

involve



MID-ANTRIM UPGRADE

Citizen Sounding Board

Interim Report

MARCH 2023

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Introduction

The Mid Antrim Upgrade Citizen Sounding Board is a group of 24 residence selected at random from the area in which the Mid Antrim Upgrade is proposed. It met for two days on Saturday 3 and Sunday 4 December 2022, in the Bank, Portglenone. During those meetings, the 24 members discussed their values, hopes, concerns and aspirations for the Mid Antrim upgrade. This report provides a summary of those meetings and their outputs.

What is the Mid Antrim Upgrade?

SONI is the organisation responsible for developing the network that moves electricity around from where it is made to where it is used (known as the grid) in Northern Ireland. SONI needs to build new physical infrastructure (cables, overhead lines, and other equipment) in the mid-Antrim area. They need to do this to make it easier for renewable energy from sources such as wind to move from where it is created in the north west to the bigger towns and cities in the east, such as Ballymena, Antrim and Belfast, where most electricity is used. This new infrastructure is called the Mid-Antrim Upgrade.

SONI has looked in detail at the area between Ballymena, Creagh, Kells and Rasharkin and identified the best area for this new infrastructure to go, considering environmental, technical, and economic factors. They have identified the best area for the upgrade (the 'study area'), but have not decided on the final route.

To help them to decide on the final route, they want to hear from communities and residents of the area to better understand local needs and preferences so that the final route reflects the best option for everyone.

This is why SONI are now seeking feedback from the community and stakeholders to inform the final proposal, which would then go to public consultation as part of the local council planning process.

SONI have appointed the public participation charity Involve to facilitate a two-part engagement process consisting of a Community Forum and a Citizen Sounding Board, to enable as diverse a group as possible to learn more about the upgrade and route options, and provide feedback that SONI will use when developing the preferred option for the upgrade.

What is the Community Forum?

The Community Forum is an opportunity for community representatives to come together to build their understanding of the proposed route options, reflect the views of their organisation or community, and provide information or insights that may need to be taken into account during project delivery.

The Community Forum will meet approximately four times between November 2022 and Winter 2023.

The Community Forum will work with Involve to agree the agenda for the meetings and can submit items for discussion. In addition to attending the Community Forum meetings, Forum members are also asked to attend the meetings of the Citizen Sounding Board in the role of 'keynote listener'. The first of those meetings took place during the weekend of 3 & 4 December 2022, and will take place again later in Winter 2023. More information on the community forum can be found online at [this link](#).

What is the Citizen Sounding Board?

The Citizen Sounding Board is a group of 24 residents recruited at random to demographically reflect the population of the areas impacted by the installation of proposed new grid infrastructure. Their involvement addresses the gap in representation that can result from only hearing from organised civil society and interest groups and acknowledges that ordinary citizens have the right to have a voice in, and have something important to bring to, decisions that will have an impact on everyone.

The purpose of this group is to hear from residents who are unlikely to otherwise engage with a public consultation process or be represented on a community forum. It operates as a Sounding Board for SONI and the Community Forum. Members will help to identify priorities, and provide feedback that is informed by the broad range of perspectives and interests within the local community

The input of the Citizen Sounding Board also enables the Community Forum members to be better equipped to represent the priorities, concerns and interests of their local area more effectively and fairly.

The Citizen Sounding Board will be brought together for at least 3 days during the pre-application stage.

Days 1-2 were held towards the beginning of the project, before a proposed route has been determined. These meetings will focus on providing information about the project, identify sites of concern and areas of priority, and agree on a set of principles for consideration in the final proposed route.

Day 3 will take place prior to SONI publicly launching Part 2b of their consultation and engagement process, after the route options have been narrowed down but before submission of the planning application, to review the proposed route/route options, evaluate their acceptability and offer any further feedback or concerns to the Keynote Listeners from the Community Forum to be taken on board and inform their final meetings.

Members of the Citizen Sounding Board

Members of the Citizen Sounding Board were recruited by random selection. Invitations were sent to approximately 5,000 addresses within the study area for the upgrade, inviting residents to take part. Of those who replied, a group of 25 were randomly selected to reflect the diversity of the area, including a range of ages, a mix of gender, different backgrounds, and a good geographic spread (see table 1). Of those 25, 24 residents attended the workshops in December.

