



Delivering a cleaner
energy future

Public Engagement





About us

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

In addition to managing the Grid in real time, our expert engineers are responsible for planning ahead to ensure our energy infrastructure meets the needs of the future.

The Northern Ireland Energy Strategy 'Path to Net Zero Energy' and Climate Change Act (2022) set an ambitious and challenging legal target that requires 80% of all electricity consumed to come from renewable sources by 2030.

In Northern Ireland, we have made significant progress so far. The all-island transmission system was among the first regions in the world to have 75% of electricity flowing through the grid from non-conventional sources at any one point in time. In 2023, approximately 50% of our electricity in Northern Ireland came from renewable sources.

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

As we work to upgrade our power system to support the delivery of the Energy Strategy we must ensure the safe, stable, reliable supply of electricity for homes, farms and businesses in the present.

To reach the ambitious and challenging targets, SONI has the crucial task of transforming the electricity system and how we manage it in an unprecedented way.

This means we need to plan for more and different types of grid infrastructure to



support the flow of more renewable energy across Northern Ireland. This important grid infrastructure will also support a growth in demand for electricity as our economy prospers and we move towards the electrification of heat and transport.

Whether its local communities, businesses, landowners, farms and civic society organisations or our partners in the electricity industry, we understand that people must be at the heart of our plans as we work to transform the power system.



The wider context – working together towards 80% by 2030

SONI's *Shaping Our Electricity Future Roadmap*, our plan to transform the power system to support Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets, has 'Engagement' as a key pillar, recognising the vital role of community support.

SONI is committed to keeping communities at the heart of grid development. That is why our Public Engagement Model has continued to evolve as we work to ensure it is responsive to the changing context.

In recent years, we have continued to introduce and invest in new, more innovative approaches to community engagement, including the successful pilot of a Citizen Sounding Board for our Mid Antrim Upgrade.

Case study

Mid Antrim Upgrade Citizen Sounding Board

Between 2022 and 2023, SONI completed 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"

However, as we get closer to the 2030, meeting Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets will require an acceleration of grid development.

The case for meaningful public engagement in this context is crucial.

This acceleration is only possible if SONI and our partners redouble our efforts to work together with local communities to make the changes to the grid required in the time ahead.

That is why we have decided to publish a revised and enhanced Public Engagement Model.

An extensive engagement exercise, supported by the expert, independent public participation charity, Involve, with stakeholders from the rural, business, civic and community planning sectors was undertaken as part of this revision exercise. Insights and expertise gathered during this process contributed to the outworkings of SONI's revised public engagement model.

SONI's 3-Part Process for Developing the Grid provides a high-level framework for public engagement that goes above and beyond what is required by planning legislation in Northern Ireland. This framework will continue to guide our public engagement approach as we work to deliver our energy transition in partnership with communities across Northern Ireland.



SONI's 3-Part Process for Developing the Grid

Each of SONI's network projects have a communications and engagement plan underpinned by our 3-Part Process for Developing the Grid – each of these plans place public engagement at the heart of transmission development.

As the Transmission System Operator, our license and statutory obligations under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 require us to meet the legal minimum threshold for public engagement before submitting a planning application.

The 3-Part Process for Grid Development is the process by which transmission infrastructure development is delivered. Public engagement is central to the 3-Part Process whereby our engagement methods during this process can be defined by the following:



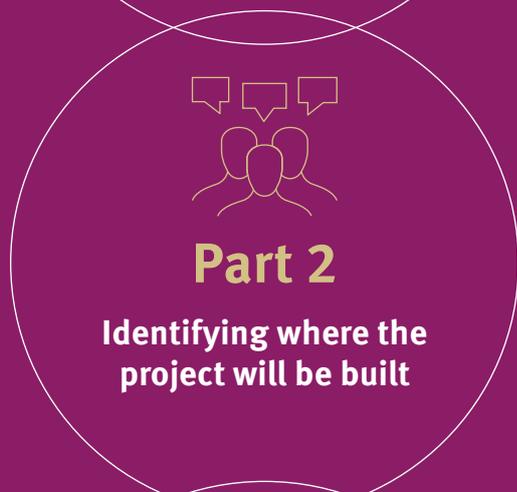
The above happens to varying degrees at each stage of the 3-Part Process, depending on the scale and complexity of the project. Other external factors, such as project opposition, local geography, stakeholder profiling and the political landscape help direct the level of public engagement we undertake.

This process means that we will engage with local communities at the earliest possible opportunity and throughout the lifetime of our project – sometimes years in advance of a planning application being submitted.

