale and pace required to meet the 2030 targets, there are competing challenges that need to be navigated to achieve the twin objectives of running the power system securely in the present while upgrading the system to meet the needs of the future.

In delivering the unprecedented scale and complexity of change required to the power system, we must also take care to ensure the cost to the consumer is always at the forefront of our minds.

Working together, we must take the time to explain the benefits of strategic long-term investments in the grid as the vehicle for delivering a cleaner, more secure energy future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Given the different priorities of our stakeholders, as Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator, we must find balanced solutions to the opportunities and challenges ahead. As an independently licensed system operator, with legal and licence obligations, we cannot and should not pretend that we can satisfy the asks of all our stakeholders, all of the time. However, through purposeful, consistent and meaningful engagement, we can work together with our stakeholders in an open, transparent and collaborative way.

To enable this approach, we have set out a new set of engagement principles.



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.



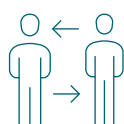
Impact

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.

Our engagement approach

In developing this Strategy, we have considered best practice and examples in other similar organisations in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Combined with the feedback from our stakeholders as part of our Stakeholder Needs Assessment and Call for Views process, we have developed the following engagement approach.

To deliver purposeful, consistent and quality engagement throughout our organisation, we will use a three-phase model in planning stakeholder engagement. During this, we will ensure we are communicating with our partners throughout.



We communicate throughout



Assess and Plan

At the beginning a project, we map out our stakeholders and assess the impact of our plans. We plan our approach to stakeholder engagement, including milestones for engagement and communication, and engage at the earliest opportunity.



Engage and Review

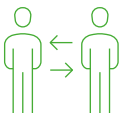
We engage with stakeholders via the methods outlined in our plans and collate and review their feedback.



Update and Improve

We update our stakeholders on our progress and we identify opportunities to incorporate their feedback to improve our plans.

Our engagement toolbox

Approach	Purpose	Mechanisms
 Inform	We share information and expertise with our stakeholders and let them know about our plans to support their awareness, knowledge and understanding.	Website, social media, emails, webinars, advertisement and marketing, direct customer engagements.
 Consult	We ask stakeholders for their views on our plans and we listen to their feedback.	Consultations via our Consultation Portal, community events, focus groups, feedback surveys.
 Involve	We build a process of two-way engagement to understand concerns and work together to identify and deliver solutions.	Workshops, bilateral meetings, industry roundtables, industry events
 Collaborate	We jointly identify common problems and co-design solutions.	Working groups, joint projects, multi-partner initiatives.

Strategic themes





This section sets out the strategic themes and key activity that will inform our approach for the duration of this Strategy.

The themes have been identified in line with our current *Strategy 2020-2025* purpose and objectives and further informed by our Stakeholder Needs Assessment and further engagement and consultation with our stakeholders.

More detailed stakeholder engagement activity will be set out in a series of shorter, more succinct Annual Action Plans which will be published alongside our Forward Work Plan.

Supporting Northern Ireland's renewable energy ambitions

As Northern Ireland's independently licenced Transmission System Operator, SONI can offer our expertise, experience and skills as a trusted adviser on energy policy to government and policymakers.

With less than six years until Northern Ireland's 80% renewable energy target is due to be met, we will continue working closely with the Department for the Economy, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Infrastructure to support the delivery of the Energy Strategy and Climate Action Plans.

Through the analysis and thought leadership contained in publications such as *Tomorrow's Energy Scenarios*, *Shaping Our Electricity Future* and the *Generation Capacity Statement*, we will continue to support government to develop the remaining enabling policy to ensure Northern Ireland can meet its renewable energy and decarbonisation objectives.

Our forecasts and assessments, in areas such as demand growth, generation capacity requirements and transmission system needs, will support policymakers to make decisions about Northern Ireland's future energy needs with

confidence. Key areas include smart systems and flexibility, interconnection, green hydrogen policy and the implementation of a new Renewable Energy Support Scheme.

As a small island-based power system, Northern Ireland has historically been world-leading in its integration of renewable energy. We were among the first power systems in the world to be able to facilitate 75% renewable energy at any given time.