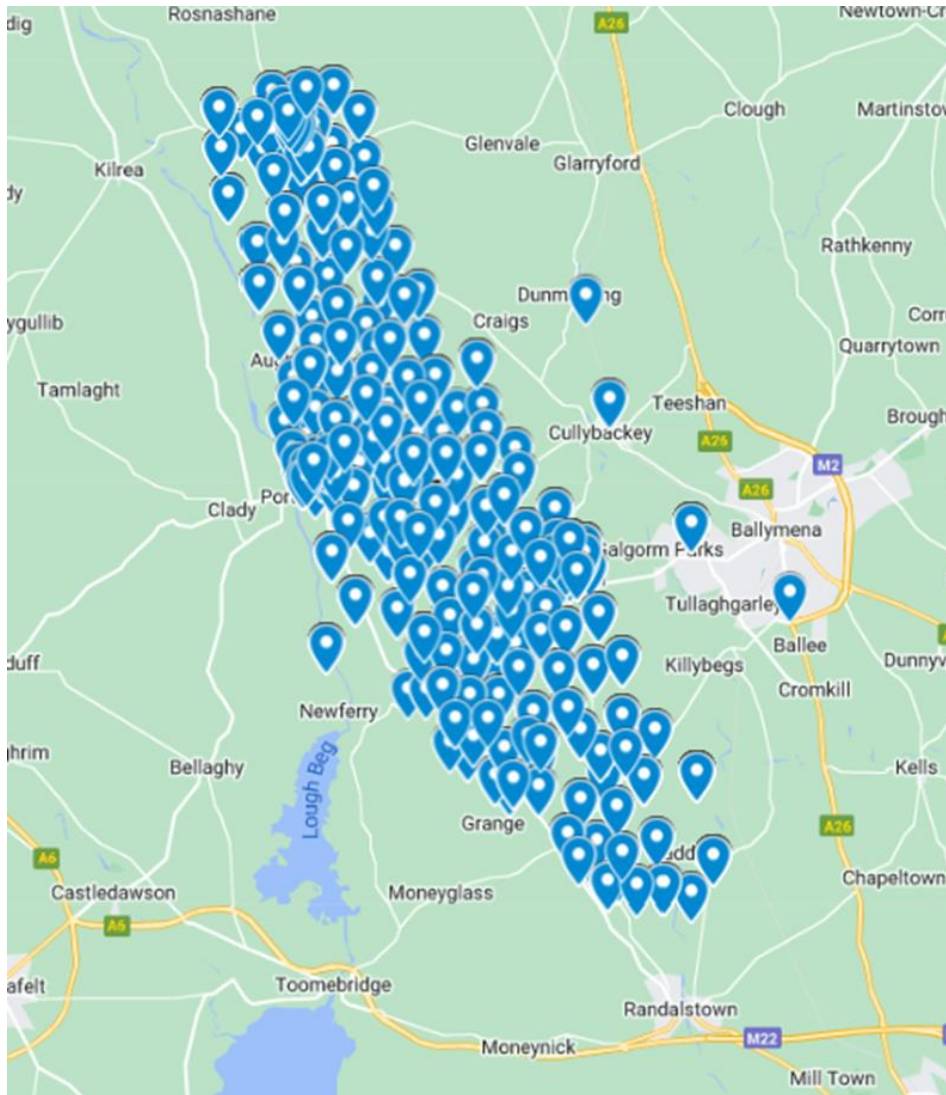


Image shows the location of addresses that received invitations to take part in the Citizen Sounding Board

Demographic characteristics of Citizen Sounding Board members

Stratification criteria		Target %	Citizen Sounding Board %
Gender	Female	51	52
	Male	49	48
Age	18-29	18	4
	30-44	24	22
	45-64	35	41
	65+	24	33
Ethnicity	White	88	100
	Diverse ethnic communities	12	0
Disability	Yes	21	22
	No	79	78
Education	No qualification/ none yet/ Level 1	41	30
	Level 2, Level 3, Apprenticeship, Other	36	33
	Level 4 and above	24	37
National Identity	British only	43	30
	Irish only	17	19
	Northern Irish only	21	15
	British and Northern Irish only	11	26
	Other	8	11

Citizen Sounding Board Process

Day one - Saturday 3 December 2022

The first day of the Citizen Sounding Board meetings began with scene setting. The Lead Facilitator introduced the purpose of the group and how it would work as part of the wider Mid Antrim Upgrade engagement process. The people involved were all introduced, their roles explained, and the agenda for the weekend was presented.

The members of the Sounding Board were then given an opportunity to introduce themselves in their small groups. Supported by group facilitators, they began discussing how they wanted to work together over the next couple of days, building on suggested conversation guidelines offered by the Lead Facilitator (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1

Conversation Guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● I will try to reach a shared understanding rather than win the argument● I will use the principle of charity: assume the best interpretation of people's statements● I will clarify to make sure that I genuinely understand other people's perspectives● I will attempt to account for my own biases and try to be humble about my views● I promise to be genuinely receptive to changing my mind● I will step forward / I will step back● Stay Curious● Don't be afraid to be in a minority● There are no stupid questions● Take responsibility for our own proactive engagement

Following this round of introductions, facilitators guided members through a discussion about values in response to two prompt questions:

1. What do we value about our landscape?
2. What do we value about our electricity supply?

The discussions took place in three small groups. The consolidated outputs of those conversations can be found below (table 1.2 and 1.3). As well as helping to define the aspects of local landscape and electrical supply that were valued by members, this exercise also helped to surface some of the fears and questions residents had brought with them into the process. We have recorded those separately in table 1.4 below.

The group exercise concluded with each group offering feedback from their conversation to the group as a whole.

It is worth noting that this discussion was intended as a 'top of mind' conversation to give people a chance to reflect on the values they were bringing with them. It took place before any information was shared about the project itself, and so the comments don't necessarily reflect the details of the proposed Mid Antrim Upgrade.

