



Emotionally  
Intelligent  
Communications

# NORTHERN GAS NETWORKS

## STAKEHOLDER CONFERENCE

8 SEPTEMBER 2022



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## INTRODUCTION

**On 8<sup>th</sup> September 2022, Northern Gas Networks (NGN) held a stakeholder conference to discuss its future business planning and strategy. In particular, the company was seeking feedback on three of its Strategic Priorities: Vulnerability and Fuel Poverty; Net Zero Carbon Energy Systems; and People and Skills. The event was divided into four sessions, beginning with an introductory presentation from Mark Horsley, Chief Executive Officer of NGN.**

The workshop was hosted online, using Zoom. Each session comprised a short presentation given by an NGN representative, followed by facilitated discussions in virtual breakout rooms. Before each discussion session, there was an introduction from a member of NGN's Customer Engagement Group (CEG) to provide some context. Attendees were also asked to provide feedback via the Slido online voting platform. Following the main conference, a Q&A session was held between stakeholders and senior NGN representatives.

NGN instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to independently facilitate the event and to take notes of the comments made by stakeholders. Every effort has been made to faithfully record the feedback given. In order to encourage candour and open debate, comments have not been ascribed to individuals.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 56 stakeholders attended the conference, representing 48 organisations.
- Stakeholders represented a range of organisation types, including utilities, local authorities, charities and suppliers.

### WORKSHOP 1: WIDER BUSINESS STRATEGIC FOCUS

- When asked to vote, using Slido, 89.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that NGN is focusing on the right strategic priorities, with an average score of 4.06/5.00, where 1.00 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5.00 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Attendees generally felt that the list of priorities was comprehensive, with no major omissions. However, some stated that they wished to see specific area of focus (such as innovation) come through more strongly.
- Participants were split around whether there was enough ambition within the business strategic focus. Some thought that it was just right, while others were split on whether it was either overly ambitious or not ambitious enough.
- Stakeholders broadly agreed that the right priorities had been targeted, but thought that some, such as 'Vulnerability and Fuel Poverty', 'Net Zero Carbon Energy System' and 'Environment and Sustainability' were much more urgent than others. They also suggested areas within 'Environmental and Sustainability' and 'Cyber Security' where NGN could go further, and it was noted that there would be further engagement on these topics in the future.

### WORKSHOP 2: COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS

- When asked to vote, using Slido, 77.6% of respondents either supported or strongly supported NGN's new social initiatives, giving a score of 3.82/5.00, where 1.00 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5.00 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Stakeholders widely praised NGN's approach to communities and social obligations, and particularly liked the use of localised partner networks to roll out support. However, there was a strong feeling that more needed to be done to promote NGN and its initiatives in order to ensure that those requiring this help could access it.
- Attendees were very impressed by the level of ambition shown in this area, but were unsure regarding whether even NGN's efforts would be enough for the expected winter crisis ahead. With this in mind, a number of stakeholders argued that NGN should be looking to drive systemic changes to prevent this kind of crisis from occurring again,
- A number of missing areas were identified that could be explored. These included advice campaigns around fuel poverty, closer partnership work with schools around fuel poverty, and embedding the sustainability agenda into efforts to tackle the fuel crisis.

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## WORKSHOP 3: FUTURE OF ENERGY: OUR NET ZERO/WHOLE-SYSTEMS FOCUS

- When asked to vote, using Slido, on whether they were in favour of the actions that NGN is undertaking to support the decarbonisation of the gas network, 84.2% of stakeholders either agreed or strongly agreed, giving a score of 4.21/5.00, where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Despite the strong support for the approach, attendees argued that NGN should be pursuing labour market engagement, upskilling employees, financing decommissioning and engaging in local government partnerships more urgently. This should be coupled in the short term with awareness-raising campaigns targeted at the general public and closer work with other gas distribution networks and local councils.
- Many participants felt that NGN should continue rolling out hydrogen as part of its Net Zero approach, and look to be an industry leader here. However, a number stressed that government buy-in for hydrogen was essential, and that NGN may not hit its targets as planned due to the uncertainty in the markets driven by this lack of explicit government support.
- There were calls for more public engagement to reassure customers about the safety and effectiveness of hydrogen networks for homes and businesses. By removing these concerns, the general public would be more likely to support these Net Zero and whole-systems initiatives proposed.

## WORKSHOP 4: BUSINESS RESILIENCE – PEOPLE AND SERVICE

- When asked to vote, using Slido, on whether they supported NGN's approach to ensuring that the company's workforce is diverse and inclusive, 77.1% agreed or strongly agreed, giving a score of 3.86/5.00, where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Stakeholders largely supported NGN's efforts across inclusion, sector challenges and social mobility. However, there was a particularly strong feeling that more could be done to ensure gender inclusivity across the workforce.
- A key message throughout discussions was that NGN needs to work harder to engage and inspire young people by going into schools and talking to young people about the company's role and future careers options. These efforts were seen as crucial to filling the skills gap, which will likely be exacerbated by the industry's ageing workforce.
- Participants suggested a range of different initiatives for aiding recruitment efforts, including local workforce development centres and targeted social media posts to make roles seem more accessible. Recruitment drives among staff from local declining industries were also seen as a potentially effective route.