Our size and the concentrated nature of network and industry stakeholder landscape means we should be able to act with innovation and agility. As Northern Ireland's 80% renewable energy target date approaches, intensifying the collaboration with government to find balanced solutions to the challenges ahead will be key to success.

As our energy system fundamentally changes to enable the decarbonisation of our society and economy, a whole-system approach is required to develop the balanced solutions needed to meet our collective ambitions. In this respect, fostering further and deeper collaboration between the electricity and gas network operators will be vitally important.

Multi-year Strategic Engagement Activity

To deliver on this Strategic theme, we will:

- 01** Continue to play an active role in existing and new government-led working groups, such as the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Group and the 80x30 Working Group, to contribute to policymaking and put forward proposals to accelerate delivery.
- 02** Undertake further detailed analysis and assessments to support policy and decision-making in key areas such as future demand and generation requirements, system needs and energy transition acceleration.
- 03** Further intensify our collaboration with NIE Networks as the TO and DSO across every level of our business and through mechanisms such as the Transmission Development Plan Working Group.
- 04** Develop and embed a more structured engagement approach with Northern Ireland's Gas Transmission System Operators to collaborate on areas of mutual interest and facilitate a whole-system approach to policy development and delivery.
- 05** Deliver a bespoke programme of engagements to update key stakeholders on our progress, including an annual business and industry event.
- 06** Continue to convene the SOEF Advisory Council to steer our delivery of the *Shaping Roadmap*.
- 07** Continue our partnership with the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce to deliver the Energy Forum.
- 08** Engage with elected representatives and officials and utilise our experience and expertise to support energy policy development.

Managing a power system in transition

To integrate further significant quantities of renewable energy to support Northern Ireland's decarbonisation goals, the electricity grid and how it is operated must be transformed at a scale, pace and level of complexity that is unprecedented.

Our Shaping Our Electricity Future

Roadmap sets out an operational programme of work to ensure the power system can facilitate newer, intermittent, and more variable forms of renewable generation. While SONI is committed to taking this forward at pace to hasten the integration of more renewable energy, there are technological parameters and lead in times for the future solutions and services we require.

As the Transmission System Operator, SONI's key priority must be facilitating the flow of a safe, secure and reliable supply of electricity from those who generate it to the homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland who need it.

In seeking to transform the power system at the magnitude required to meet the 2030 targets, there are competing challenges that need to be navigated to achieve the twin objectives of running the power system and maintaining security of supply in the present and upgrading the system and integrating more renewables for the future.

In managing a power system in transition, we are committed to working with government, regulatory partners, industry and others to manage the short-term challenges that arise while working collaboratively on the medium and long-term solutions.

We are acutely aware of industry concerns in relation to key strategic challenges such as the pace of renewable integration, firm access and dispatch down. We are committed to working collaboratively to deliver balanced solutions to these challenges. As such, workstreams in areas such as Long Duration Energy Storage, Low Carbon Inertia Services and Future Arrangements for System Services will be a key priority.

As joint operators of the Single Electricity Market, we will continue to work closely with EirGrid to deliver the system operational roadmaps that will facilitate the operation of a fundamentally renewables-based power system.

At a European level, we continue to collaborate as part of the European Network of Transmission System Operators to monitor key operational developments and innovation to understand their applicability for Northern Ireland's power system.

On security of supply, we will continue to engage with the Department for the Economy and the Utility Regulator to ensure the market delivers the generation required to meet Northern Ireland's energy demand and mitigate any potential risks to security of supply.

Each year, we publish the *Winter Outlook* and engage with our stakeholders on the adequacy position for the Winter ahead. Given our role to plan the power system to accommodate Northern Ireland's current and future energy needs, we also publish the annual *Generation Capacity Statement* to signal to the market the generation that Northern Ireland requires to meet our current and future demand.

Managing any power system is complex and involves balancing a wide range of external factors such as the weather, consumer demand, unforeseen generator outages, the timely delivery of new

generation by developers and the retirement of old fossil fuel generation. Balancing these factors becomes more challenging as the grid transitions to a system based on variable, intermittent, renewable generation.