Table 1.2

What we value about our landscape	
Beauty & nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uninterrupted views - we are rural and we value that. ● Trees, hedges, and hills. ● The river. ● Appreciate the seasons and [the effect on] wellbeing. ● Air quality ● Minimal impact of infrastructure
Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preservation of the natural habitat for wildlife. ● Birds. ● Birds of prey.
Agriculture and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We want to protect our communities. ● It's a rural economy. ● Farming.

Table 1.3

What we value about our electricity supply	
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Constant. ● Dependable. ● Reliable. ● Consistent. ● Convenient. ● Taken for granted. ● Available.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meets needs.
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Produced closer to source. ● Locally owned and easily and cheaply fixable. ● All-island or hyper local.
Sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Eco-friendly. ● Meets climate obligations. ● Encourage and incentivise renewables.
Affordable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Efficient. ● Economical. ● Fair price.
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transparency, e.g. understanding the true cost of investments, better information, for example about electric vehicles.

Table 1.4

Fears and concerns	
Relating to local landscape	Relating to electricity to supply
Potential pollution and related health implications	Lines and pylons are undesirable
Disruption during construction that could impact on the natural beauty of the local area or on farming	Safety and health concerns
Noise pollution and the potential negative impact on animals	Why a new line and not an upgrade to the existing one?
Negative impacts on property values	
Visual impact	
Impact on animal habitats and biodiversity	
Flooding, and the need to stay away from peat bogs	
Increase in traffic	
Animal and human suffering as a result of the upgrade.	

Other comments and questions

- Concerns about nuclear power
- Salt mines - overnight storage
- All underground in Ireland
- Mismatch in production - grid only needs so much
- How under strain will the network be?

Panel 1: Understanding the Context

Following a short break, the group reconvened to hear from the first panel of the day. There were two speakers:

1. Dr Rónán Davison-Kernan, SONI, on how the electrical grid works.
2. Steven Agnew, Renewable NI, on what is renewable energy.

The purpose of the panel was to help members build their understanding of the context for the Mid Antrim Upgrade. Both speakers gave short plain-language presentations accompanied by slides (which can be found online [here](#)).

After each presentation, the group was given a moment to individually note down any thoughts or questions, and at the end of the presentations, the three small groups discussed what they had heard and what questions they would like to ask in the Q&A. Members prioritised what they felt were the most important questions to ask, choosing their top two. The remaining questions were gathered up and given to the project team from SONI.

The Lead Facilitator chaired a Q&A with the speakers, who answered questions from each small group in turn.

The Panel and Q&A were followed by lunch.

Panel 2: What is the Mid Antrim Upgrade?

After lunch, the Citizen Sounding Board heard from the second and final panel of the weekend, in which Ciaran McCartan and Alicia Trainor from SONI set out the details of the proposed Mid Antrim Upgrade, including the following:

- Why is it needed?
- What is it?
- How the current study area was identified.

As with the previous panel, the members had an opportunity to discuss what they had heard in small groups in order to develop and prioritise the questions they wanted to ask the speakers. Unanswered questions were gathered up and given to the project team from SONI.

As previously, the Lead Facilitator chaired a Q&A with the speakers, who answered questions from each small group in turn.

This panel was followed by a short break.

Group reflections and developing a vision for the best outcome

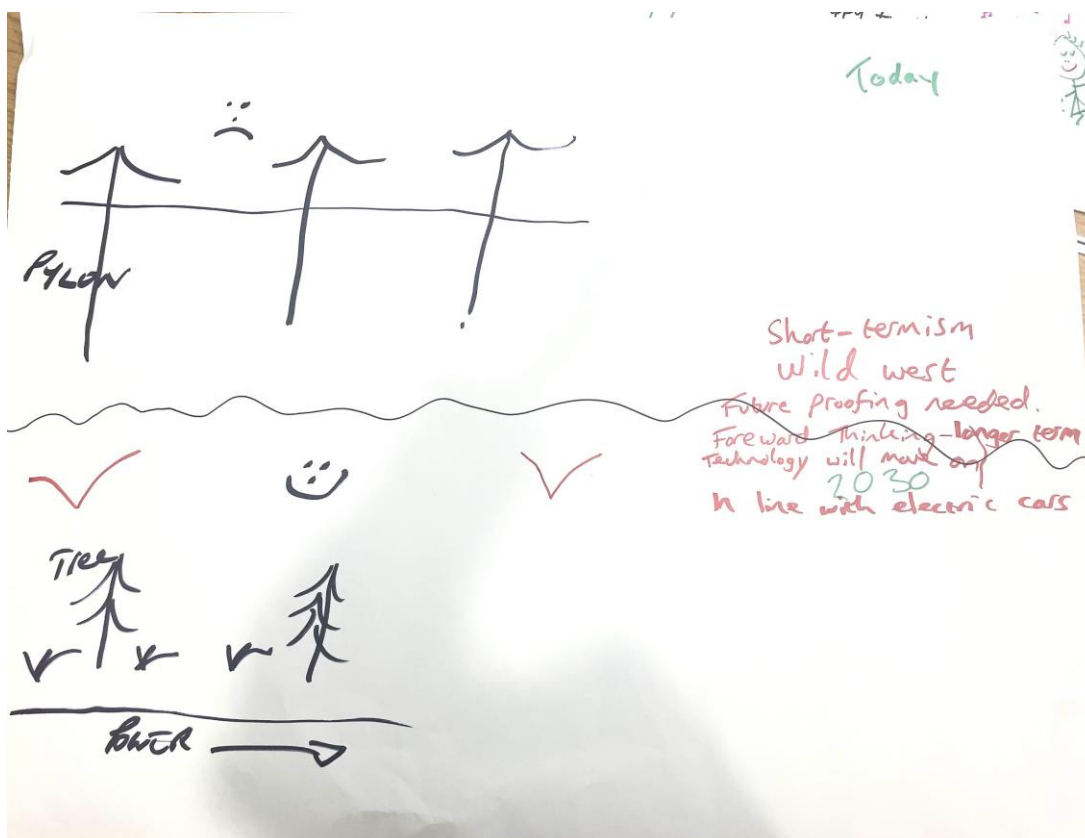
The final hour of the day was spent reflecting on what had been discussed so far during the day, including the speakers' presentations and Q&A, and to begin defining what a best-case scenario would be.

