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## REPORT

A review of SONI's public consultation processes  
and procedures

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**Explanatory note**

The following report makes reference to a number of Northern Ireland Executive departments, namely the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development.

In May 2016, the titles and duties of the Executive departments were changed. The Department for the Economy, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Communities assumed the relevant responsibilities of the former departments, respectively.

# Contents

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<b>1</b>	<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1	Background to the review.....	5
2.2	About the review team .....	6
2.3	Contextual backdrop .....	6
2.4	Social acceptance of major infrastructure projects.....	7
2.5	Stakeholder Engagement in planning decisions .....	8
2.6	Current situation within Northern Ireland.....	9
2.7	Summary.....	12
<b>3</b>	<b>Background .....</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1	About SONI .....	13
3.2	Current projects.....	14
	Curraghamulkin .....	14
	Brockaghboy .....	14
	Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector (North/South Interconnector) .....	14
<b>4</b>	<b>Approach .....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1	Research methodology .....	16
4.2	Limitations .....	19
<b>5</b>	<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>20</b>
5.1	Desktop research - Case Studies.....	20
	Northern Ireland .....	20
	Scotland .....	24
	England .....	25
	Europe (France-Spain) .....	30
	Summary of findings .....	31
5.2	Primary Research .....	31
5.2.1	Participative Process.....	32
5.2.9	Internal culture, processes and procedures .....	37
5.2.12	Political leadership and advocacy .....	38
<b>6</b>	<b>Recommendations.....</b>	<b>41</b>
6.1	Instigate a refreshed programme of engagement .....	41
6.2	Streamline SONI's internal process and procedures (consultation specific) .....	45
6.3	Continue to build on the recent, extensive public affairs programme.....	46
6.4	Ensure adequate resourcing and funding for communications and engagement .....	47
<b>7</b>	<b>Closure.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>References .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Appendix 1 – Letter of Invitation (External Stakeholders) .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Appendix 2 – Total sample, by stakeholder category .....</b>	<b>52</b>

## 1 Executive Summary

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In mid-2015, SONI commissioned The Consultation Institute (tCI) and its partner TCI Engagement (TCIe) to undertake an independent review of SONI's processes and procedures for Public Consultation. For ease of access, the review focused on the following three projects; Curraghamuilkin, Brockaghboy and to a lesser extent the North-South Interconnector.

Based on the findings of the study and output from internal workshops (x2), interviews with internal SONI and EirGrid staff (x8) and Board Members (x2), as well as external stakeholders (x34), tCI is able to highlight the effectiveness and limitations of the consultation and community engagement programmes. The successes and weaknesses were examined and opportunities for improvement were identified. Finally, recommendations for the way forward in consultation and community engagement have been proposed.

This report outlines our findings and recommendations.

### Findings

**Finding 1:** - In light of recent statutory Pre-Application Community Consultation (PACC) requirements in Northern Ireland, there is a need to *further* update SONI's current consultation framework.

**Finding 2:** Whilst it is acknowledged that the approach in RoI (Step 1 - Step 6) is premised on best practice, SONI needs to remain mindful of the differences between the two markets.

**Finding 3:** The majority of stakeholders (on both a Project and Corporate Level) feel that SONI staff are approachable and professional. Access to SONI staff 'on the ground' was praised.

**Finding 4:** The views of stakeholders involved in both Curraghamuilkin and Brockaghboy are mixed but project 'acceptance' is reasonably high, particularly among landowners.

**Finding 5:** SONI's communications materials, particularly its website, need to be updated and refreshed in order to meet stakeholder needs.

**Finding 6:** There is a gap in general understanding of the decision-making process – explanations are needed as to how and why decisions are made. Feedback from consultations should be published on SONI's website (transparency is key).

**Finding 7:** SONI should consider formally monitoring and evaluating their engagement methods.

**Finding 8:** There are three organisational sub-cultures operating under one roof – NIE,

SONI and EirGrid, suggesting that there is a clear need to streamline and formalise consultation processes and procedures.

**Finding 9:** There is a need for a system with data mining capabilities to allow sufficient data capture and documentation – in accordance with new statutory PAC requirements.

**Finding 10:** There is a need for energy, and therefore grid, development, to be explained clearly to the wider public.

**Finding 11:** Awareness of SONI is low. There is confusion and a gap in general understanding of who is responsible for what (i.e. roles and responsibilities) between EirGrid, SONI and NIE.

**Finding 12:** There is a need for high-level political leadership to facilitate the development of a sustainable electricity system.

**Finding 13:** Landowner compensation is generally regarded as a good idea – so long as the funds are administered appropriately.

**Finding 14:** SONI has the ‘will and passion’ to implement an effective consultation programme, but needs adequate resources and funding to do so.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Further amend SONI’s current consultation framework to ensure compliance with Section 27 and Section 28 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011. Publish and promote in the public domain.

**Recommendation 2:** Run a parallel deliberative engagement and/or research process alongside early needs assessments and feasibility studies or Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) process.

**Recommendation 3:** Host three consultation rounds, as opposed to two, during the PACC process. Produce a summary report and a final PAC report detailing to what extent the proposals may have changed as a result of PACC, in accordance with Section 28 obligations.

**Recommendation 4:** Broaden the catchment zone to include adjacent communities, non-statutory stakeholders, and groups under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

**Recommendation 5:** Consider improving consultation methods and communication materials in the light of stakeholder feedback, especially individual project websites.

**Recommendation 6:** Implement a monitoring and evaluation processes.

**Recommendation 7:** Undertake an Aarhus Compliance test.

**Recommendation 8:** Develop and implement an internal handbook/community engagement policy consisting of a series of processes and procedures.

**Recommendation 9:** Undertake a review of SONI's (and EirGrid's) current Stakeholder Management System (SMS) to ensure fitness for purpose in line with new legislative reporting requirements – consider configuring a new SMS, if required.

**Recommendation 10:** Undertake internal consultation-specific staff training.

**Recommendation 11:** Continue to drive key messaging and consider resourcing a specific public education campaign.

**Recommendation 12:** Develop a Landowner Easement model.

**Recommendation 13;** Ensure adequate resourcing and funding for communications, engagement, community outreach (e.g. an education programme).

## 2 Introduction

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### 2.1 Background to the review

This review was undertaken in the context of previous work carried out by EirGrid, specifically a comprehensive review of its existing consultation process for grid development projects<sup>1</sup>, published in 2014. This review highlights the importance of engagement with the public and with communities directly impacted by new grid projects. The review found that while significant consultation measures had been undertaken by EirGrid, changes were required to improve the process for future engagement to ensure that it is in line with international best practice.

In line with its commitment to best practice, EirGrid has commissioned a similar study in Northern Ireland on how SONI can develop a similar community-based approach to consultation, remaining mindful of cultural and legal differences in each market. Essentially, the objectives of the research were to explore what SONI Ltd. has done well in its engagement procedures and processes; identify areas for improvement; and determine the best ways to inform, engage and communicate with key stakeholders and communities in Northern Ireland in the future.

The review comprised four main elements:

1. **Primary Research:** workshops and interviews with internal staff and external stakeholders to identify the strengths and weaknesses in SONI's current approach, and seek their feedback on how they would like to be consulted on future electricity transmission infrastructure development;
2. **Secondary Research:** stakeholder mapping, best practice research into other major infrastructure projects, in reference to the new Northern Ireland Pre-Application Community Consultation legislative requirements and EirGrid's current six-step approach;
3. **Draft Report:** development of a draft report which will be released for feedback by the EirGrid board and internal SONI staff; and
4. **Final Report:** production of a final report that will be published and promoted in the public domain. The final report is to provide recommendations to SONI on how best to improve its stakeholder engagement strategies and community consultation processes by bringing in and developing the concepts of best practice.

In addition, the review was to focus on three major transmission line projects, namely Curraghamuilkin, Brockaghboy and to a lesser extent the North-South Interconnector.

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<sup>1</sup> There were four inputs into the consultation review: a review of public feedback; a review of international best practice in public consultation; an independent external expert review carried out by SLR Consulting Limited; and an independent external expert review carried out by the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators.



## 2.2 About the review team

The review was undertaken by the Consultation Institute (tCI) and its partner, Belfast-based TCI Engagement.

The Consultation Institute is a not-for-profit professional body, specialising in best practice consultation and stakeholder engagement. It is based in the UK but also operates globally. tCI is considered by many (inter)national organisations and governments as the ‘gold standard’ experts by initiating consultation research, publications, specialist events, an independent Quality Assurance scheme, and training on best practice<sup>2</sup>.

TCI Engagement brings over 50 years’ combined experience in developing and implementing stakeholder and community engagement programmes for major infrastructure projects, both locally on the island of Ireland and further afield. This experience spans the energy and telecommunications sectors and has helped to build the knowledge-based company’s capability in consulting individuals and communities on large and contentious projects throughout the project life-cycle.

## 2.3 Contextual backdrop

The social, political, economic and technological context, within which SONI and the EirGrid Group as a whole operate and develop the electricity transmission grid across the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, has changed significantly since SONI was acquired by EirGrid in 2009. While energy policy is a devolved matter, falling under the remit of the devolved administration established after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, much of the policy development is shaped by UK policy, such as internationally agreed climate change targets.

Importantly, Westminster legislation such as Energy Market Reform and policy initiatives such as the early closure of renewables support for onshore wind can have unintended or disproportion impacts on the local market given Northern Ireland’s unique position as the only part of the UK that shares a wholesale electricity market with another jurisdiction and the part of the UK with the highest wind speeds.

While the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has primary responsibility for most aspects of policy, the Department of the Environment is responsible for climate change targets as well as planning policy. The Department of Social Development is responsible for fuel poverty issues (domestic fuel poverty i.e. households that spend more than 10% of their income on heating is 42%).

In April 2015, responsibility for the vast amount of planning applications was transferred from the Department of the Environment’s Planning Service to the 11 local councils as part of the Review of Public Administration.

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<sup>2</sup> The Consultation Institute has adopted a ‘Charter’, which contains 7 best practice principles; ‘Integrity’, ‘Visibility’, ‘Accessibility’, ‘Confidentiality and Transparency’, ‘Full Disclosure’, ‘Fair Interpretation’ and ‘Publication’. It notes that ‘for consultation to yield its true benefits, and to assist in the process of evidence based decision- making, it needs to take account of these best practice principles’. The Royal Town Planning Institute has adopted the use of these principles in its ‘Guidelines on effective community involvement’.

The primary driver of energy policy is the Strategic Energy Framework (SEF). At the time of its launch in 2010, it set out four key goals: building competitive markets; ensuring security of supply; enhancing sustainability; and developing energy infrastructure. This ‘technology neutral’ policy, which set a renewables target of 40% by 2020, combined with a reasonably positive planning regime (Planning Policy Statement 18) for renewables and a generous support mechanism has facilitated the growth of onshore wind primarily west of the Bann. While the region enjoys high wind speeds it lacks the infrastructure required to incorporate what are essentially, mini power stations in the form of windfarms and single turbines that have been particularly popular amongst the farming community.

Alongside this growth in renewable generation, Fermanagh in the North West and Antrim in the North East have been identified as possible locations for shale gas extraction. Mirroring developments in both the Republic of Ireland and GB, there is considerable community and environmental sectoral opposition to the prospect of fracking. The rise of opposition groups, in the form of local community groups, as well as regional alliances, has been facilitated by the powerful combination of social media, increased expectation of citizens in their engagement with institutions and a level of energy infrastructure development possibly not seen since the electrification of Northern Ireland in the 1950s.

The pace and impact of change was evident during the course of this research as the operational implications of recent UK policy, the early closure of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) to onshore wind has contributed to an unprecedented increase in grid and planning applications across the region. The decision by UREGNI, that planning permission does not have to be secured by a developer before they apply to NIE for a grid connection, has challenging implications for how SONI and NIE both do business in the short and medium terms.