While our experienced, expert grid engineers have tried and tested plans in place to manage any imbalance that may occur between demand and the generation available, our assessments point to several challenges over the coming years that will need to be managed in close collaboration.

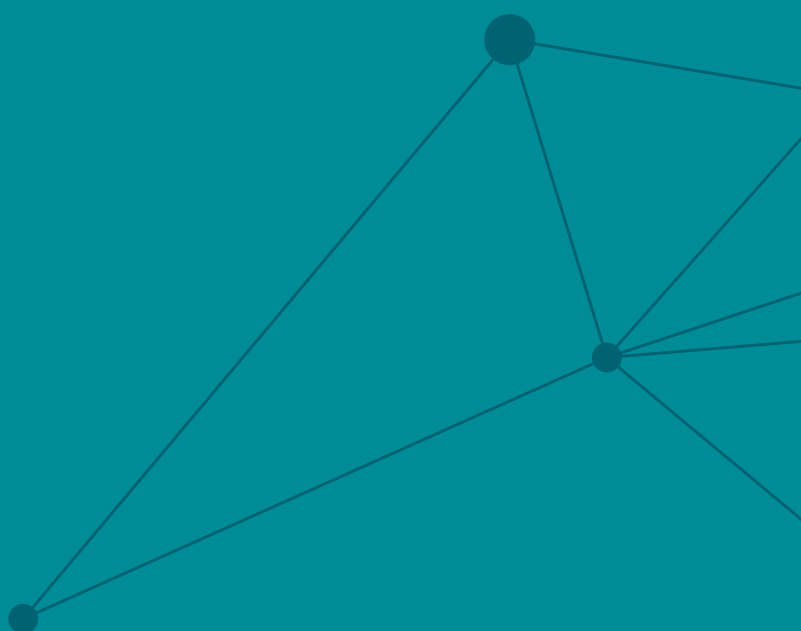
As such, continuing to test and further develop our emergency preparedness and procedures with partners, including the Department for the Economy, The Executive Office Civil Contingencies frameworks, NIE Networks and others, will remain a key engagement priority.



Multi-year Strategic Engagement Activity

To deliver on this Strategic theme, we will:

- 01** Continue to work collaboratively and constructively with the Utility Regulator and the Department for the Economy on core security of supply workstreams.
- 02** Deliver strategic engagement programmes on thought leadership workstreams on areas such as Long Duration Energy Storage, Low Carbon Inertia Services and Future Arrangements for System Services.
- 03** Engage with industry on strategic challenges such as dispatch down and firm access policy to identify balanced solutions.
- 04** Further engage on and develop the National Resource Adequacy Assessment to introduce further methodological rigour on future demand and generation capacity assessments.
- 05** Deliver a programme of strategic communications and engagement with key stakeholders and consumers on SONI's role in managing a power system in transition, including on our *Winter Outlook*.
- 06** Engage as an active member of the European Network of Transmission System Operators to share best practice.
- 07** Further develop SONI's emergency preparedness procedures in collaboration with partners.



Working together to accelerate the transformation of the power system

As nationally significant infrastructure, the electricity grid plays a key role in our society and economy ensuring power can flow safely, securely and reliably from where it is generated to where it is needed.

As the Transmission System Operator, we have a legal and licence obligation to plan the upgrades required to the grid to meet Northern Ireland's energy needs in an economic, efficient and coordinated manner. We also have an obligation to facilitate connections to the grid for those seeking to generate and sell electricity.

However, our planning role has taken on a new importance with Northern Ireland's ambitious renewable energy targets. As the vehicle for transporting electricity to homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland, the electricity grid is crucial enabling infrastructure for our collective renewable energy ambitions.

More infrastructure in the form of pylons, towers, poles, overhead lines, underground cables and substations will be required to connect new generation and transport renewable electricity across Northern Ireland.

As the energy transition progresses, we anticipate a significant increase in demand for grid connections and the required infrastructure and capacity to facilitate them.

Through the Renewable Grid Liaison Group, we work closely with industry and regulatory partners to identify challenges and collaboratively develop solutions.