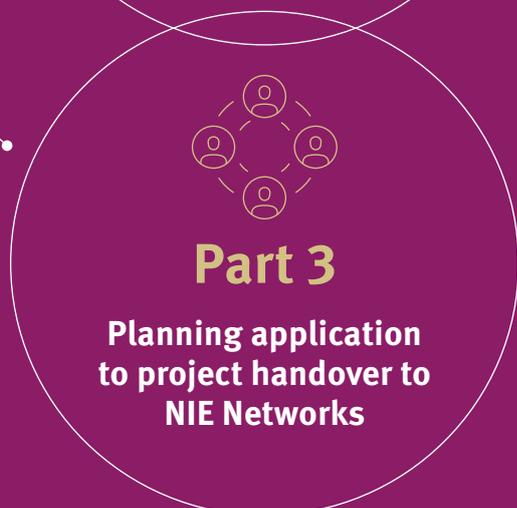
SONI's Grid Development Process



In this part of the process, we will consult on the findings of our research and analysis. We will seek the views of elected representatives, local planning officials, and the asset owner – NIE Networks. We will consider their views and take feedback on board where appropriate, before we finalise the best performing technology solution and the general area where the project may be located.



During this stage, we will provide the public, elected representatives, landowners, and local businesses with opportunities to participate in the process and to tell us what they think. Local knowledge and insight is important to us and so, we will listen to and consider views before we finalise our proposals. Working in partnership is key to this process.



At this final stage we will continue to engage with local communities and landowners in the vicinity of the project during the planning application determination period and ensure that everyone who is interested is kept informed. Part 3 is the only part of the grid development process that SONI is obliged to fulfil under planning legislation.

Our revised approach to public engagement

Achieving Northern Ireland’s climate targets will require an increase in public support of the changes required to decarbonise the power system. It is only through meaningful public engagement and partnership with communities, landowners, businesses, and farms that public support can be achieved.

It is clear that everyone has a part to play in delivering Northern Ireland’s energy transition. Although increasing numbers of consumers are becoming aware of the actions required to tackle climate change, research carried out by the Consumer Council found that only 58% of those polled supported the building of new transmission infrastructure in their local area to aid the increased use of renewable energy.¹ By reviewing our public engagement approach, SONI hopes to heighten levels of public support to help deliver Northern Ireland’s energy transition.

SONI’s approach to public engagement goes beyond simply introducing communities to local project plans in their area. Through our revised approach we aim to go even further, using this model to help connect the public with what is happening in relation to decarbonising the power system. To achieve this, we will engage with people’s values and concerns to help them understand how we can individually and collectively help Northern Ireland move through the energy transition.

This revised approach includes communicating clearly who SONI is and what we do and demonstrating the link between building a power system for the future and developing or improving transmission infrastructure within local communities. This includes additional processes and forums that enable the public to engage and contribute to transmission development in a way provides a sense of community ownership and promotes public support.

Since carrying out a review into our public engagement model, a number of key themes emerged as priorities for consideration when revising our approach. These included:

- **Early engagement with stakeholders**
- **Broadening public participation**
- **Enhanced digital engagement**

1 (2023) Attitudes to the Energy Transition. Consumer Council NI, p. 21.

‘The earlier, the better’: early engagement

SONI engage with key stakeholders as early as possible once the best solution is identified to fix an issue with the power system in the area affected. We provide political representatives and local planning authorities with a brief on this best solution. This initial engagement enables SONI to create early opportunities to receive feedback that can help shape our plans at an early stage.

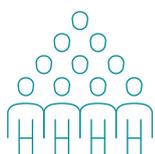
Moving forward, SONI will endeavour to move beyond political and local authority engagement by identifying further interest groups from the business, civic and third sectors to help broaden community knowledge of a forthcoming project at the earliest opportunity.

An additional benefit of broadening engagement early in the process, is the localised knowledge that can help our engineers further refine plans, avoiding any social, environmental, and economic inhibitors that often only those living and working in an area can identify.



Broadening public participation

Beyond helping the public to understand the relationship between decarbonising the power system and tackling climate change, SONI are committed to facilitating more in-depth participation that invites members of the public to help shape our plans using the following methods:



Deliberative mini publics

A deliberative mini public is a group of residents (usually between 12 and 50 but may be up to 100 in larger metropolitan and/ or regional projects). They are recruited at random to demographically reflect the population of the areas impacted by the installation of proposed grid infrastructure. They are brought together for several days over a period early in the grid development process to learn about the project, weigh up options, and make suggestions for how best to proceed. Their involvement addresses the gap in representation that can result from only hearing from organised civil society

and interest groups and acknowledges that ordinary citizens have the right to have a voice in, and have something important to bring to, decisions that will have an impact on everyone. SONI will facilitate this model when developer larger network projects.