## **2.4 Social acceptance of major infrastructure projects**

Although community opposition to major infrastructure projects is not new, according to various academics and sectoral experts, the expectations of local resistance for the future development of the sector are on the rise (Newig and Kvarda, 2012; Cotton and Devine-Wright, 2012). It seems that the context of decision-making in the electricity sector has gradually shifted from one of being a primarily technical matter to an increasingly social, environmental, and thus political one. Therefore, the established decision-making framework and processes for grid development need to adapt to changing times.

According to Devine-Wright (2012), there are three main reasons for this trend. First, the nature of the energy industry has been changing due to the emergence of smaller but more numerous generation facilities, thus increasing their visibility and potential local impact. Second, the public and community awareness and engagement in relation to the energy sector and environmental issues has increased. Third, as the nature of the energy industry and public engagement with grid development has changed, the institutional arrangements within which such policy decisions are made, have not changed.

Public and local opposition to new transmission lines is a common cause of delay, hampering organisations attempts to obtain their Social License to Operate (SLO). Recent

cases of conflicts include the Scottish Beaulieu-Denny line, which was the subject of the longest ever public inquiry in Scotland (Tobiasson et al., 2014); the France-Spain interconnection project (discussed further in Section 5), first proposed in 1980 and met by considerable opposition bringing round a second proposal in 2003 (Ciupuliga and Cuppen, 2013); and the Norwegian Hardanger transmission line, which was one of the 2010's most reported news stories in Norway (Ruud et al., 2011).

In order to increase public trust, reduce stakeholder conflicts, and therefore encourage acceptance of new developments, recent social science research suggests increased information provision as well as more emphasis on communication and community involvement at an earlier stage and in a more deliberative planning process. Additionally, Ciupuliga and Cuppen (2013) highlight the role of dialogue in the planning process, which is argued to not only foster social acceptance of transmission developments, but also benefit the project through the access to local knowledge and insights.

## 2.5 Stakeholder Engagement in planning decisions

Public participation - the involvement of citizens in planning decisions - is required in most EIA programmes around the world. However, it is often reduced to a formulaic procedural exercise instead of a substantive process to include the public in environmental decision-making (Weber et al, 2006). Nevertheless, planning academics and practitioners call widely for public participation and a review of relevant literature suggests that there are four basic reasons as to why it is important:

- First, public participation is regarded as proper, fair conduct of democratic government in public decision-making activities;
- Second, public participation is widely accepted as a way to ensure that projects meet citizens' needs and are suitable for the affected public;
- Third, the project carries more legitimacy, and less hostility, if potentially affected parties can influence the decision-making process;
- Finally, the ultimate decision is 'better' when local knowledge and values are included and when expert knowledge is publicly examined and scrutinised.

Arguments on the other hand, are that it is a quicker and more cost-effective to exclude the public in EIA. Project proponents eager to implement their project may fear that citizen involvement will delay their schedule or force them to revise the project (Portney, 1991). To the project owner, it might seem more prudent to push the project through quietly rather than run the risk of a public process, with consequential delays. However, excluding the public does not necessarily ensure expediency. Alienated citizens become skeptical citizens and, once citizens begin to lose trust in a project proponent, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the project proponent to regain citizens' trust (Bradbury et al., 1994).

Distrustful citizens in turn will tend to respond with contentious, argumentative legalistic actions, which can be time-consuming and expensive for the project. Therefore, the project

driver needs to consider not only the risks of including, versus avoiding, citizen input, but also the potential benefits of establishing a long term co-operative relationship with citizens (Weber et al, 2006).

## 2.6 Current situation within Northern Ireland

A review of recent and historical literature indicates that there is a lack of public participation in the Northern Ireland planning system's processes. A recent study conducted by Friends of the Earth (2011) into public and stakeholder opinion of the Northern Ireland planning system indicated that 73% of respondents believe that their views are rarely or never taken into account in planning decisions. In response to this, the 2011 Planning Act has introduced changes to the planning system; one in particular requires applicants to carry out consultation with local communities before submitting major planning applications (that is, pre-application).

### 2.6.1 **A 'new normal' – Pre-Application Community Consultation (PACC)**

As referred to in the Planning (Northern Ireland) Act 2011, 1 July 2015 marked the introduction of a statutory duty on developers to consult with the local community, in *advance* of submitting a planning application for regionally significant and major development proposals. The purpose of this rule is to improve efficiency in developing and determining planning applications and enhance community involvement at the appropriate points in the planning process. This is an almost entirely new concept for Northern Ireland, and it represents a highly significant new requirement for SONI.

Key elements of this new development management system are:

1. A **new development hierarchy** based on a three-tier classification of developments (consisting of 'regionally significant', 'major' and 'local');
2. **Pre-application discussions**, known as 'PaDs';
3. **Pre-Application Community Consultation**<sup>3</sup> (known as PACC) between prospective applicants and communities, and associated **Pre-Application Community Consultation report** (referred to as PAC);
4. **Pre-determination council hearings** prior to the determination of certain types of applications; and
5. **Schemes of delegated decision making** for local planning applications.

For the purposes of this report, we will focus on stages 2 and 3.

#### 2.6.1.1 **Pre-Application Discussions (Non-Statutory)**

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<sup>3</sup> Note - Pre-Application Consultation does not replace the opportunity, or remove the need, for communities and individuals to make formal comments on proposals during the planning application process.

The pre-application discussion process is not a statutory requirement and is therefore optional. It may also not be relevant in every instance. In addition, a proportionate approach should be taken in light of the nature, scale and impact of the application. The main purpose of the PaD is to spend time exchanging relevant information and discussing plans during the critical period when proposals are being developed and are therefore capable of change.

With regards to engagement, it is thought that during this stage, applicants will conduct preliminary consultation with neighbours, other authorities or statutory stakeholders (in as proportionate a manner as possible). This will help to facilitate discussions and identify key issues with key consultees at an early stage, especially where an Environmental Statement (ES) is likely to be required.

The PaD process usually starts before contacting the council or Department. If, however, the applicant needs to talk to someone about a general enquiry, they can contact the relevant duty planning officer. If the query is more complex, the applicant should fill in a Pre-Application Discussion proforma and forward it to the relevant planning office.

#### **2.6.1.2 Pre-Application Community Consultation (Section 27, 28 and 50 of the Planning Act)**

As noted in Section 27 of the 2011 Act, if pre-application consultation is required, applicants must submit a Proposal of Application Notice (PAN) at least 12 weeks prior to the submission of the planning application.

The Notice must detail the consultation process the applicant will undertake including when, how and with whom. The council or Department will respond to the notice within 21 days, stating whether the proposed consultation is sufficient or whether any additional consultation is required.

*The PAN should include (Regulation 4):*

- A description of the development to be carried out;
- If the site has a postal address, that address;
- A plan showing the outline of the site at which the development is to be carried out;
- Contact/correspondence details for the prospective applicant and agent;
- An account of what consultation the prospective applicant proposes to undertake (when, with whom and what form).

Consultation with communities can begin when the Proposal of Application Notice is submitted, although further consultation may be requested by the council or Department.

#### **Who should be consulted and how?**

The prospective applicant is required to indicate in the Notice what consultation will be undertaken. 'Community' stakeholders should include groups under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and all those with an *interest* in development in an area.

*The statutory minimum requirements are:*

- The consultation must include at least one public event where members of the public may make comments to the prospective applicant on the development;
- Details of the proposal and consultation must be published in a local newspaper at least 7 days prior to the event being held.

The public event advertisement must include the location and description of development, details as to where further information can be obtained, date and place of the event, a statement explaining how and by when persons wishing to make comment to the prospective applicant relating to the proposal may do so and a statement that comments made to the prospective applicant are not representations to the council or Department.

The council or Department may, within 21 days of receiving the Proposal of Application Notice, notify the prospective applicant of any other persons that they consider must also receive a copy of the Notice and of any other consultation that must be undertaken, including its form.

Consultations must be carried out in a manner that provides genuine opportunities for members of the public to engage with applicants. For example, the timing and location of events should be considerate of the lifestyles and commitments of all members of the local community.

*Outcome*

The consultation should be a meaningful engagement with those who can represent the community's views, and should offer the opportunity to mitigate negative impacts and misunderstandings and deal with community issues that can be addressed.

The applicant must submit a Pre-Application Consultation Report (PACC) with the planning application detailing the consultation undertaken and any changes made to the proposal as a result.

**2.6.1.3 Pre-Application Community Consultation report (Section 28 of the Planning Act 2011, and Regulation 5)**

As noted in Section 28 of the Planning Act 2011, the purpose of the PAC report is to confirm that PAC has taken place in line with statutory minimum requirements and/or in line with any further requirements set by the planning authority in their response to the Proposal of Application Notice.

The report should:

- Specify who has been consulted;
- Set out what steps were taken to comply with the statutory requirements and those of the planning authority.

It is advisable that the report also includes:

- Copies of advertisements of the public events;
- Reference to material made available at such events.

The report should also set out how the applicant has responded to comments made, including if, and to what extent, the proposals may have changed as a result of PAC. The report must accompany the planning application when submitted. The report is to be made in writing and can be submitted electronically

#### **2.6.1.4 Duty to Decline (Section 50 of the Planning Act 2011, and Regulation 6)**

Section 50 of the 2011 Act also provides that the council or Department must decline to determine an application where the applicant has not complied with the requirements of pre-application consultation.

### **2.7 Summary**

For future applications<sup>4</sup>, SONI will need to factor in the time and cost of undertaking the community consultation, and consider the nature and scope of the consultation required. Insufficient consultation could form a reason for refusal or grounds for a subsequent legal challenge. Conversely, undertaking an extensive consultation that is disproportionate to the nature of the proposal will increase costs and delays in moving the planning application forward.

Current guidance from the Department of the Environment (i.e. Information Leaflet No. 14<sup>5</sup> and Information Leaflet No. 16<sup>6</sup>) is relatively vague in terms of setting out the requirements for community consultation. In addition to legislative requirement surrounding PACC, each local Council will produce their own individual Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs) that will provide some advice about how developers should undertake pre-application consultation in relation to major projects. This should also be taken into consideration when developing a consultation plan/programme for each project.

What constitutes best practice will inevitably take some time to develop, but the moment is opportune for SONI to lead the way in undertaking best practice consultation in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>4</sup> That will be submitted from 1 July 2015 onwards.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/advice/advice\\_leaflets/pads\\_guidance\\_-\\_march\\_2014\\_-\\_amended-6.pdf](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/advice/advice_leaflets/pads_guidance_-_march_2014_-_amended-6.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.planningni.gov.uk/downloads/pre-application\\_community\\_consultation\\_guidance\\_-\\_june\\_2014.pdf](http://www.planningni.gov.uk/downloads/pre-application_community_consultation_guidance_-_june_2014.pdf)



## 3 Background

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### 3.1 About SONI

SONI, the Transmission System Operator was established as a wholly owned subsidiary of NIE/Viridian in June 2000 and is responsible for the safe, secure and reliable operation of the electricity transmission system in Northern Ireland<sup>7</sup>. Importantly, the infrastructure itself remained under the ownership of NIE/Viridian, who also retained responsibility for the planning and development of the grid. To this day, NIE networks, now owned by ESB, retains ownership of the transmission network and is responsible for transmission construction and maintenance. NIE also retains ownership and responsibility for the electricity distribution system.