In small groups, facilitators supported members to discuss the following:

- What has stood out so far?
- Have you any concerns or worries about this project?
- What is your best hope for how this project turns out?

After everyone in each group had an opportunity to contribute, the conversation turned to developing a vision for a best-case scenario outcome for the project. Using a blank sheet of paper and the prompt question 'what would it be like in 2030 if your best hopes were realised and your concerns or worries addressed?', members were encouraged to use drawing to capture their vision for the future. Each table developed a vision or visions, and then verbally presented it back to the group as a whole.

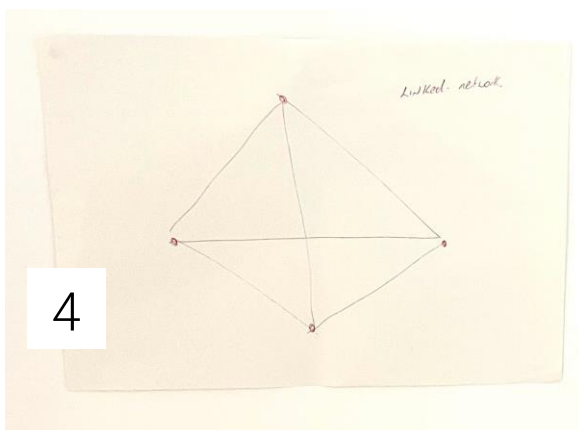
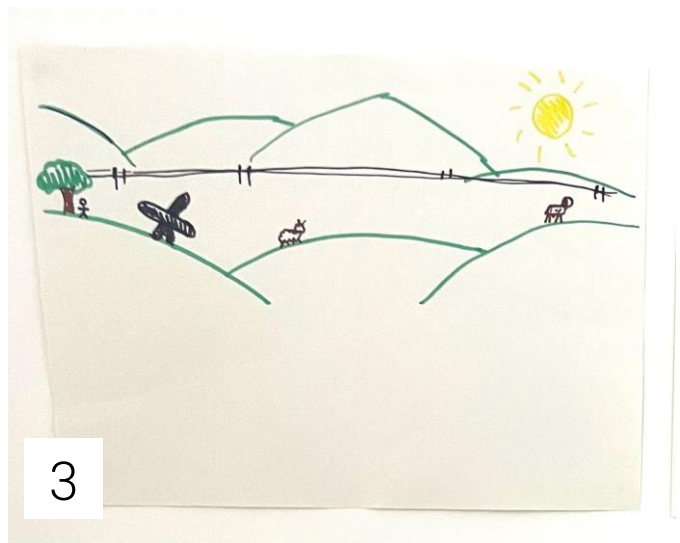
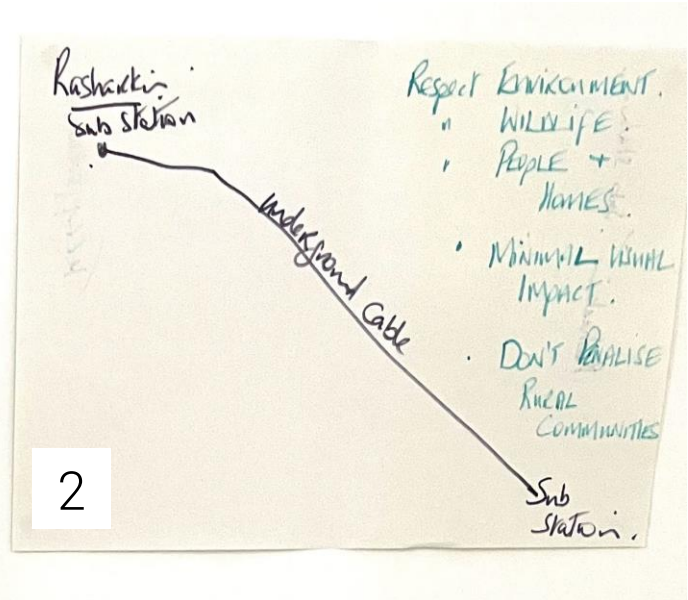
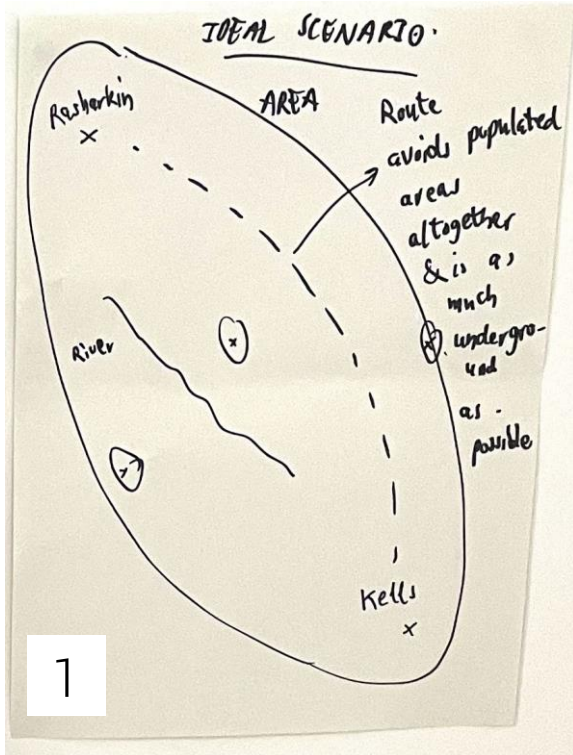
Group 1