With demand for connections set to rise, we understand that our Connections Policy and process needs to be fit-for-purpose. Engaging with industry to develop a more robust revised policy and investing in a more in the customer journey will be a key priority for SONI in the coming years.

Our rolling ten-year Transmission Development Plan sets out the programme of grid infrastructure required and we work closely with NIE Networks through the Transmission Development Plan Working Group to deliver this expeditiously.

Our draft Transmission Development Plan 2023-2032 sets out six critical projects for the 80% target set by the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022. We understand the timescales to deliver this programme of infrastructure are hugely challenging and that working in a business-as-usual fashion risks us falling short of our goals. That is why intensifying our collaboration with government, industry, regulators and local communities to proactively identify opportunities to remove barriers to delivery and accelerate progress will be a key priority for SONI.

In the coming months and years, we will continue to engage with government, industry and regulatory partners on proposals that could accelerate grid development such as Transmission

Clusters, anticipatory investment and more of a plan-led approach.

Local communities must be at the heart of the energy transition. Our 3-Part Grid Development Process and Public Engagement Model means that SONI is engaging with local communities and their elected representatives at the earliest possible opportunity, sometimes years before a project is submitted for planning permission, and over multiple engagement periods.

Feedback from local communities can be invaluable in the development of our projects, but consistent, open and meaningful engagement is also vital if we want to build trust and confidence in the areas which host Northern Ireland's grid infrastructure.



While our existing public engagement model goes far above and beyond what is required as part of the planning process, we recognise the need to redouble our efforts with local communities. That is why we recently revised and strengthened our Public Engagement Model, following a period of consultation and engagement with civic society organisations and public engagement experts.

Incorporating new, innovative and more deliberative methods to expand and improve our reach and engagement with local communities will be a key focus in our upcoming projects.

Landowners and rural communities play a crucial role in hosting the grid infrastructure that ensures power can flow from where it is generated to where it is needed in farms, businesses and homes across Northern Ireland.

We recognise that hosting grid infrastructure is a burden that impacts landowners and rural communities.

To demonstrate our commitment to engage with landowners with integrity, consistency and respect, we have developed a new Landowner Charter which sets out the standards and principles that will drive our approach.

More widely, we recognise that the views of consumers must inform our work and shape our plans. Over the coming years, deepening our collaboration with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland through more structured engagement will ensure the voice of consumers is at the heart of everything we do.

To achieve Northern Ireland's decarbonisation goals, we must work together, as a full energy eco-system, to ensure we explain and communicate the societal, environmental and economic benefits of this once-in-a-generation transition to consumers and ensure they have the information and confidence to play an active role.

Multi-year Strategic Engagement Activity

To deliver on this Strategic theme, we will:

01 Engage with the Department for the Economy, NIE Networks and industry on proposals to help accelerate the delivery of grid infrastructure.

02 Deepen our collaboration with NIE Networks on grid delivery through the Transmission Development Plan Working Group.

03 Continue our engagement with industry through the Renewable Grid Liaison Group and other working groups.

04 Engage with industry and regulatory partners on a revised Connections Policy.

05 Engage with industry and regulatory partners to develop new Transmission Cluster Policy and consider options to improve firm access policy.

06 Implement our new Public Engagement Model and Landowner Charter.

07 Deliver a programme of public engagement and landowner engagement for SONI.

08 Deliver a programme of strategic communications to improve the awareness and understanding of the need to upgrade the power system with consumers.

09 Deepen our relationship with the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland through a more structured programme of engagement to ensure consumer insights shape our plans.

10 Liaise with the Department for the Economy and the Utility Regulator on policy opportunities in areas such as landowner compensation and community benefit.

A world-class system operator working for Northern Ireland

At SONI, we are entering a new phase on our journey as Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator.

Changes made to our licence made by the Utility Regulator to provide more managerial and operational separation between SONI and our parent company, EirGrid plc, offers an opportunity to forge a fresh vision and direction with the guidance of our new, independent Board.

As we approach the end of our current Price Control period and *Strategy 2020-2025*, we will be commencing an extensive programme of internal and external engagement to inform our next five-year strategy, Business Plan and our Price Control submission.