The outworking of a series of EU competition and energy market directives and the privatisation of the energy industry in the UK, have been two of the key drivers of change both internally and externally for SONI over the last decade. The establishment of the Single Electricity Market (SEM), the first multi-jurisdictional, dual currency wholesale electricity market in the world, on 1 November 2007 prompted changes to SONI's responsibilities, relationship with the Republic of Ireland transmission and market operator, EirGrid plc, as well as the two energy regulatory authorities on the Island of Ireland.<sup>8</sup>

From 2007 SONI continued as system operator for Northern Ireland while assuming all-island market operator duties through SEMO, a joint venture with EirGrid plc.<sup>9</sup> This relationship developed even further in 2009, when SONI Ltd as an Independent System Operator, joined the EirGrid Group

Given its key public interest obligations, SONI's transmission operations in Northern Ireland is regulated by the Utility Regulator Northern Ireland (UREGNI), while its market operations through SEMO is jointly regulated by the Utility Regulator Northern Ireland (UREGNI) and its Republic of Ireland counterpart the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER). The decision-making body which governs the market is the SEM Committee.

The most recent chapter in SONI's evolution has taken place over the last 18 months, as the organisation assumed responsibility for NIE's transmission system design and planning functions in April 2014. Done to satisfy the requirements of the European Union's Third Energy Package (IME3), SONI also gained responsibility for obtaining wayleaves and other statutory consents to permit the construction of new electricity transmission apparatus, bringing the organisation into the public engagement arena for the first time.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2001 an EC inquiry concluded that further measures were necessary in order to complete the internal energy market and to reap its benefits. The Directive required legal and management separation of system operators from companies carrying on generation and supply obligations, to ensure fairer competition.

<sup>8</sup> The second EU Electricity Directive (Directive 2003/54), adopted in August 2003, set out a date for market opening for non-household consumers of 1 July 2004 and for all electricity customers by 1 July 2007.

<sup>9</sup> The System Operator licence required SONI to operate the "all-island transmission systems" in conjunction with EirGrid, the Ireland TSO, and the Market Operator licence required SONI to operate the Single Electricity Market in conjunction with EirGrid, the Ireland Market Operator.



While the forces driving change within SONI may reflect the general direction of travel for modern regulated utilities, SONI assumes responsibility for the design and planning of essential energy infrastructure projects at a critical change moment for the energy sector in Northern Ireland.

Marked by increased consumer expectation, security of supply concerns as well as the inherent challenges of operating within a small island market, SONI enters the crowded and complex arena of public engagement on three important infrastructure projects. The first two are connections to windfarm clusters, unique to Northern Ireland within a wider UK energy policy context; and the third is the Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector.

### **3.2 Current projects**

#### **3.2.1 Curraghamulkin**

The Curraghamulkin project involves the construction of a new 110/33kV cluster substation located approximately 300m north east of no. 166 Dooish Road, Drumquin; the construction of a new 110kV switching substation located approximately 500m north-north east of no. 110 Cavan Road, Dromore; and the construction of approximately nine kilometres of 110kV overhead transmission line to connect the two substations.

This will traverse the townlands of Cavan, Mullawhinny, Shannaragh, Mullaghbane, Aghadulla (Harper), Corrasheskin, Cornavarrow and Curraghamulkin. Two project open days have been held, and a planning application was submitted to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in 2015.

#### **3.2.2 Brockaghboy**

This project will involve the construction of c.18.8km of 110kV overhead electricity transmission line including associated support structures and other apparatus and 0.4km of connecting cable linking Brockaghboy Wind Farm Substation, Drumbane Road, Garvagh, Coleraine, BT51 5DR and NIE Networks Rasharkin Main Substation, Finvoy Road, Rasharkin, Ballymena, BT44 8SD. Circa 12.9km of overhead line falls within Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council and Circa 5.9km within Mid Ulster District Council.

The proposed transmission line will traverse multiple townlands from Magheraboy, to Dunnavenny. Two project Open Days were held and a planning application was submitted to Mid Ulster District Council and Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council in December 2015. It is anticipated that the overhead transmission circuit will be operational in 2017.

#### **3.2.3 Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector (North-South Interconnector)**

Seen by many as the final building block of the SEM, the interconnector project, often referred to as the second North/South Interconnector will allow the increased flow of electricity to meet consumer demand when and where it is required within the SEM.

Given the age and profile of generation assets, or power stations in Northern Ireland, the interconnector was planned for completion by 2016 in time to bridge expected electricity capacity shortfalls as outlined in the SONI generation adequacy reports.

The Northern part of the project, critical to SONI's main function of keeping the lights on, was led by NIE from 2009 to 2014. The transfer of the project team and support from NIE to SONI in 2014 not only ensured the retention of institutional knowledge, but also ensured the continuity of strong relationships between the project team, particularly way leave officers, with landowners and other key stakeholders, relationships that are central to the success of the delivery of any large infrastructure project.

## 4 Approach

A mixed methodology approach was taken for the research involving a desktop literature review, workshops, in-depth interviews (either face-to-face or via phone) with both internal and external key stakeholders. A summary of the research methodology is shown in Table 1.

Our approach to conducting the Review followed the agreed Terms of Reference as a minimum. However, as the Review progressed, our lines of inquiry extended in response to emerging information and our judgment that these additional insights would add particular value.

### 4.1 Research methodology

**Table 1 Research methodology**

Component	Sample sizes	Details	Timing
<b>Workshops</b>	2 groups in total:  1 X 4 attendees  1 X 12 attendees  (n=16 in total)	A workshop was held with EirGrid's Public Affairs Executive Team on 30 July to introduce the project team, obtain an update on the status of current projects and to handover any historical documents that may be of relevance.  A further workshop was held on 21 August with a broad representation of SONI staff to review the current stakeholder engagement process on SONI's projects and to obtain feedback on the proposed case studies.  Both meetings were attended by Gráinne Walsh and Victoria McCabe and facilitated by Quintin Oliver from the Consultation Institute.	30 July and 21 August 2015.
<b>Desktop literature review</b>	Over 50 documents where reviewed (hard copies and online).	As part of this study, tCI undertook a detailed literature review of best practice approaches to community and stakeholder engagement, specifically within the infrastructure sector in NI and further afield.  While the Project ToR specified that the review team focus on infrastructure projects in NI, given that statutory pre-application community consultation is a	September–January 2016.

Component	Sample sizes	Details	Timing
		<p>relatively new concept in Northern Ireland, it was extended to include other jurisdictions such as Scotland, England and Wales, where PACC has been operational for a number of years.</p> <p>Following a detailed workshop held with SONI staff on 21 August, we identified seven case studies which were then assessed against a set of inclusion criteria to ensure those selected would facilitate exploration of the key prerequisites which included compliance with new NI PACC statutory obligations and/or Aarhus, community benefit schemes and an extensive community engagement programme<sup>10</sup>. From that, a literature review comprising several key industry and government papers and selected academic papers (both hard copy and online) was undertaken between November 2015 and January 2016.</p> <p>We examined the new legislative requirements surrounding PACC in NI as well as third party reports that had been commissioned or produced in relation the Republic of Ireland review.</p> <p>With regards to SONI's current consultation approach, we also reviewed SONI's two-tier stakeholder map, adding to it where necessary, in order to substantiate our primary research.</p>	
<b>In-depth interviews</b>	<p>8 internal interviews conducted.</p> <p>34 external interviews</p>	<p>A letter was issued to 116 internal and external stakeholders on 5 October 2015 requesting their participation (refer to Appendix 1) in the research study. In order to further garner interest, follow up emails were sent on</p>	<p>15 September –13 November.</p>

<sup>10</sup> Note - it was not possible to obtain some of the information requested due to commercial sensitivities surrounding it.

Component	Sample sizes	Details	Timing
	<p>conducted.</p> <p>(n=42 interviews in total)</p>	<p>the week commencing the 12 October and phone calls placed between 19 and 23 October to those who did not respond. By 26 October, a total of 21 'selected' interviewees had been confirmed.</p> <p>Interviewees were selected based on the 'type' of stakeholder category they fell into, previous interactions with SONI, their knowledge of the projects under review and of SONI's stakeholder engagement processes in general. A number of stakeholders were recruited from SONI's political database. However, given the broad remit of this project, this database expanded to include a wider range of stakeholders, such as business &amp; trade associations, educational establishments, environmental NGOs and community or interest groups. The majority held senior positions within their organisations.</p> <p>A number of stakeholders were also randomly selected as the TCIE team attended two Project Information Sessions; one for Curraghmulkin on the 15 September (n=8) and another for Brockaghboy on 5 October (n=13). The team also observed the SDLP and DUP annual Conferences, enabling useful interaction with councillors, MLAs and other party representatives on 14 and 21 November, respectively.</p> <p>A total of 42 interviews were conducted face to face or by telephone by Victoria McCabe, Gráinne Walsh and Quintin Oliver between 15 September - 13 November 2015. Each interview lasted between 30 - 60 minutes. A breakdown of the total sample, by stakeholder</p>	

Component	Sample sizes	Details	Timing
		<p>category, can be found in Appendix 2.</p> <p>An in-depth interview guide was developed prior to each interview to ensure an element of structure. However, the interviews did not keep to any set questioning. Rather, they were conducted as free-flowing conversations to elicit team members' accounts on how engagement was conducted, and views on what worked and what could have been improved.</p> <p>All interviews were conducted by trained interviewers, working in accordance with Interviewer Code of Conduct of the Market Research Society. Interviews were conducted on a confidential basis (each interviewee signed a confidentiality form), no incentives were offered and each interview was transcribed immediately after.</p>	

## 4.2 Limitations

While every effort was made to identify re-occurring themes from the qualitative research, due to the lack of quantitative analysis this study cannot be deemed statistically representative of the NI population as a whole. In addition, at the time of conducting the research, there were other SONI research projects in the field (with a particular focus on the North-South Interconnector project) and at the risk of over-burdening individuals who were part of this research, a number of stakeholder were removed from the original interviewee list.

Finally, the review requested that stakeholders provide their thoughts on application of the RoI six-step consultation approach in NI. This proved somewhat difficult as awareness levels were relatively low. In order to overcome this, the review team provided hard copy documentation to explain the RoI approach, where feasible.

## 5 Findings

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### 5.1 Desktop research - Case Studies

Throughout the review, the team discovered that there is no blueprint approach for organising stakeholder participation in transmission grid planning - every community/country is unique and no single approach fits all. We also discovered that the influences on the style and type of community engagement are affected by various factors such as:

1. The style of engagement will be driven by its purpose<sup>11</sup>;
2. Technology type and the scale of the development;
3. Different developers have developed their own procedures, protocols and engagement strategies - even for fulfilling basic statutory consultation requirements<sup>12</sup>;
4. The proposed ownership model for the development; and
5. Local governance arrangements.

Nonetheless, while all key findings from this review may not be fully applicable to rolling out SONI's grid projects, there is considerable local and international experience represented in these examples, which could be adapted for the future.

#### 5.1.1 Northern Ireland

##### 5.1.1.1 Onshore Wind Energy – Doraville, SSE

SSE plc is the third largest wholesale energy generator by capacity in Ireland's all-island Single Electricity Market (SEM). In Northern Ireland, SSE generates 88MW of renewable energy powering 75,000 homes each year. It is the leader in community funding in Northern Ireland, investing over £500,000 so far into local communities around its NI wind farms.

In addition, a review of SSE's consultation material suggests that the organisation takes a three-stage approach to running consultation exercises - Scoping, Implementation (that is, pre-planning application) and Post Planning Application. See Table 2 for a copy of their overarching Community Engagement Framework. SSE appears to tailor this Framework in consideration of the following aspects:

- Large-scale versus small-scale projects;
- Remote versus populated;
- Individual project characteristics.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, if the developer is seeking simply to fulfil statutory obligations by raising awareness of the development so that the local community has an opportunity to make objections, then this will entail a different set of engagement activities to a situation where the developer wishes to work in partnership with the host community to develop a scheme that brings substantial joint benefits.

<sup>12</sup> These will reflect corporate thinking on the value and role of community engagement.