Group 1's vision depicts 'today' with a drawing of overhead power lines and a sad face, alongside '2030' with a drawing of trees, an underground powerline and a happy face. The text reads:

'Short termism; Wild West; Future proofing needed, forward thinking - longer term; technology will move on, in line with electric cars'.

Group 2

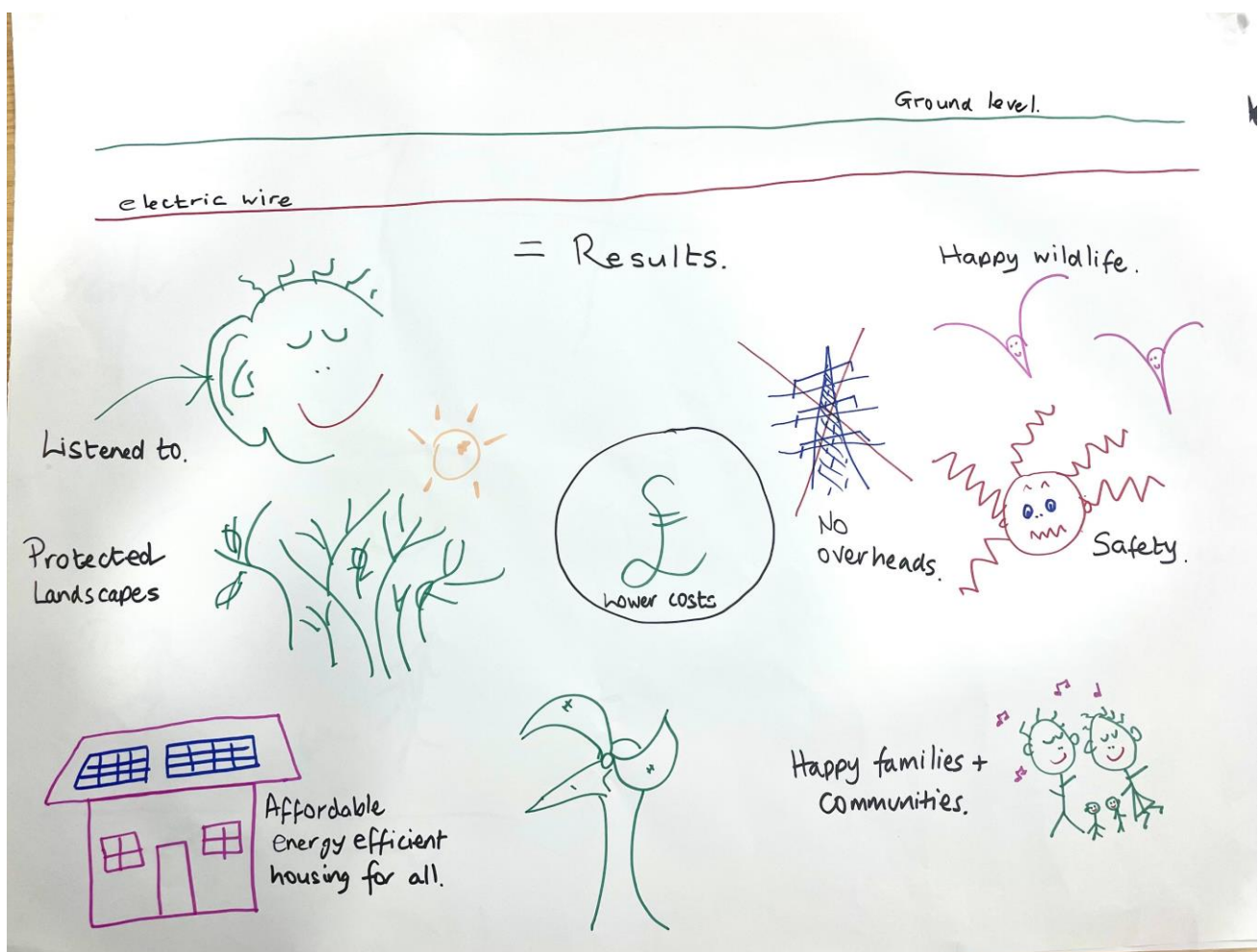


Group 2 developed 5 different visions rather than one that everyone on the table could agree on.