When using this model, SONI will commit to detailed consideration of the deliberative mini public's conclusions, and to provide a written response outlining how it will influence the planning process.



Public engagement events

During part 2 of our 3-Part Process for developing the Grid, SONI facilitate localised public engagement events that enable members of the local community to understand who SONI is and what we do and learn more about transmission development in their community.

These events provide the public with the opportunity to provide feedback prior to any planning permission being sought by the local authority.

When using this model, SONI will give feedback on how public input has influenced their decisions.



Consultation portal

SONI's consultation portal provides the public and key stakeholders with an opportunity to participate in our public consultations processes. The public may have up to 12 weeks to make a response to our plans. Consultees will be able to record submissions across multiple consultations and save the progress of partially completed submissions to complete at a later date. When using this model, SONI commits to ensuring that each consultation has concise, clear and accessible information to help consultees form their response appropriately. When using this model, SONI will give feedback on how public input has influenced project plans, if applicable.

Enhanced digital engagement

We are committed to enhancing digital methods of engagement to promote the energy transition across Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to localised transmission projects.

We will communicate using a range of digital communication channels and tools including our website, social media channels and virtual consultation rooms and use a variety of creative approaches such as video and graphics to ensure that the information we provide is accessible for all, particularly those least engaged and hardest to reach.

We will promote and invest in digital signposting to enable the public to engage with our in-person events and consultation processes.