**Table 2: SSE/Airtricity Community Engagement Framework**

Consultation Phase	Sub-Phase	Communication Tool	Audience
Scoping	Early Stage/Development/Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local Agent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landowners</li> </ul>
Implementation	Project Design/EIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project development team and local agent</li> <li>Door to door</li> <li>One-to-one meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local residents and statutory consultees</li> </ul>
	Pre-planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Open Evenings</li> <li>Advertised in Local Papers, newsletters and shops</li> <li>Project plans made available</li> <li>Photomontages</li> <li>Information Boards</li> <li>Project website and brochure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local residents</li> <li>Statutory consultees</li> <li>Elected representatives</li> </ul>
	Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respond to RFIs where appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authority</li> </ul>
Post Planning Application	Pre-Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appoint Local Community Liaison</li> <li>Landowner workshops</li> <li>Project update newsletter</li> <li>Web site updates</li> <li>Traffic Management Plans</li> <li>School Visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landowners</li> <li>Local residents</li> <li>Local authority</li> <li>Elected representatives</li> </ul>
	Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local community liaisons</li> <li>Traffic Management Plans</li> <li>Project update newsletter</li> <li>Website updates</li> <li>School visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landowners</li> <li>Local residents</li> <li>Local authority</li> <li>Elected representatives</li> </ul>
	Commissioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local community liaison</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authority media</li> </ul>
	Operation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Liaison Officer</li> <li>Community fund</li> <li>Wind farm open days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landowners</li> <li>Local residents</li> <li>Community bodies</li> <li>Elected representatives</li> </ul>



Alongside this, SSE develops an integrated strategic communications plan, which strives to:

- Inform, educate and listen to stakeholders and the community;
- Determine engagement levels based on each project phase; and;
- Agree target audiences, communication tools and delivery methods.

The organisation promotes that it is committed to community engagement and believes that *“early, ongoing and meaningful engagement builds confidence and trust”*. It has employed a team of Community Liaisons Officers who are responsible for community engagement relating to wind farm projects. These liaison officers focus on community consultation, engagement and identifying opportunities for local community partnerships.

As noted on its website, SSE states that *‘we are based in the area and are happy to meet with anyone who wishes to speak with us. In particular, we are committed to carrying out a 12-week public consultation processes in preparation for any of our planning submissions’*.

The company ran a 12-week pre-planning consultation programme for the Doraville onshore wind farm, which began on 10 September 2014. They ran a public event held in Silverbirch in Omagh and prior to the event, sent out invites and response forms to over 400 residents and groups living within 5KM of the proposal. All consultation material is readily accessible on their website.

One of the company goals is to become a ‘long-term member of the community’ and in doing so, have become the leader in community funding from wind energy, investing over £1million to more than 130 communities across Northern Ireland.



#### 5.1.1.2 Natural Gas – Gas to the West, Mutual Energy and SGN

Mutual Energy and SGN are in the process of carrying out a formal pre-application community consultation exercise as required by Section 27 of the Planning Act NI 2011 on its ‘Gas to the West’ Project. This community consultation process consists of two stages and seeks to establish the views and opinions of the community to inform the route selection, the design and environmental assessment of the pipelines and their related above-ground installations to assist in preparation of the associated planning application.

As noted on the dedicated project website, the first phase of the consultation process was undertaken to obtain views on the project and to gather information that may be relevant to the pipeline route selection and assessment of any potential environmental impacts. A second phase of consultation will be undertaken in early spring 2016 when the pipeline route has been further developed. In addition to this formal community consultation, SGN

have engaged in a series of meetings with key project stakeholders including local elected representatives, local councils, other government departments and agencies and representative bodies since the outset of the project.

SGN states that its aim is to construct the pipelines with minimum inconvenience to local residents and landowners and to work with all those who may be affected. Care for the environment is a prime concern. They have stated that they will work closely with the local public, community representatives, environmental specialists and statutory bodies, where applicable, throughout the process and that they are keen to integrate stakeholder and community engagement in the early stages of the project cycle to test propositions, refine options, and manage risks<sup>13</sup>.

A review of the project website shows that they have developed print and online collateral to support community engagement activities and aid public understanding of the Gas to West project. They take a personalized approach with video interviews from the project team streamed online, they also include photographs and contact details for team members.



In addition to the formal planning process, Gas to the West recognises the importance of statutory AND non-statutory consultation with public representatives, landowners, the local community, role-players and relevant stakeholders. They work of a strategy which facilitates three phases and two categories; the first phase runs independently and typically precedes the last two phases which run parallel to each other.

1. Landowner Consultation (non-statutory)
2. EIA Consultee & Planning Consultee Consultation (statutory)
3. Community, Public Representative, Stakeholders consultation (non- statutory)

This approach allows for the sharing of information as part of an iterative process, allowing the flow of information to and from the different parties. This Pre Application Discussion (PAD) process also forms part of the statutory consultation process for strategically important planning applications to improve the quality of those applications and to speed up the decision-making process. These discussions are important in identifying key policy and technical/environmental issues at an early stage in the design of projects, especially where an environmental statement is likely to be required.

<sup>13</sup> Article 27 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 stipulates that applicants for “major developments” must “give notice” to the Department of the Environment before submitting an application for planning permission. The Article further refers to regulations, which may specify further parties upon whom notice of the application should be served.

As noted on their project website, it is understood that SGN will prepare a ‘Pre-application consultation report’ to meet the consultation requirements set out in Article 28 of the new Planning Act.

### 5.1.2 **Scotland**

Developers initiating national and major development proposals in Scotland have been required to conduct PACC since August 2009, under the terms of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2006. A review of the legislation shows that statutory requirements are very similar to that of Northern Ireland. In view of this, it was only fitting to review a Scottish-based example – that of RES and its Glenchamber onshore wind farm.

#### 5.1.2.1 **Onshore Wind Farm – Glenchamber, Renewable Energy Systems (RES)**

The 11-turbine Glenchamber wind farm was consented in July 2012 after an appeal by the developer RES. In the first instance, the wind farm proposal was refused by Dumfries & Galloway Council, which acted as the planning authority. The proposal was rejected on grounds of significant and unacceptable environmental effects on the visual amenity, and on the historic landscape character of the Plateau Moorland that will be overwhelmed by the turbines.

Another reason was adverse effects on flight safety based on an objection from the Ministry of Defence, which was later withdrawn. RES appealed against this decision and after a very detailed consideration of arguments and statements by key consultees, the Reporter granted planning permission subject to 26 conditions.

The developer, RES, states that *“meaningful and productive consultation requires a more detailed approach which goes above and beyond the minimum”*. Early community engagement should therefore facilitate a constructive consultation process, help to understand and address concerns, assist the public in understanding benefits and impacts, add value and improve quality of the proposal and help define the structure of community benefits.

In its PAC report the developer not just refers to good practice guidelines in Scotland, but also evaluates how the different standards of the ‘PAN 81 03/2010’ were used in the consultation process. So, the consultation process included comprehensive community engagement practices, which facilitated a mutual communication of information and concerns prior to the application submission.

A community liaison group was established as a forum for discussing issues and concerns, after key stakeholders had been identified in accordance with Dumfries & Galloway Council. Methods involved in the consultation process were set out in the Proposal of Application Notice, which included community council meetings, the community liaison group, a public exhibition, meetings with key stakeholders, door-to-door meetings, newsletters and emails, questionnaires and comment cards, as well as an independent telephone survey. The telephone survey was conducted by an independent consultant. The Community Relations

Manager and Project Manager were particularly trained in ‘public and stakeholder engagement’, ‘negotiation skills’ and ‘conflict resolution’.

### 5.1.3 England

PACC has been a statutory requirement in England and Wales since 2008, under the Planning Act 2008. The PACC process was introduced to streamline the decision-making process for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), making it fairer and faster for communities and developers alike.

#### 5.1.3.1 **Transport – High Speed 2 (HS2), Department for Transport (DfT)**

High Speed 2 (HS2) is the most significant transport infrastructure project in the UK since the motorways were built in the 1950s and 1960s. HS2 will be a Y-shaped rail network that will reduce journey times between Britain’s major population centres and improve capacity across the existing rail network. It will be built in two phases. The first will see construction of a new 225km line between London and Birmingham by 2026. It will include a connection to Europe via High Speed 1 and the Channel Tunnel.

Phase 2 will extend the high-speed lines to Manchester and Leeds opening in 2033. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the details of the consultation and engagement carried out during Phase One of HS2 (the route between London and the West Midlands). The first phase of HS2 is set to begin in 2017 with an indicated opening date in 2026, while completion of the entire network is expected in 2033.

Given the sheer size of the project, it goes without saying that the level of opposition to HS2 is enormous, ranging from Westminster politicians to environmental groups. A consultation in 2011, which ran for six months, revealed 90% of respondents were against HS2. That aside, HS2 appears to have developed a high-level consultation strategy stating that *“effective stakeholder and media engagement is fundamental to successful delivery of the vision for HS2”*. It identifies three stakeholder engagement objectives, each of which applies at a national, regional and local level:

1. To raise awareness across society of what HS2 is and why it is important to Britain and to the population of Britain
2. To build support for HS2 so that all sectors make the most of the opportunities it brings.
3. To give opportunities for people to ‘have their say’ through the development and implementation of HS2, including through formal consultations and the parliamentary process.

HS2 also states that successful stakeholder engagement relies on:

1. Clear stakeholder segmentation that identifies stakeholder groups, understands their roles (e.g. as impacted individual, decision maker, opinion former, influencer etc) and appreciates their priorities and issues;
2. Good understanding of opinions held by stakeholders and likely influencing factors, carried out through regular opinion research;

3. Recognising engagement as a relationship management process that demands regular activity over a sustained period;
4. An ability to adjust engagement approaches to suit stakeholder groups and respond to their level of awareness and support
5. Robust management processes.

Interestingly, in keeping with objectives to raise awareness and build support for HS2, a strategic decision was taken in June 2013 to refresh the brand at minimal cost following an internal review of the variety of presentational styles used in published material since the project inception, and feedback that stakeholders were unsure of the distinction between HS2 Ltd and DfT branding. The brand refresh meant that:

- All published material features an updated logo (which includes the strapline ‘engine for growth’) that shows more clearly what HS2 is;
- Internal covers of published materials discreetly explain whether a document is published under an HS2 Ltd, DfT, or contractor banner;
- All published material adopts a template approach to ensure consistency in style and layout.

Although High Speed 2 could have been consented under the Planning Act regime, it is being authorised via its own Act of Parliament. Nevertheless, consultation and engagement on the proposed scheme has been carried out in compliance with relevant guidance and legislation, including:

- The Aarhus Convention;
- Cabinet Office guidance on Consultation (July 2012)<sup>14</sup>; and
- The Gunning Principles, which are a set of legal criteria, favoured by judges, for assessing the fairness of a public consultation.

In engaging and consulting on the proposed scheme, the following categories of stakeholder have been involved: members of parliament; local authorities (members, officers and functions); statutory consultees (identified through other acts), utility companies and major asset owners; community groups and stakeholder organisations; directly affected parties (including property owners and businesses); and the general public.

With regards to consultation methods, HS2 established a number of community, planning and environment forums, with representatives from along the London to West Midlands route. The forums provided mechanism for dialogue and information gathering rather than decision making itself, essentially they intended to ensure that relevant views from stakeholders and interested parties were reflected in HS2’s decision making. In addition to these forums HS2 held bilateral meetings and other forms of engagement in order to better understand localised matters.

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<sup>14</sup> Prior to July 2012, the Cabinet Office’s Code of Practice on Consultation issued in July 2008.

In the main, consultations have involved: supporting media to publicise the consultation and any local events; the production of leaflets and letters which are distributed to properties within the broad vicinity of the line of route; online information, in some instances with a dedicated consultation website; documents and maps which are available from the website and on request via a dedicated consultation telephone number; and local events which are open to the public and at which relevant specialist staff are present to answer questions.