Moving clockwise from the top left above:

1. Drawing of the study area with a dotted line to indicate the preferred location of the new lines. Text reads 'Route avoids populated areas altogether, and is as much underground as possible'.
2. Drawing of the study area with a solid line representing an underground cable from Rasharkin to 'substation'. Text reads: 'Respect environment; wildlife; people and homes; minimal visual impact; don't penalise rural communities.'
3. Drawing of a rural landscape. There are trees, people, animals and a wind turbine featured in the image. In the background is an overhead power line.
4. Drawing of a diamond shape with a 'cross' shape in the centre. Text reads: 'linked network'.
5. Drawing of a rural landscape. There are trees and animals featured in the image, and birds in flight in the sky. There is a power line depicted below the ground.

Group 3



Group 3 worked together on their vision. It features a line at the top of the page indicating ground level. Below it is an electrical wire, to indicate an underground power line. Below that, the text reads '= results' and drawing of a smiling person next to text that reads 'listened to', a drawing of vegetation and text that reads 'protected landscapes', a house with solar panels on the roof next to text that

reads 'affordable energy efficient housing for all', a wind turbine, a matchstick family beside text that reads 'happy families + communities', a head with zigzag lines coming off it to indicate electrocution next to the text that reads 'safety', birds in flight beside text that reads 'happy wildlife', a pylon with an 'x' through it next to text that reads 'no overheads', and a pound sign in a circle with text that reads 'lower costs'.

| It is important to highlight that, at the close of the first day, there was a strong sentiment that the best-case scenario would involve the new line being placed underground.

Day Two - Sunday 4 December 2022

The second day of the Citizen Sounding Board began with a restatement of the purpose and scope of discussions. The previous day had concluded with many of the members making strong statements in favour of undergrounding the new infrastructure and opposing the idea of overhead lines. However, the option of undergrounding the line to the extent preferred by many of the members had been ruled out by SONI based on several factors, and was outside of the scope of the discussion. It was important to restate this at the start of the second day, and, with the consent of the Sounding Board Members, to focus the discussion on the aspects of the Mid Antrim Upgrade that can still be influenced by local residents.

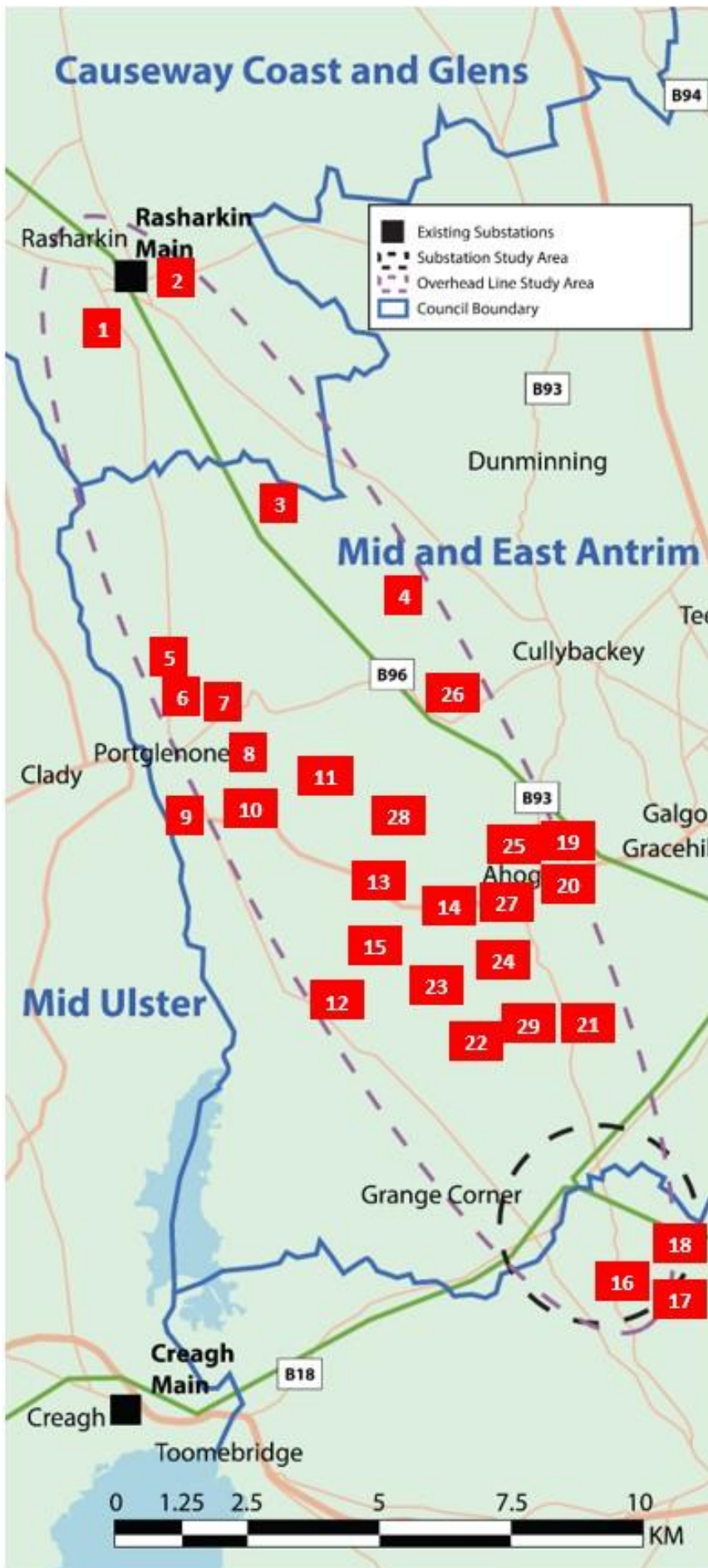
Following this, representatives from SONI answered some of the unanswered questions from the previous day. It was not possible to answer every question – some were vague, beyond the capacity of SONI to comment on, or required more research than the timeframe permitted. However, all questions have been recorded and those that can be answered will be revisited when the Citizen Sounding Board reconvenes later in 2023.