Due to the complex and interdependent nature of Northern Ireland's energy system, we understand that collaboration must be at the heart of our approach.

Given how we are funded, we also want to understand the views and priorities of consumers, both domestic and non-domestic, as to how we can be a world-class TSO working for homes, farms and businesses across Northern Ireland.

That is why we are engaging with our key stakeholders at the earliest possible opportunity in the development of our new five-year Strategy.

This five-year Strategy will fundamentally shape the submission for our next Price Control submission to the Utility Regulator.





The scale and complexity of the task to meet Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets is unprecedented, however while we are confident in our role to support that journey, we want to hear openly and honestly from our stakeholders about their priorities for Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator.

The extensive programme of engagement to support the development of our next five-year Strategy, Business Plan and Price Control submission will be a key engagement priority for our organisation.

We are committed to working collaboratively with our stakeholders to co-develop a vision and plan for the future that will position SONI as a world-class TSO working for everyone in Northern Ireland.

On an annual basis, we continue to publish a Forward Work Plan and Performance Report where we set out the additional activity we intend to undertake to add further value for our stakeholders within our existing Price Control Allowance. Working with the Utility Regulator, we host a number of engagement workshops throughout the year to discuss our progress against delivery and highlight success in key projects. As a new process, further refining our approach to the Forward Work Plan and Performance Report, to provide the most open, value-added information and experience for our stakeholders will be a key area of focus.

Multi-year Strategic Engagement Activity

To deliver on this Strategic theme, we will:

01 Develop and deliver an extensive engagement process to support the development of our next five-year Strategy, Business Plan and Price Control submission.

02 Ensure that the views and insights of consumers, both domestic and non-domestic, fundamentally shape our plans.

03 Develop a new five-year Stakeholder Engagement Strategy to support the delivery of our Strategy 2025-2031.

04 Publish an Annual Forward Work Plan and Performance Report as part of the Evaluative Performance Framework and engage with stakeholders throughout the process.

05 Deliver a programme of strategic engagement and communications to increase awareness and understanding of our role as Northern Ireland's Transmission System Operator.

Fostering a culture of engagement





Our mission is to embed a culture of engagement at every level and across every team in our organisation. We aspire to offer ‘best in class’ standard of engagement that is purposeful, meaningful and consistent to all our stakeholders.

In this section, we set out how we will deliver this Strategy and its associated action plans and demonstrate successful delivery.

How we'll deliver this Strategy

Annual Action Plans

As outlined in our 'Calls for Views' paper, where we asked for the views of our stakeholders on our proposed approach, the primary mechanism for delivering this Strategy will be through a series of Annual Action Plans. These Actions Plan will be published alongside our Forward Work Plan and set out the stakeholder engagement activity that will be undertaken each year.

Stakeholder Engagement Coordination Group

To coordinate stakeholder engagement activity, SONI has established a Stakeholder Engagement Coordination Group to coordinate and oversee the delivery of the annual action plans, the consistent rollout of our approach and the implementation of our evaluation framework. This Group will also coordinate the development of future Action Plans and consider opportunities for continuous improvement and innovation.

A Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit

To foster a high standard of purposeful, consistent and meaningful engagement, we will develop a stakeholder engagement toolkit, including tools such as stakeholder mapping templates, to support our teams in the planning and delivery of their engagement activity.