There are dedicated response channels, where people can respond by email, post or online; independent handling, analysis and reporting of consultation responses; the publication of a consultation report covering the main themes of the consultation responses once the consultation has closed; and the publication of a decisions document, setting out decisions taken as a result of the consultation process.

Dedicated press handling on the proposed scheme has been in place since early in the project. Further, both online and offline communication methods have been adopted to communicate the project. This has included the development of a dedicated HS2 website and the use of social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook etc). A public enquiries team has been in place since the spring of 2010, with a dedicated telephone number, email address and postal address.

A variety of mechanisms has been used to facilitate participation in consultations, such as: provision on request of translations of documents and publicity materials; wheelchair accessible venues for consultation and engagement events; hearing loops at certain venues; interpreter services at certain venues; provision of transport to facilitate attendance at events in remote areas; and facilitating responses from people with disabilities.

#### **5.1.3.2 Nuclear power – Hinckley Point C Connection Project, National Grid**

The Hinckley Point C Connection Project is planned to connect a proposed new nuclear power station at Hinckley Point in Somerset to the National Grid high voltage electricity transmission system by September 2017. National Grid are working closely with Western Power Distribution on implementing the project. The project comprises a 57km electricity connection – from Bridgwater in Somerset to Seabank near Avonmouth. The project typifies the complexity of striking the right balance between a technically feasible, cost-effective solution and preserving the local countryside. Approval was granted for the Project on 19 January 2016.

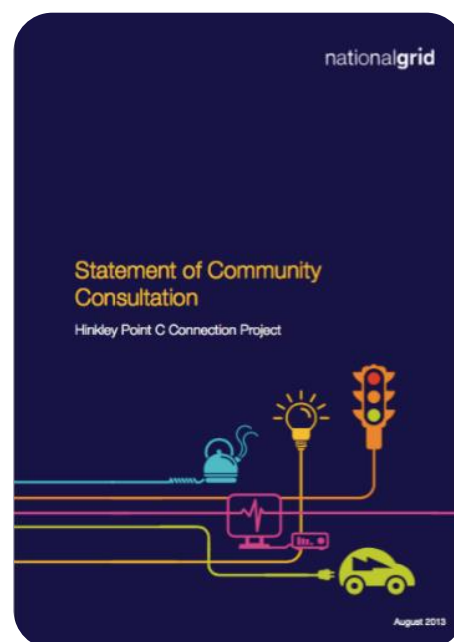
When the need for the connection was first highlighted in 2009, immediate reactions were along the lines of ‘we don’t want it’, ‘put it all underground’, ‘why not use a sub-sea route?’. National Grid has come a long way in the past four years from that position. They listened to the public (i.e. non-statutory bodies), engaged with statutory bodies and, as a result of the feedback received, changed their proposals.

Work on the project began with an assessment of all the possible (and technically feasible) ways that the necessary connection could be made. National Grid then worked with environmental experts to take into account environmental features and designated



landscapes, such as areas of outstanding natural beauty, ecologically important sites and the locations of listed buildings, while trying to minimise the impact on people and communities as far as possible. More than 20 options were considered – including overland and sub-sea – before concluding that a connection overland between Bridgewater, in Somerset, and Seabank, near Avonmouth, was the most appropriate way forward.

Prior to commencing consultation, the organisation developed a Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC), to sit alongside their PAN, which set out how National Grid proposed to carry out that consultation pursuant to Section 47 of the 2008 Act. It was prepared in consultation with each of the relevant councils and was informed by relevant government guidance, specifically the Department of Communities and Local Government's "Planning Act 2008 - Guidance on pre-application consultation", the relevant local authority's Statements of Community Involvement and National Grid's policy and experience in this area. The local media was notified and the SOCC was sent directly to approximately 1,000 local stakeholders and community groups on the database (electronically where email addresses were available and by post for those without) and put onto the project website. The full SOCC was also published in the relevant council newspaper.



The organisation consulted for 22 weeks on two 'corridor' options across land, engaging with local authorities, all the statutory stakeholders – the Environment Agency, English Heritage, Natural England, and some 45 other bodies – as well as conducting over 40 public exhibitions along the entire route. In 2010, the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Royal Institute of Architects launched a competition, supported by National Grid, to find an alternative to the traditional steel-lattice pylon. The result was the T-pylon, a shorter and more modern design that will be used for the first time in the UK.



For the purpose public consultation, National Grid defined two broad geographic consultation zones, which were drawn up following discussions with the relevant councils. Consultation Zone One (highlighted in blue) extends at least 1 km either side of the broad overhead line route corridor options or at least 1 km around the broad substation siting locations. Households in Zone One were contacted by letter with a project summary leaflet and details of planned public exhibitions in addition to being covered by the more general communications. Consultation Zone Two (the green line) encompasses those households that are more than 1km from the broad overhead

line route corridor or broad substation siting locations, but still within the same town and parish council areas. Within Zone Two, National Grid offered briefings to all of the town and parish councils. Communities within Zone Two were covered by the more general communications. As National Grids proposals were refined from broad route corridor options to specific detailed alignments, the same criteria was applied to define consultation zones at Stage Two. National Grid redefined their consultation zones around the preferred corridor.

Once the alignment of a preferred route was decided, National Grid discussed with landowners precisely where pylons would be placed and where they would propose going underground. In the case of the Hinckley Point C connection, that meant an 8.5km section through the Mendip Hills, an area of outstanding natural beauty, and also putting a further 8km of existing 132,000 volt overhead underground between Nailsea to Portishead.

The organisation created three community forums to help them engage with 56 parish councils. These meet at key stages and included representation from local communities and various campaign groups were set up along the route. A project newsletter was sent to over 40,000 homes and businesses within a defined consultation zone. The organisation's September 2013 consultation proposals included eight public exhibitions and public question and answer sessions. These were chaired, by public figures including by Dr Liam Fox, MP for North Somerset, and Charlotte Leslie, MP for Bristol North West. The organisation produced reports after two consultation stages, as well as a summary Pre-Application Consultation (PAC) report.



The project website features computer-generated videos that allow people to 'travel' along the route to see what it will look like with the T-pylons or lattice pylons. Detailed ecological studies helped ensure major infrastructure projects didn't harm the environment. The organisation used Facebook and Twitter to help further engage with the public via social media.

They took over empty shops in three locations so we could use them as National Grid community information hubs. Open six days a week, they contained all the information to help local people understand the project proposals. Elsewhere, a National Grid exhibition vehicle, decked out with maps and other information, visited supermarket car parks and colleges to engage with harder-to-reach communities and groups.

As part of the consultation process, they also set up thematic groups. They considered and advised National Grid on environmental aspects of the project, including information collection and the Environmental Impact Assessment process. Thematic groups included local authority officers and statutory consultees such as Natural England, the Environment Agency and English Heritage and other special interest groups specifically related to



environmental issues.

With regards to data management and responding to stakeholders, each stakeholder comment was logged by the community relations team onto a bespoke response management database. Following this, the community relations team assessed how National Grid should respond – either via a standard acknowledgement and pre-prepared information, or a bespoke response. At the end of the consultation, over 1,500 tailored responses were crafted and all representations were transferred into a specialist consultation analysis tool.

This consultation analysis tool allowed to a dynamic coding structure to be developed as responses often raised multiple ‘issues’, either specific to route corridors or to the proposals in general. Essentially each response was read in full by analysis team and was allocated a code. A two-tiered coding structure was developed with 16 overarching themes e.g. Environment, Corridor Preference, 404 sub themes and 187 location specific codes. Continuous quality assurance exercise undertaken via a secure access website.

With regards to demonstrating the ‘big picture’, National Grid launched a Powering Britain’s Future campaign in 2012 which gave National Grid a great opportunity to work with a range of partner organisations and look for ways that to tackle the UK energy challenge together.

### Powering Britain’s Future



#### 5.1.4 Europe (France-Spain)

##### 5.1.4.1 **France – Spain Interconnector, REE and RTE**

The France-Spain Interconnector project is a 64.5 KM underground interconnection line linking France and Spain. It was a 35-year project and suffered massive delays due to overwhelming public opposition, which was resolved in 2001. Approval was granted in 2008, project works commenced in 2012 and the new electrical interconnection began its commercial operation on 5 October 2015.

The project was split across two countries, and the route ran through 23 towns, with very diverse populations, which created its own set of challenges. The planning applications required different documentation and different lengths of time to carry out. Public opposition was centred on concerns surrounding the visual impact of the line and the implications it could have on tourism.

A process of concertation (co-decision and dialogue) was carried out in France in the early 2000s. An NGO opposed to the extra high voltage lines and an opposition group, ‘Non à la THT’, was formed. There was a perception that the French company involved, RTE, was untrustworthy and had unfairly dismissed local community and regional representatives’ appeals for an undergrounded line. In 2006 a European coordinator was asked to facilitate the implementation of the process. The outcome of this was the decision to build the line

underground wherever possible, and follow the existing over ground infrastructure when undergrounding was not an option. By listening to the concerns of the local community who had felt they were shut out in the early years of the scheme, the public's faith was restored in the project and opposition groups were more open to discussions.

In the early years of the project information was very difficult to come by, with the electricity companies being unwilling to engage with the public and share information or listen to suggestions. Following the concertation process of the early 2000s and the 2008 intervention of a mediator, information became more freely available and process became a collaborative one.

#### 5.1.5 **Summary of findings**

The case studies demonstrate that community engagement is conducted at a range of stages during planning and development processes. In most cases this begins at pre-planning and even in early scoping work and continues through construction and during the operational life of a project.

However, engagement takes different forms and is directed at different 'publics' during these stages. For example, engagement at the scoping phase is often targeted at statutory consultees and particular identified interest groups, whereas wider publics are engaged with during pre-application consultation and planning. This suggests that wider community engagement is typically reserved for when many of the key decisions have been made. This also limits the possible range of outcomes to come from community engagement and the opportunities for community members to influence aspects of the proposed development. However, within the European case study there is evidence of community engagement in early planning processes.

Indeed, a positive feature of the European example is that community engagement was focused at fostering dialogue and interaction both with and within the community. For example, a community representative and spokesperson was recruited to negotiate interests between the developer and the local community. Such processes may be important for creating shared understandings and going some way towards building consensus.

The projects which encountered least public opposition tend to be those in which more dialogical forms of engagement were used and where there was feedback to community members on how consultation responses had been addressed. Additionally, where community engagement was led from within the community (e.g. through a community spokesperson) this also appeared to have had a positive impact on community acceptance.

### 5.2 **Primary Research**

This section discusses findings that have emerged from the primary and secondary research process. With regards to the primary research, we have sought to identify trends, themes and insights arising from stakeholder and community feedback, and from internal discussions, drawing from our professional experience, to arrive at a set of key findings.

In response to these findings, we have set out recommendations in on how SONI could improve its consultation and engagement processes. Many of these recommendations are strategic in nature and relate fundamentally to the way SONI plans and governs capital project development. However, some are more tactical and could be implemented within the current organisational arrangements.

### 5.2.1 Participative Process

### 5.2.2 SONI's current consultation programme

The review discovered that while a lot of productive activity is being conducted with regards to community consultation, there is no formalised, published company-wide approach to community engagement. SONI has, however, in line with new statutory requirements surrounding PACC in Northern Ireland, developed a 'loose' consultation framework (in the form of a process 'flowchart') that includes holding two 12-week public consultation rounds. This framework, which was developed in line with 'Holford Rules', was applied to Curraghamuilkin, Brockaghboy and the North-South project, which adopted a broader consultation approach due to external stakeholder requests and expectations.

It would appear that SONI's approach to consultation is similar to those that EirGrid implemented a year ago. It represents traditional practice in the sense that SONI hosts open days, places advertisements in newspapers, has a defined period of consultation, produces quite technical reports and publications, and sends information out to those who have a vested interest in the project. Whilst it was acknowledged that the process has evolved over the past few months in terms of the supporting communications material and political engagement, it still tends to revolve around a series of staged public events.