Mapping

Each of the small groups in turn were then invited to help map the area. This exercise used the SONI map of the study area, which was printed on a large format vinyl. Sticky dots, labels and permanent markers were available, and facilitators were on hand to support members to add details to the map that members felt were important to note.

Figure 1.1 presents the main points of interest highlighted by the group.

Figure 1.1



Map key

1	Rasharkin GAA
2	Cemetery
3	Fort
4	Moss and upland
5	GAA land
6	Cemetery
7	Primary school
8	Primary School
9	Filming locations
10	Portglenone forest - native woods and bluebells
11	Cemetery
12	Oldest thatched pub Crosskeys
13	Important views across the Bann to the Sperrins
14	Scenic route
15	Assumed Fort
16	Local interest rath
17	Cemetery
18	Low lying area prone to flooding
19	Cemetery
20	Ahoghill Community Centre
21	Scenic route
22	Views towards Slemish
23	Acorn Community Centre and St Mary's GAA
24	Ben Vista Garden Centre
25	Primary school
26	Diamond School
27	Primary school
28	Telephone mast
29	McArt's Fort

Factors for SONI to take account of when deciding the route

Once all the groups had a chance to add to the map, members were given time to do a gallery review, where they could look back in the outputs from the previous day, including the values they defined the previous morning, the visioning exercise from the previous afternoon, and the mapping exercise they had just completed.

Members then had an opportunity to discuss and reflect on what they had heard and discussed so far in their small groups. Facilitators then moved the discussion along to the kinds of things SONI should take account of as they work toward the best option for the final route for the upgraded electricity infrastructure in the area.

The outcomes of those discussions are in table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1

Factors for SONI to take account of when deciding the route	
Theme	Factors
Communication, engagement, accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Follow up engagement as needed at different stages. ● Keep communication open, follow up with regular updates- email group? ● Open and transparent with landowners and householders ● Keep the communication open with people during the coming months -allow people to still feel involved and informed ● Indicate how they have taken the groups concerns and comments into account-be transparent ● Honesty re plans, ensure landowners are consulted ● Keep locals informed of developments ● Community event to capture local knowledge ● Use local knowledge on flooding ● Communication between now and stage 2b ● Accountability-answer questions and timescale for feedback ● Consider cost with each change from a to b -clarity on breakdown of cost per mitigation-opportunity to input at each stage.
Visual and societal impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Retain infrastructure in LFA land (less favoured area) and not good agricultural ground ● Avoiding community assets ● Avoiding areas of natural beauty ● Keep the visual impact of the structure to a minimum (wooden poles not steelwork!) ● Ensure planning application includes plans for screening to

	<p>reduce visual impact -sub-station</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preserve local scenery where possible ● Underground cable around villages and environs ● Social locations like playing fields and historical landmarks protected ● Places; all natural areas; forest, river, river walks, birds breeding/migration sunflower fields, fishermans walk monuments, ● Minimise visual pollution-if not underground should be seen by as few people as possible ● Substation to be partially underground to minimise visual impact ● Planting around substation
Minimise disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minimise disruption to the community's everyday lives bring the installation of the infrastructure ● Minimise disruption to local area during installation ● Use existing infrastructure where possible ● Substation -consider nearby neighbours, call on people with experiences of substation location
Human factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Health and safety ● Where children are e.g., schools, parks leisure areas, sports clubs, fishing clubs. ● Where people go e.g., churches, cemeteries, gardens centres, forests, shopping malls, river walks.
Future Proofing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Future proof line design for 25-50 years ● Ensure mapping is up to date

Challenges, and what could help

The final exercise of the day focussed on the challenges members felt the project could face, and what they felt could be done to address them. These challenges and potential mitigations are in table 2.2 below.