Building our capacity and capability for engagement

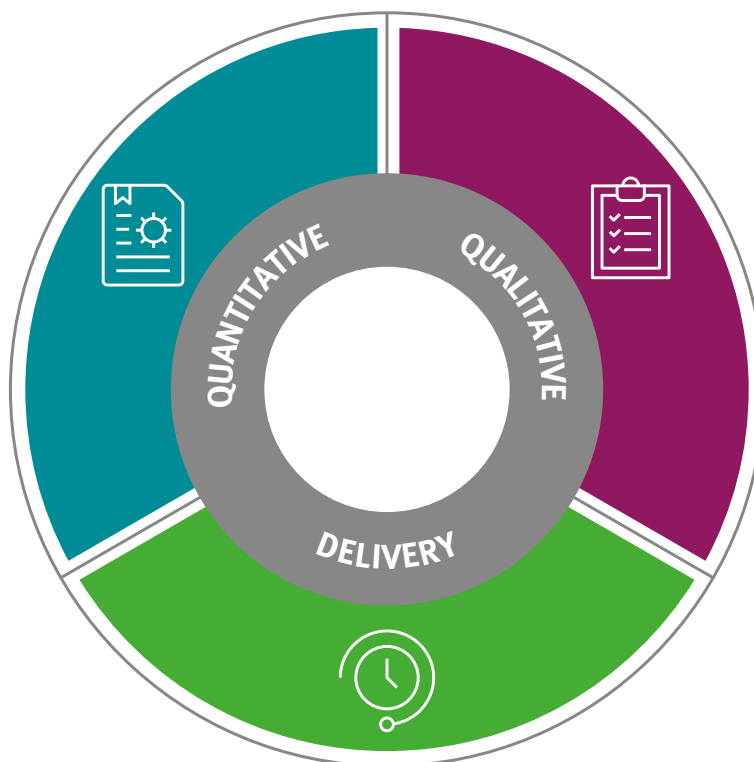
We want to embed a culture of engagement at every level and across every team in our organisation. To support our teams to further develop their capacity and capability, building on their strong subject matter expertise, we will develop and deliver a programme of continuous professional development. We will also embed engagement into our team business planning, objectives and personal development plans.

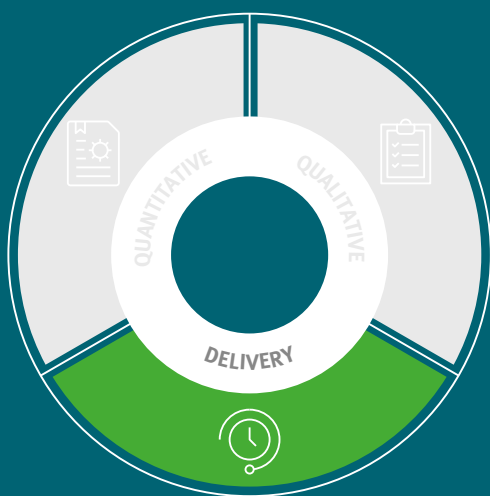
How we'll demonstrate success – our Engagement Evaluation framework

We understand that it is important to our stakeholders that we demonstrate how we are delivering against our engagement commitments and they have the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience of working with us.

Using this Framework, we will report against our performance through the annual SONI Performance Report process detailed in the Evaluative Performance Framework.

To support this, we have used industry best practice to develop an Engagement Evaluation Framework which utilises a range of metrics and research methods to provide the most accurate and considered picture of our performance.





Metrics

Delivery against planned engagement activity



Metrics

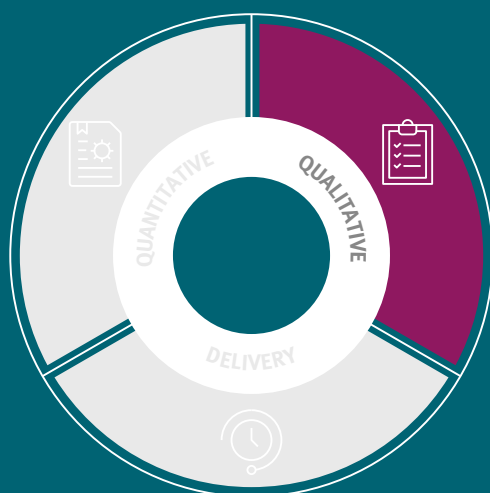
Post engagement-specific survey

- Knowledge and professionalism
- Accessibility
- Delivery against expectations
- Stakeholder satisfaction
- Opportunities for improvement

Annual pulse survey

- Knowledge and professionalism
- Accessibility
- Delivery against expectations
- Stakeholder satisfaction
- Opportunities for improvement
- Future engagement priorities

Social media/digital engagement metrics



Metrics

Focus groups
Survey comments
Case studies
Engagement testimonials







12 Manse Road, Belfast,
Co. Antrim, BT6 9RT.

T: +44 (0)28 907 94336
W: soni.ltd.uk