A number of interviewees implied that the organisation has not been overly proactive with regards to reaching 'hard-to-reach' (or 'seldom heard'/'difficult to listen to') people and broader stakeholders that perhaps do not read particular newspapers, are not online, nor have displayed a direct interest in the project. It was also noted that 'extensive engagement is occurring with landowners; *however, "engagement with other stakeholders is falling through the cracks"*.

With regards to 'adapting' its consultation approach, a number of individuals suggested that SONI could start 'higher' (that is before they develop a specific project) by communicating key public interest messages (e.g. *"we need to connect to the Republic of Ireland because we have a problem with security of supply"*) as opposed to lower level, downstream 'Project' specific messages (discussed further in Findings 10 and 11).

Although this was acknowledged as a one-way flow of information, as opposed to consultation, stakeholders suggested that *"this would increase public awareness and understanding of the rationale for pursuing Grid projects"*. It was also suggested that *"this would act as a precursor for local engagement, addressing the perceived knowledge gap about the bigger picture, which would help contextualize local debates"*. Essentially, it was

seen that this stage would precede local engagement and skill-up the local population with basic information.

It was also suggested that *“before SONI starts a project they need to understand what community needs are and from that, they can deploy a range of potential solutions in addressing those needs, in parallel with the system needs”*. We are aware that SONI holds a number of Pre-Application Discussions (PADs) in accordance with statutory recommendations, and suggest that SONI considers running a parallel deliberative engagement and/or research process alongside this early needs assessment and feasibility process.

It is important to note, however, that other interviewees suggested that SONI needs to be mindful of the underlying element of *“consultation fatigue”* in Northern Ireland. Key comments included: *“SONI’s approach to consultation needs to be balanced as communities or specific individuals can unreasonably hold up infrastructure development”, “It is important that we don’t get bogged down by NIMBYISM”, “we have had no strategic projects but because we are consulted to death – I’m frustrated, we are constipated!”*.

With regards to the Pre-application Community Consultation stage, according to best practice examples, SONI should aim to ensure it has three key aims: first, informing the public about local impacts in an accessible way, in addition to broader information (linking in with Findings 10 and 11); second, empowering and supporting people to have a real say in shaping grid plans; and third, reporting back to stakeholders as to whether their comments were taken into consideration in the design process, and if not, why not.

In summary, it is apparent that SONI is operating within a rapidly changing legislative and social environment in which a ‘new normal’ is emerging, with regards to pre-application community consultation (PACC) in Northern Ireland. It is evident that a broader engagement framework (consisting of a defined ‘catchment zone’) and consultation methods is needed.

**Finding 1:** In light of recent statutory Pre-Application Community Consultation (PACC) requirements there is a need to further update SONI’s current consultation framework.

### 5.2.3 Comparison with the Republic of Ireland approach

A number of interviewees suggested that developing a common, harmonised consultation approach was deemed more efficient and streamlined, but acknowledged that SONI should not underestimate the diverse historical experiences that communities have been through with regards to community consultation and infrastructure development, generating some negative attitudes.

A number of interviewees mentioned that EirGrid encountered a *‘particular set of difficulties with regards to community consultation in the RoI’* and that SONI should not be *‘importing solutions to problems they don’t have’*. It was noted that if any change were to occur it *‘should be implemented in a staged approach, rather than in one swathe’*.

While a number of similarities (such as Step 3, 4 and 5) were identified in SONI's general approach (i.e. they are currently implementing it), the main area of discussion focused on Step 1 and 2, with a number of interviewees expressing apprehension regarding the relevance of it to the NI market.

Key comments included: *"adopting EirGrid's RoI approach could be a step too far, we need to learn to walk before we can run"* and *"it will double the time it normally takes to develop small projects (such as Curraghamuilkin, Brockaghboy), and potentially double the cost"*. Other comments included; *"there is a risk of making promises that they can't deliver on"*. It is apparent from this that a middle ground needs to be found with regards to adapting NI's current consultation framework in accordance with RoI's six-step approach.

In the words of one stakeholder *"EirGrid needs to be mindful of those sensitivities and be consistent. They can't be seen to be doing something different in the Republic of Ireland than they would Northern Ireland. But whatever they do in Northern Ireland, it needs to be nuanced."*

**Finding 2:** Whilst it is acknowledged that the approach in RoI (Step 1- Step 6) is premised on best practice, SONI needs to remain mindful of the differences between the two markets, both legally and culturally.

#### 5.2.4 Interaction with SONI staff

On a project level, the majority of stakeholders (though not all) were content with their dealings with SONI. They said they felt *'respected'* throughout the process, simply due to the friendly, genuine and approachable manner in which SONI personnel dealt with them. There were a number of positive comments about stakeholders' dealings with SONI employees, particularly those who operate on the ground.

Comments included: *"SONI is a professional organisation and very well organised"*; *"The team are very helpful"* and *"SONI staff are professional, competent and thorough"*. They felt that SONI provided the right people to deal with their issues, each of whom had an understanding or intimate knowledge of key areas of interests, and were informed enough to provide answers to their questions.

This demonstrates that SONI remains very close to people on the ground – especially landowners, demonstrating that the consultation processes are about the individual and the impact the works will have on them. This personalised approach appears to be working and it is recommended that SONI continues to develop strong community relations.

On a corporate level, it was felt that SONI could try to be more transparent in its decision making – key comments included *"I would like more information on the transparency of project costs"* and *"They could be more open and transparent because when they aren't, it creates suspicion and then they can be treated more harshly than they deserve"*. It was observed that while staff are regarded as generally positive, all SONI staff who interact with the public should have relevant consultation, engagement and feedback training.

**Finding 3:** The majority of stakeholders (on both a project and corporate level) feel that SONI staff are approachable and professional, and appreciated the impact of the transmission lines on their community/property. Access to SONI staff ‘on the ground’ was praised.

#### 5.2.5 Project acceptance/opposition

Feedback across the two projects varied according to the project in question, the nature of the affected communities, and the extent to which individuals had been impacted directly by the projects. Having said that, feedback was generally positive, and acceptance is relatively high for both Curraghamulkin, Brockaghboy. Interestingly, those most affected by the project, such as landowners in, or in close proximity to, transmission line corridors, tended to be generally positive compared to people in the broader community.

The common feeling was *“the general mood in the community is alright. Anyone who is getting a pole in their land is happy - it’s money to them”*. For those non-landowners, SONI was not seen to be overly committed to notifying and informing them about the project. A small minority felt that SONI had decided on projects and outcomes prior to public consultation and not taken into account community concerns, suggestions or comments. This implies that there is a need for SONI to extend its consultation catchment zone to include the broader community, thereby mitigating allegations of lack of transparency.

**Finding 4:** The views of stakeholders involved in both Curraghamulkin, Brockaghboy are mixed but project ‘acceptance’ is reasonably high, particularly among landowners.

#### 5.2.6 Communication material and methods

We received a wide range of feedback about SONI’s consultation methods and communication materials, particularly the website. A number of interviewees suggested that SONI should simplify the language for non-technical stakeholders. It was also noted that SONI should aim to tailor its information based on specific areas of interest – for example, the health impacts of electro-magnetic frequencies (EMF) was viewed as an area that needed greater explanation and information. It has been noted that a significant body of work in this area is now underway for the North-South Interconnector project, but this needs to be mirrored across all projects, and again, needs resourced.

A number of people feel that the material was somewhat *“marketing”* orientated and did not talk about the possible downsides to the project. It was also suggested that SONI should further explain the understanding of engagement and Pre-application Community Consultation (PACC) as they are relatively new concepts in Northern Ireland.

Regarding SONI’s website, a number of stakeholder felt the material provided did not provide sufficient details about the possible impacts, so they needed to attend the open days to find out more. Other interviewees suggested that the website is hard to navigate, contains too much technical information and is not particularly user-friendly. In addition, there is no online structured mechanism for feedback to consultative phases. Some key comments are noted below:



*"I look at it most weeks - most of the time it's about fuel mix. The mobile app doesn't work on the iPhone 6"*

*"There is lots of technical information on there that we don't need or understand"*

*"It's very difficult to find information, publications, consultations and historical documents"*

*"It isn't user friendly, it doesn't provide information that people need. It is difficult to read and difficult to navigate the library catalogues"*

*"There is a huge amount of information on the site, a huge amount of detail, and it takes a great amount of time and commitment to use it".*

With regards to consultation methods, a number of respondents suggest that the concept of running an education programme was a strong idea and that the use of experts, to explain complex topics such as EMF at consultation rounds, would prove valuable.

**Finding 5:** SONI's communications materials, particularly its website, need to be updated and refreshed in order to meet stakeholder needs.

### 5.2.7 The decision-making process

A number of interviewees suggested that they are not clear on what they can and cannot influence and how they fit into the decision-making process; others suggested that they do not fully appreciate how their feedback may have influenced the final decision.

It was suggested that reasoning for route choices should be clearly set out, with others suggesting that it is important that participants in consultation processes are clear on what exactly they are being asked to comment on, and how their information will be considered. Some interviewees mentioned that having clear terms of reference (ToR) for the various stages and opening up the consultation in terms of what people can or cannot influence is critical.

Key comments included *'we are running consultations at the moment, but there hasn't really been a clear direction with regards to what the public are being asked, and how they can influence the proposal'* and *'It's not that people can't have influence on the proposal, it just that isn't being formalised and made clear'*.

In fitting with new statutory requirements, it was suggested that SONI needs to publish consultation reports, after each consultation round showing how feedback from stakeholders has been taken on board (Section 28 of the Planning (NI) Act). It is also evident from the above that SONI needs to improve the effectiveness of its consultation processes to define more lucidly and cogently the consultation opportunities, including offering clear guidance on how feedback and input can be provided.

**Finding 6:** There is a gap in general understanding of the decision-making process – explanations are needed as to how and why decisions are made. Feedback from consultations should be published on SONI's website (transparency is key).

### 5.2.8 **Monitoring and Evaluation**

It was discovered that SONI do not have a formalised process for monitoring and evaluating their engagement approach. It was proposed that implementing such a process would prove useful with regards to offering feedback to SONI about what worked, what worked less well and how they could improve their practices of engagement in future projects.

**Finding 7:** SONI should consider formally monitoring and evaluating their engagement methods.

### 5.2.9 **Internal culture, processes and procedures**

#### 5.2.10 **Organisational culture**

It was clear when undertaking the review that there are three organisational sub-cultures operating under one roof – NIE, SONI and EirGrid, suggesting that there is a clear need to put in place a handbook for all SONI staff and consultants, with accompanying behaviour and culture training and support, to streamline consultation processes and procedures. It was discovered that there is no formalised 'umbrella' document that links grid development to external affairs – key comments included: *“there needs to be more of a connection”, “it needs to be packaged together a bit more”, “I think community engagement has probably fallen between two stools to a certain extent”*.

**Finding 8:** There are three organisational sub-cultures operating under one roof – NIE, SONI and EirGrid, suggesting that there is a clear need to streamline and formalise consultation processes and procedures.

#### 5.2.11 **Stakeholder Management System (SMS)**

Both SONI and EirGrid use a database management system, but this system has limitations. It tracks all correspondence and engagement with an individual – from a media contact to an elected representative, and was mainly driven by the need to 'track' engagement for oral hearings. From conducting the review, however, it is evident that the system is not being used consistently across the organisation with various individuals suggesting that they do not have access to it.

It was noted by various individuals that the development of a central stakeholder (based on the CRM model) database which can be used as a reporting tool to provide a high-level dashboard with data-mining capabilities is now critical. In addition, there is a need for seamless interaction between a master database of all stakeholders across all projects in order to avoid duplication, and to draw appropriate cross-cutting lessons.

**Finding 9:** There is a need for a system with data mining capabilities to allow sufficient data capture and documentation – in accordance with new statutory PAC requirements.