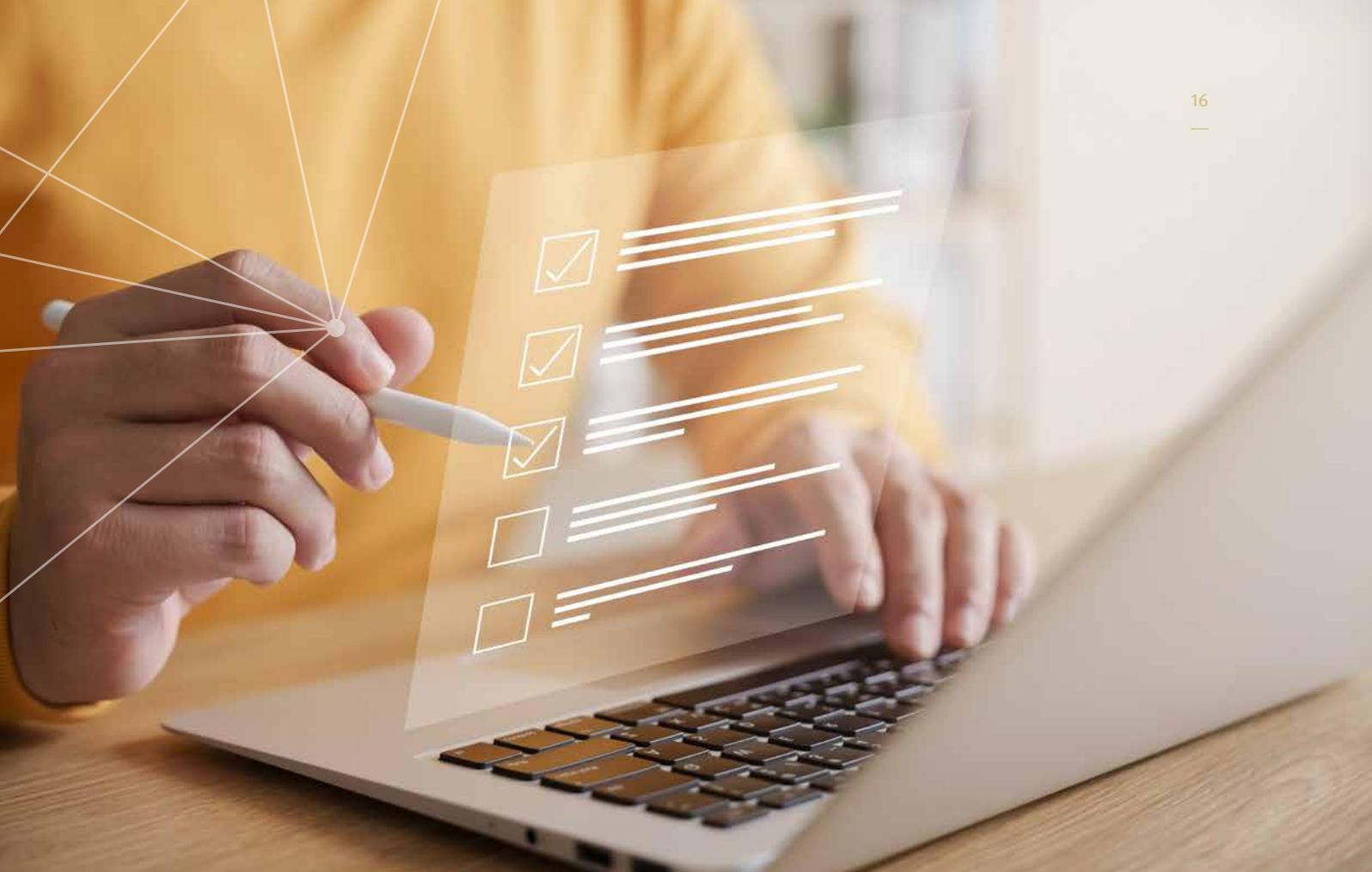
Making this model a success

The publication of this revised Public Engagement Model is the beginning of a new chapter in helping to drive Northern Ireland's energy transition. This model outlines a blueprint for public engagement that keeps communities at the heart of grid development.

Success against this model will not be met in isolation. SONI's overall stakeholder engagement strategy, expertise from our Landowner Engagement Team and involvement of industry partners is crucial to promoting public acceptance of transmission infrastructure.

The public are key to the success of Northern Ireland's energy transition. They must feel that they have opportunity to engage now and into the future with our engagement teams to help refine grid development plans by understanding the bigger picture of tackling climate change through fundamentally changing our energy system.





Monitoring and evaluation

To ensure our public engagement remains fit for purpose and meets the needs of local communities, farms and businesses, SONI have incorporated a robust and consistent engagement evaluation framework which will enable us to demonstrate the success of public engagement approach. This involves inviting quantitative and qualitative post-engagement specific feedback from members of the public to ensure our engagement is transparent, informative, and accessible, and to help us measure our progress.

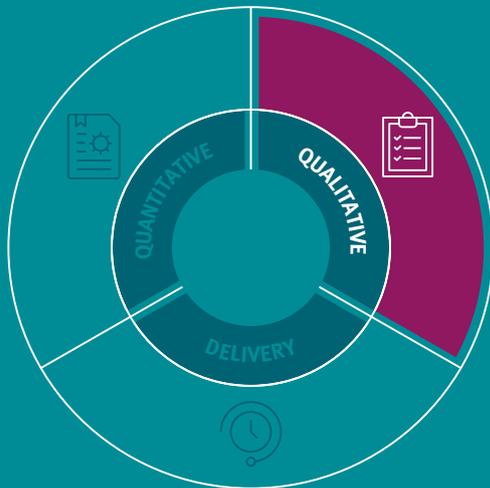




Metrics
Delivery against planned engagement activity



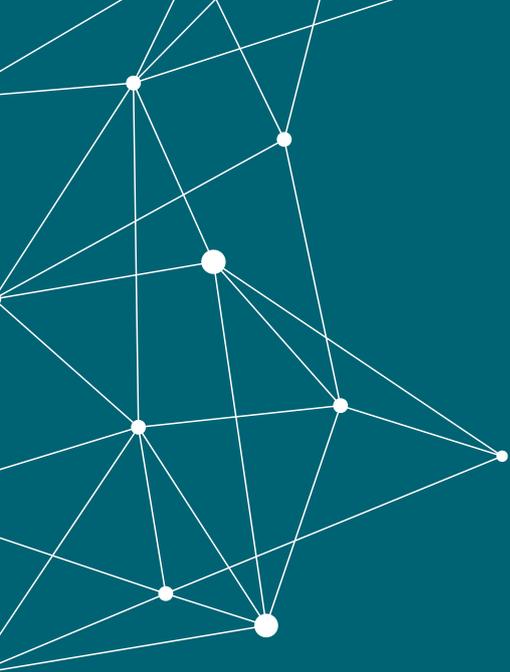
Metrics
Post engagement-specific survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and professionalism • Accessibility • Delivery against expectations • Stakeholder satisfaction • Opportunities for improvement Social media/digital engagement metrics



Metrics
Deliberative mini publics Additional commentary (consultation responses) Case studies Engagement testimonials







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