Table 2.2

Challenges and what could help	
Challenge	What could help
General disruption	Ample notice, communication and information, good planning,
Extra cost to people/customers,	
Understanding the exact route proposed,	Drone footage
Planning	Assessment of delay, more streamlined system, more resources,
Land acquisition	Use government assets e.g., recent school closures
Community Response	Early and comprehensive information, delineate a potential route-see response and scope for trade-offs,
Trust	Keep us informed
Landowner reluctance	Negotiation and engagement
Avoiding good agricultural land	Consult DARD maps which outline disadvantaged land
Avoiding places where people live and visit (not landowners),	Very careful route design and ongoing engagement and extremely detailed maps
Consult as widely as possible	Accessible range of (well publicised events) at different times and in different locations
Decisions made <u>with people directly impacted</u> -proactively	Letters to named individuals, face to face engagement, use a variety of methods to reach people
Trust-knowing how to recognise conflicting aspirations	Clear communication fof hierarchy of constraints, Phase 2b explanation of choices, that which is open to influence is clearly stated
Keeping up to date	Point of contact, clear timeline
Generate interest-positive news	Make use of village news

Noise pollution and disruption during construction	Information in advance
Other potential challenges	
Limited Budget	
Timeframe	
Functioning government	
Extra cost to people/customers	

Participant feedback

Members of the Citizen Sounding Board completed a feedback form at the end of the second day. 22 out of 24 people completed the form.

Questions about support to take part and the organisation of the event

1. 'How satisfied are you with the support and assistance provided by the organisers at Involve?'
100% were satisfied or very satisfied.
2. 'How satisfied are you with the communication you received about the arrangements in the run up to the workshop?'
95% were satisfied or very satisfied.
3. 'How satisfied are you with the organisation of the day?'
100% were satisfied or very satisfied.

Comments from participants:

'Absolutely superbly organised weekend - very informative + enjoyable'

'Thought it was really clear and really effective in terms of communication & information'

Questions about the speakers, evidence, and learning about the issue.

4. 'Overall, how would you rate the speakers?' (0 = poor, 10= excellent)
Average score: 9
5. 'We are interested in understanding about your learning over the course of the weekend. On a scale of 0 to 10, how much do you feel you know about the mid-Antrim upgrade now? (0 = Nothing at all, 10 = A lot)'
Average score: 8
6. 'I understand the purpose of the Citizen Sounding Board and my role'.
90% agree or strongly agree.
7. 'I understood everything that the speakers talked about'.
90% agree or strongly agree.
8. 'I found the speakers interesting'.
95% agree or strongly agree.

9. 'The information was clear and easy to understand'.

85% agree or strongly agree.

10. 'Information was presented in a fair and balanced way'.

80% agree or strongly agree.

11. 'I learnt a lot about the subject'.

90% agree or strongly agree.

12. 'I was given enough information to form opinions on new subjects.'

68% agree or strongly agree; 18% neither agree nor disagree; 14% disagree or strongly disagree.

Comments from participants:

'I thought all the presenters and facilitators were super. They took time to explain everything, no matter how many times we asked the same questions. All the presenters were really open and created a feeling of wanting to meaningfully engage. That's really important in something like this.'

'It was as comprehensive as it could have been for this stage of the overall process.'

'Information from SONI was clear and they answered questions to the best of their ability. Session by Steven Agnew less useful, needed to be clearer that Renewable NI is a private company.'

'Would have liked more detail from SONI. More background to project. Preferred SONI presentation earlier on day 1.'

'I need more information on the routes that are planned.'

Questions about the quality of small group discussions and facilitation

13. 'I felt comfortable taking part in the discussions'.

100% agree or strongly agree.

14. 'I felt my opinions were listened to'.

95% agree or strongly agree.

15. 'There was enough time to discuss the issues properly'.

90% agree or strongly agree.

16. 'I felt like I could ask questions'.

100% agree or strongly agree.

17. 'At my table some members tended to dominate the discussions'.

55% disagree or strongly disagree; 14% agree; 31% neither agree nor disagree.

18. 'My table members respected what I had to say, even if they didn't agree'.

95% agree or strongly agree.

19. 'The table facilitators made sure that opposing views were considered'.

100% agree or strongly agree.

20. 'My views change or developed through listening to others'.

55% neither agree nor disagree; 45% agree or strongly agree.

Comments from participants

'Facilitators did an excellent job keeping us on track if the conversation reared in a direction that was not needed'.

'I felt a bit of a minority during the initial day, but I felt able to be that minority - the facilitators really helped me with that'.

'I appreciated the opportunity to be consulted'.

Other general comments

'Very good organised event - well looked after all day. Done very professionally'.

'I struggled with the map exercise - a 3D model may have helped my cognitive awareness. I was very tired after the 1st day - the facilitators were excellent!'

'This 2-day event could have been completed in a shorter time frame. I feel time was too generous for the activities on the first half of the first day.'

'Advice as to where to find information on the subject prior to meetings would have been helpful.'

'Really enjoyable weekend - and quite unexpected. This was due to the facilitators and the group that took part.'