## 5.2.12 Political leadership and advocacy

### 5.2.13 Project need

During the course of our interviews, it was evident that a number of individuals and organisations had little understanding of the need for each project beyond the immediate requirement of connecting a wind farm. A small number, mostly those with industry or public policy knowledge, articulated an understanding of Northern Ireland's broader energy requirements.

As our research progressed, an increased output from SONI communications was noted and messaging is beginning to filter down. However, there remains a need to continue to drive the explanations about energy and grid development to the wider NI public, which must be adequately resourced. Given SONI's transmission operator role, combined as it now is with grid planning and connection obligations, many sectoral stakeholders feel that SONI should enjoy a leadership role in communicating a public interest message about the need for energy infrastructure. However, it was felt that this could not be done in isolation, nor could it be done without adequate resources.

**Finding 10:** There is a need for energy, and therefore grid development, to be explained clearly to the wider public.

### 5.2.14 Awareness of SONI

When asked to describe phrases that come to mind when respondents hear the name 'SONI', the following words were mentioned '*electronics*', '*communication*' and '*televisions*'. This lack of awareness appears to be impacting SONI staff on the ground who indicated that '*even though we're not NIE, we are still dealing with all of NIE's previous issues, we're being treated as one and the same*'.

The acknowledgement that SONI in certain circumstances, is 'piggy in the middle' reflects the significant communications and stakeholder management challenge faced by SONI. It was evident during the course of this review that SONI staff are required to deal with issues that are outwith the organisation's remit.

As well as absorbing both financial and human resources, the SONI team are often subject to criticism that they had little or no ability to resolve. Since this research was initiated, SONI has engaged in a number of above and below the line campaigns, with a particular focus on the North-South Interconnector; visibility should be sustained to support the drive for further understanding of SONI's function and brand awareness.

**Finding 11:** Awareness of SONI is low. There is confusion and a gap in general understanding of who is responsible for what (i.e. roles and responsibilities) between EirGrid, SONI and NIE.

### 5.2.15 Political leadership

Both public and sectoral feedback pointed to a need for high-level political leadership to ensure the development of a sustainable electricity system. The idea of a Ministerial

Advisory Group emerged as a potential vehicle for the provision of strategic advice to the Northern Ireland Executive, facilitating a cross-sectoral approach to the development of energy policy and the delivery of energy infrastructure.

The importance of this was reinforced during conversations with industry and investment-focused organisations for whom the availability of a safe, reliable and sustainable energy system is essential, with one stakeholder noting that *“SONI and other decision makers need to have a bigger conversation with the public about the consequence of not making decisions.”*

**Finding 12:** There is a need for high-level political leadership to facilitate the development of a sustainable electricity system.

#### 5.2.16 Compensation for landowner/ host community

The review elicited mixed responses with regards to arrangements by SONI to ensure continuity and security of tenure for its assets, through community benefit funds. The principle of landowner payments was generally regarded as a good idea, alongside wider community-orientated funding, *“the principle of sharing out that benefit is something that is definitely good,”* so long as they are administered correctly and wisely. From a host community perspective, it was noted that all issues relating to that wider community gain, as opposed to specific landowner compensation can become competitively charged and emotive.

In the words of one stakeholder *“you then get into what is ‘community benefit’ and how do you ensure that the benefit is truly to the community”* and therefore needs to be handled sensitively from the beginning. It was suggested that SONI should be upfront from the start that there will be recognition for landowners, supplemented by investment in areas affected by the grid – this will help prevent payments later looking like ‘payoffs’.

One political stakeholder stated that in *“trying to establish a change of mind-set from fossil to green...It would be good to know that the view that has been changed that the community is getting the benefit as well as for the general good”*.

From a sectoral perspective, the value of benefit funds in general was acknowledged, but the complex question of cost allocation was noted by a number of key stakeholders. SONI has the opportunity to develop some more sophisticated modelling, drawing from experience across these islands. One stakeholder identified an opportunity in the development of local Community Plans, citing areas area in Scotland as providing good examples.

Another stakeholder noted: *“I think the nub of that is understanding community needs, and some of those communities may be needing the funds, but it may be other, less financial support and recognition. So the core of that is what do our community need and want as part of this project for example. So I have no difficulty for the community benefitting from something going through their community at all. I think it is clearly a sensible idea. SONI should consider it, absolutely”*.

**Finding 13:** Landowner compensation is generally regarded as a good idea – so long as the funds are administered appropriately.

#### 5.2.17 Resources

While undertaking the review it was evident that SONI staff have the will and passion to implement a more effective consultation and engagement programme, but need appropriate resources and funding to do so.

It was suggested that SONI should consider appointing an in-house person with expertise in planning and stakeholder engagement, who would work closely with the newly appointed Public Affairs and Communications lead. There is a clear need for three local community liaison officers – one to focus on North-South, the other Curraghamulkin and another on Brockaghboy.

The liaison persons should best be individuals whom the local community trust and with whom they will have open communication. These individuals will serve as a link between local communities and the project team, which will lead to enhanced dialogue between local communities and groups as SONI works to develop the transmission grid.

When deploying an external support, it was suggested that SONI continues to maintain a close relationship. They cannot be too far removed from the front end, otherwise members of the community will ask – “*who is the face of SONI?*” While there is still a need for external support in the delivery of communications and stakeholder engagement for projects, it was suggested that it is important to ensure communities can continue to engage directly with SONI staff.

**Finding 14:** SONI has the ‘will and passion’ to implement an effective consultation programme, but needs adequate resources and funding to do so.

## 6 Recommendations

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With new Northern Ireland legislation having taken effect from 1st July 2015, statutory Pre-Application Community Consultation (PACC) will demand a higher level of professionalism in the preparation of applications than ever seen before.

Essentially, the aim of these new processes will be a speedier planning application process, with the community feeling that they are stakeholders in the process and therefore less likely to object to, and potentially slow down, a planning application.

‘Transparency’ is the defining word and commentators suggest that early community engagement builds trust, eases the process overall and reduces costs. It is clear that a new ‘new normal’ is emerging in Northern Ireland and the time is opportune for SONI to capitalise on this and become the leader in best practice PACC.

### 6.1 Instigate a refreshed programme of engagement

**Recommendation 1:** Amend SONI’s current consultation framework to ensure compliance with Section 27 and Section 28 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011. Publish and promote in the public domain.

We understand that EirGrid recently published its new approach to consultation entitled *‘Have Your Say’*. On the back of this, we understand that SONI is in the process of developing its own NI-specific version, for external publication. It is envisioned that this document will detail SONI’s vision and approach to consultation, and how this is driven by both legislation (e.g. Section 27 and 28 statutory obligations contained in the Planning Act (NI) 2011) and best practice.

We suggest that SONI includes a commitment, within this document, to adhering to consultation principles<sup>15</sup> (e.g. Accessibility, Transparency, Timeliness), as set out in the Consultation Charter. We envisage that this document will be aimed at external community stakeholders, but also linked to the landowner liaison strategy.

It is suggested that individual Community Engagement Project Plans stream out of this overarching framework, incorporating the specific implementation plan for each project. In detail, we foresee that this plan will cover the ‘what’, the ‘who’, the ‘how’ and the ‘when’, and what messages and information are communicated to whom, by whom, when and via which chosen communication channel. Developing this standard approach to stakeholder engagement will provide consistency in managing stakeholders, and key messages, across all

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<sup>15</sup> Principles can be described as abstract ideals or standards of judgments. Even though they may prove difficult to apply to real-world situations, they help us strive for something better (Burchell & Cook, 2006). In other words, putting these fundamental principles into practice will contribute to effective engagement: it will increase the public’s trust in the process and add to productive and positive outcomes.

projects. It will also provide the backbone for developing the Planning Advice Notice (PAN)<sup>16</sup>.

**Recommendation 2:** Run a parallel deliberative engagement and/or research process alongside early needs assessments and feasibility studies or Pre-Application Discussion (PAD<sup>17</sup>) process.

When conducting the research, we identified that a number of stakeholders felt that SONI should strive to *“understand what community needs are, prior to and in parallel with the system needs”*. We are aware the SONI holds a number of Pre-Application Discussions (PADs) in accordance with statutory recommendations, and suggest that SONI should consider running a parallel deliberative engagement and/or research ‘needs’ assessment process to gather evidence from community members and key stakeholders in an area where a project is proposed, before it is confirmed and lines are drawn on a map.

The evidence should focus on the issues that would need to be addressed to build the public case. We suggest using a research methodology proactively to recruit participants to this process, as self-selection methods may not work. These methods could include focus groups and deliberative forums, using professional recruiters to ensure a representative attendance, plus high-level stakeholder and opinion-former interviews.

In addition to building the public case concurrently with the economic case, this approach would help SONI better to understand the communities and build relationships in an area where a major project could emerge. It would be important to communicate the outcomes of this process publicly to lay the foundations of more specific project proposals, corridor selection processes and environmental approval processes.

**Recommendation 3:** Host three consultation rounds, as opposed to two, during the PACC process. Produce a summary report and a final PAC report detailing to what extent the proposals may have changed as a result of PACC, in accordance with Section 28 obligations.

Even though guidelines issued by the Department of the Environment NI (DoE) suggest that at least one public event should be undertaken in the locality in which the proposed development is situated<sup>18</sup>, we recommend that SONI holds three consultation rounds, as opposed to one/two, relating to different milestones of the project’s development. We believe that this approach is in ‘proportion’ to the scale of the type of developments proposed.

<sup>16</sup> The new legislation requires developers to submit a ‘Proposal of Application Notice (PAN)’ 12 weeks before submitting a formal planning application. The PAN will explain how a prospective applicant will engage with the local community and set out a timetable for the engagement. Once a planning authority receives a PAN, they have 21 days to consider the proposal. The legislation directs that they can either confirm their acceptance of the proposal, or direct the applicant to modify their approach.

<sup>17</sup> It is thought that the developer-led PAN and pre-application community consultation will be strongly linked to the existing pre-application discussion (PAD) process, a non-statutory but integral part of the proactive planning process, with advice from the PAD process feeding in to the pre-application community consultation.

<sup>18</sup> The event must be advertised in the local press at least seven days in advance.

- The aim of the **first consultation round** should be to introduce the project and its broader need, describe the consultation process (timeline, methods of engagement etc.) and obtain feedback on how SONI could improve their approach. By empowering communities to decide how SONI consults with them, SONI will be enabling them to participate in a more accessible and inclusive manner. We suggest that this subset of the Pre-Application Notice (PAN<sup>19</sup>), should be published in the public domain – perhaps entitled ‘Our Statement of Community Consultation’ or ‘SoCC’ – in line with best practice. Findings from this consultation round should be published in the public domain, in the form of a summary consultation report.
- The **second consultation round** could focus on reporting on the conclusions of environmental scoping exercises and ‘Options Development’. This session will also allow attendees to review and comment on the results of the environmental scoping report – providing feedback to the project team; and raising any other issues of concern regarding the project. Findings from this consultation round should be published in the public domain, in the form of a summary consultation report.
- The **third and final consultation round** could report back on how stakeholder comments have been considered in the design process, in line with statutory requirements. We recommend that this information session is held in advance of consent application submission to allow for final comments/feedback and final revisions to be made should such be necessary. Findings for this consultation round (and previous two) should be combined and a final PAC report produced (in consideration of Section 28 obligations in the Planning Act (NI) 2011) and published in the public domain. As noted in DoE guidelines, the report should set out how SONI responded to comments made, including if, and to what extent, the proposals may have changed as a result of PACC. The report must accompany the planning application when submitted. It will be in SONI’s interest to get this right first time round, as Section 50 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 will give the local authorities the power to decline to determine an application if they consider that the legislative requirements have not been complied with.

**Recommendation 4:** Broaden the catchment zone to include adjacent communities, non-statutory stakeholders, and groups under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998)

A number of non-landowners felt that SONI was not seen to be overly committed to notifying and informing them about individual projects. In view of this, we suggest that SONI strives to broaden its consultation catchment zone to include the local community, non-statutory stakeholders, and groups identified under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998).

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<sup>19</sup> Requirements will include a period of 12 weeks for the PAN to be in effect before submission of the planning application, during which time the community consultation should take place. There should be at least 1 public event (with notice of the event advertised at least 7 days prior) and the council are given a period of 21 days to notify the applicant if they require further action in terms of the community consultation.

We suggest that, prior to commencing any project, an extensive stakeholder audit should be undertaken and all relevant strategic stakeholders, including statutory bodies, businesses and their representative bodies, politicians, environmental and community groups and landowners for example, should be further profiled, mapped and categorised by projected influence on the project and area of interest. For ease of PAC reporting, stakeholders should also be broken down into statutory and non-statutory stakeholders.

In terms of mapping and classifying stakeholders, the consortium could use Mendelow's (1981) model, classifying and mapping stakeholders based on their level of interest and influence. Stakeholders can then be weighted and assessed on their ability to influence the project in either a positive or negative way.

The Consultation Institute has further developed Mendelow's model, as also adjusted and recommended by the World Bank, covering:

- Stakeholder Identification
- Stakeholder Profiling
- Stakeholder Mapping

This leads, in turn, to a process of 'policy alignment' mapping, where relationships (non-existent, opposing, or congruent) are mapped against the policy positions of stakeholders. The outputs from these methodologies leads to greater clarity of analysis, better decision-making and improved outcomes for both proponents and respondents.

In addition, this exercise will allow the relevant organisations and individuals to be identified and targeted with specific information about the project at the appropriate juncture and to invite them to take part in consultation exercises that will be rolled out over the lifetime of each project, as appropriate. Every attempt should be made to tailor information to specific stakeholder groups.

**Recommendation 5:** Consider improving consultation methods and communication materials in the light of stakeholder feedback, especially individual project websites.

In response to feedback obtained from stakeholders, SONI should commit to improving how they communicate to ensure technical information and decisions are presented in an understandable and straightforward manner. For example, consider providing simple, non-technical factsheets on key areas of interest such as electromagnetic fields. In addition, every attempt should be made to tailor information to specific stakeholder groups. Implementing an effective SMS will allow aid this 'tailored' approach.

With regards to the SONI website, it was suggested that the level of interactivity could be enhanced and that the administrative workload associated with processing the large number of stakeholder submissions to the public consultation process could be reduced if an online survey was included in the project website. This will also aid collation, analysis and



interpretation of consultation responses. It was also suggested that each project should have a standalone, dedicated webpage, but linked to SONI's parent site.

**Recommendation 6:** Implement a monitoring and evaluation process.

We suggest that SONI implements a monitoring and evaluation process, perhaps through a series of standardised questions in individual project questionnaires. This would prove useful with regards benchmarking effectiveness, offering feedback to SONI about what worked, what worked less well and how they could improve their practices of engagement in future projects.

**Recommendation 7:** Undertake an Aarhus Compliance test.

The UN Aarhus Convention and the subsequent Maastricht implementation guidance impose higher demands on public authorities, and those acting publicly, on their behalf, such as EirGrid and SONI, in the domain of public consultation and access to decisions, under the three pillars of access to information, public participation and access to justice. EirGrid and SONI can become champions of the Convention's principles and practice across the island, before the process becomes overly public, adversarial and juridical.

## 6.2 Streamline SONI's internal process and procedures (consultation specific)

**Recommendation 8:** Develop and implement an internal handbook/community engagement policy consisting of a series of processes and procedures.

We envisage that the aim of this handbook will be introduce a combined and consistent approach to engaging with the community across the organisation and to provide employees with the tools necessary to achieve this objective – it should be rolled out across the organisation via a staged approach, with appropriate training and support. Critically, this handbook will act as the golden thread between individual project teams, the public affairs and corporate communications teams, as well as senior management.

It is envisioned that this handbook will help further streamline SONI's consultation processes and procedures. It could include a series of procedural, 'how to' documents highlighting communication protocols, contact response targets (KPIs'), behaviours when dealing with stakeholders, details on SONI's SMS, a grievance management mechanism to include issues and crisis management as well as top tips on 'how to' run a successful community information session (to name a few).

**Recommendation 9:** Undertake a review of SONI's (and EirGrid's) current Stakeholder Management System (SMS) to ensure fitness for purpose in line with new legislative reporting requirements – consider configuring a new SMS, if required.

We have received mixed feedback regarding the effectiveness of the current SMS tool used by SONI. In response to this, we suggest that SONI undertakes a review of its fitness for



purpose, whilst at the same time identifying internal needs and requirements from those who use it.

It is envisioned that this new system will allow for efficient reporting on all projects across SONI's portfolio; allow for cloud access, with security levels appropriate to users; allow for traceability in terms of information being inputted and disseminated; accommodate linked online surveys (through the website); allow for flagging of outstanding issues that need to be closed; allow for tracking of issues (via tagging) at different consultation phases to highlight how these are developing and from which stakeholder groups; and allow for reporting on consultation phases such as how many people engaged, how, when, issues etc. (in compliance with Section 28 PAC reporting requirements). It should also provide a record of the project team member who is liaising with a specific stakeholder and the topic on which this engagement is taking place. In addition, it would allow for consistency of messaging across all projects.

**Recommendation 10:** Undertake internal consultation-specific staff training.

Consideration needs to be given to how SONI deals with issues such as EMF and health. Staff need to be equipped with strong appropriate messages that allow them confidently to communicate the most up-to-date science on the subject and that SONI adheres to international best practice. Staff also need training and support in dealing with challenging behaviour by more clearly agitated individuals.

### 6.3 Continue to build on the recent, extensive public affairs programme

**Recommendation 11:** Continue to drive key messaging and consider resourcing a specific public education campaign.

This public education programme should focus on two pillars - the role of energy in making Northern Ireland a place to live, work and invest in; and the role of SONI, as well as other key stakeholders, in 'keeping the lights on', attracting investment and planning for the future. While this education programme should be led by SONI as system operator, it needs to be supported by all stakeholders.

**Recommendation 12:** Develop a clear and appropriate landowner compensation model

Appropriate Landowner compensation and associated community benefit or proximity funds are generally regarded as a good idea – as long as they are administered correctly and fairly. From a host community perspective, it was noted that all issues relating to community gain could become charged and emotive, and therefore need to be handled sensitively from the beginning.

It is recommended that SONI review its current model of wayleave agreements and associated payments to an easement model - accepted and used by many utilities. It is suggested that this model will allow for a more appropriate compensation scheme, while

also giving SONI and eventually NIE Networks a more appropriate and securable relationship with the landowner. As per any community fund, it must be recognised that the easement approach will increase the cost of development; it is therefore recommended that SONI trial this approach on the Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector (North-South Interconnector) on a pilot basis, before considering roll-out on future grid development projects.

It was suggested that SONI should be upfront from the beginning that there will be recognition given to landowners for assets placed on their land, and accompanying community funds of various types that may emerge over time, as concomitant investment in areas affected by the grid – this will help prevent payments later looking like ‘payoffs’.

From a sectoral perspective, the value of benefit funds was acknowledged but the complex question of cost allocation was noted by a number of key stakeholders. SONI has the opportunity to develop some more sophisticated modelling, drawing from experience across these islands as well as international examples, to unpack some of these well-known challenges - who is it for? Other than money, what is available? E.g. landscaping, roads, community centres; what does the community secure, when and why? On what terms and conditions? With what impact, measured how? Any community fund model must be given thorough consideration – funds applied to future projects, will have an impact the cost of these developments and will have a subsequent bearing on consumer costs. If this model is to be pursued legislative changes will be required, SONI therefore must be prepared to engage and educate a range of stakeholders on the benefits of any funds versus the increase cost to consumers.

#### **6.4 Ensure adequate resourcing and funding for communications, engagement, community outreach (e.g. an education programme.)**

**Recommendation 13:** Ensure adequate resourcing and funding for communications, engagement, community outreach (e.g. an education programme).

It is evident that SONI needs to implement a number of changes to its current consultation approach to ensure compliance with statutory obligations. This, however, needs to be reflected in the level of resourcing.

For example, it was suggested that SONI should consider appointing an in-house person with expertise in planning and stakeholder engagement. In addition, there is a clear need for three local community liaison officers – one to focus on North-South, the other Curraghamulkin and another on Brockaghboy (and held for future projects). Funds also need to be allocated to update SONI’s website and to produce bespoke information materials and experts at consultation events (to name a few).

## 7 Closure

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TCI Engagement disclaims any responsibility to the client and others in respect of any matters outside the agreed scope of the work.

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## 9 Appendix 1 – Letter of Invitation (External Stakeholders)

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Dear X,

***Reference: Invitation to participate in a review of SONI's public consultation processes and procedures***

As you may know, SONI Ltd. is the System Operator for Northern Ireland ([www.soni.ltd.uk](http://www.soni.ltd.uk)). It is responsible for the consistent and reliable transmission of electricity, matching supply and demand for power across Northern Ireland. It is regulated by the Utility Regulator Northern Ireland and works in co-operation with NIE to develop the electricity grid infrastructure.

SONI Ltd. sees public consultation and stakeholder engagement as a vital aspect in the development of grid infrastructure projects. In view of this, it recently commissioned the Consultation Institute ([www.consultationinstitute.org](http://www.consultationinstitute.org)) and its local partner organisation, TCI Engagement, to conduct an independent review of its outward-facing engagement approach with stakeholder groups, interested parties and the general public, entitled '*A review of SONI's public consultation processes and procedures*'.

The objectives of the research are to:

- Explore what SONI Ltd. has done well in its engagement procedures and processes;
- Identify areas for improvement; and
- Determine the best ways to inform, engage and communicate with key stakeholders and communities in Northern Ireland in the future.

The review will include conducting desk research on best practice approaches and legislative requirements surrounding community and stakeholder engagement, particularly on large scale infrastructure projects, plus undertaking a number interviews. These activities will run in parallel with the intent that all information will be used as a basis of future recommendations to SONI Ltd.

In order to optimise the impact of the recommendations included in the review and to ensure that the requirements of important stakeholders are identified, we would be pleased if you (or another member of your organisation on your behalf, if applicable), would accept our invitation to participate in a one-off interview with a member of our team - either face-to-face, in a mutually agreed upon location, or, if more convenient via telephone, between 26 October - 13 November 2015.

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be relatively informal. We are simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on any interactions you *may* have had with SONI Ltd. and how you would like them to engage with you in the future.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings, unless consented otherwise. When our quality control checks have been completed, your personal details and all recording will be

securely destroyed. Please refer to the attached consent form for your information – we will ask you to sign a copy of this, prior to commencing the interview.

If you have any questions regarding this research, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me on 028 9087 2800 or by e-mail at [grainne@tciengagement.com](mailto:grainne@tciengagement.com).

We will contact you via telephone or email next week to confirm your interest in being interviewed.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your time and assistance in this very important project.

Kind regards

Victoria Mc Cabe / Gráinne Walsh  
TCI Engagement Ltd *on behalf of The Consultation Institute*

## 10 Appendix 2 – Total sample, by stakeholder category

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A breakdown of the total sample, by stakeholder category, can be found below.

Type of stakeholder category	No.	% of sample
Landowner/farmer	11	26
Internal Staff	8	19
Political Representative	6	14
Environmental NGO's, Community or Interest Group	4	10
Member of the community	4	10
Business & Trade Association	2	5
Private Sector	2	5
Educational Establishment/Research Body/Academic	1	2
Government Department	1	2
Local Council	1	2
Non-Statutory Consultees/Non-Departmental Government Departments/Agencies	1	2
Regulatory Body	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100%</b>

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