## Q&A SESSION

- During the additional Q&A session following the main conference, questions mainly focused around diversity, inclusivity and the transition to hydrogen.

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## WRITTEN FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form about the event. Some of the key findings are shown below:

- Stakeholders gave a satisfaction score of 8.13/10 for the event, where 10 is the most positive view.
- When asked how they rated the discussions, attendees gave a score of 7.5/10, where 10 is the most positive view.
- When invited to assess the event content and speakers, participants gave a score of 8.13/10, where 10 is the most positive view.
- Stakeholders gave a satisfaction score of 7.88/10 for their relationship with NGN, where 1 is very dissatisfied and 10 is very satisfied.
- When asked which topics they were most interested in, 'Future of Energy' and 'Environment and Sustainability' were the most popular, with 88% of respondents selecting them.

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## WORKSHOP 1: WIDER BUSINESS STRATEGIC FOCUS

Mark Horsley, Chief Executive Officer, welcomed attendees and provided an overview of NGN's business operations and the challenges that lay ahead. Mark then introduced Gareth Mills, Regulation and Strategic Planning Director, who took stakeholders through NGN's wider business strategic focus. Gareth began by setting out NGN's current approach to business planning and to engaging with stakeholders and customers. He acknowledged that their expectations are changing rapidly, and explained that these new needs are being fed into the company's business planning approaches. As a result, 10 strategic priorities have emerged, as well as a refocused vision statement for the business.

Stakeholders were then invited to discuss this strategic focus in the breakout rooms.



### SUMMARY

Discussions began with introductions. Stakeholders represented a wide range of groups, including charities, local authorities and utilities. Many already have a working relationship with NGN, such as supplying tools or involvement in vulnerable customer partnerships, and others were looking to see how they could align more closely with NGN in their operations.

Stakeholders broadly felt that NGN was pursuing the right strategic priorities. When asked to vote, using Slido, on whether NGN is focusing on the right areas, 65.3% of respondents agreed and 24.5% strongly agreed, with 6.1% voting neutral and 4.1% strongly disagreeing. This gave an overall score of 4.06/5.

There was a general consensus that the strategic priorities were comprehensive and ticked the right boxes, with no glaring omissions. With NGN's operating area covering many different population types across a wide geographical area, the comprehensive nature of these priorities was praised. Individual stakeholders

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were pleased to see specific priorities appearing, which they believed were particularly relevant to their sector or wider society at present, such as Value for Money, People and Skills, and Net Zero Carbon Energy System.

Despite the general praise, a number of stakeholders felt that some areas were missing or could come through more strongly in some of the existing strategic priorities. These included innovation and business resilience. Others wanted more detail about the principles underpinning these priorities. For example, one stakeholder asked what lay underneath 'People and Skills', and how NGN is intending to increase diversity across its workforce.

More widely, even though participants were largely of the view that these priorities could deliver effective results, they were worried that NGN presented them as individual items rather than interconnected areas of focus. Therefore, NGN was urged to find links between these individual priorities and devise solutions that address multiple priorities, rather than approaching them in siloes. There was also a feeling that customer and stakeholder engagement must underpin these ten strategic priorities, and it was noted that NGN should redouble its efforts in reaching out to customers in vulnerable situations, in particular. While it was acknowledged that NGN is very strong in the area of customer engagement, stakeholders acknowledged that it has not yet reached some marginalised groups. By reaching out to as many people as possible, NGN would have a greater chance of achieving these priorities.

Attendees were fairly split around whether the strategic priorities showed the right level of ambition. Some praised the extensive scope of the priorities across the business and thought that the timeframes were ambitious. However, others were concerned that it was trying to work too widely and questioned whether it had enough staff in place to achieve so much so quickly. Therefore, there was a feeling that some allowances would need to be made around whether NGN could fulfil all of its goals. At the same time, others were of the view that NGN was not going far enough in some of its priorities, and thought that there was more that could be done around vulnerability and fuel poverty, particularly in light of the cost-of-living crisis. Others wanted more details about what sat underneath each main heading in order to assess how ambitious each strategic priority was.

While there was a widespread feeling that NGN has targeted the right areas of focus with its priorities, attendees believed that not all priorities were equally urgent for all stakeholder groups. Therefore, they were of the view that it might be appropriate to split them into short-, medium- and long-term priorities in future strategic planning. With this in mind, there were many calls for NGN to focus its efforts around supporting vulnerable and fuel-poor customers in the immediate future, through support with bills, and tariff assistance for public buildings acting as 'heat banks' this winter. Others recommended looking at rolling out carbon-monoxide safety campaigns on television and online, with concerns that people will resort to burning household items this winter rather than using their heating systems.

Other attendees argued that NGN could go further in a number of its other strategic priorities. This was particularly the case around the 'Environment and Sustainability' priority, by incorporating climate-change adaptation as a sub-priority and helping to support renewable energy sources. In addition, some participants stressed that energy affordability and sustainability needed to be balanced out, and did not want to see



efforts to put sustainable resources in place delayed further due to the cost-of-living crisis. While many stakeholders were happy to see cyber security included as a strategic priority, others highlighted potential physical security weaknesses, such as terrorist threats to physical infrastructure. Therefore, NGN was urged to focus on physical security too.

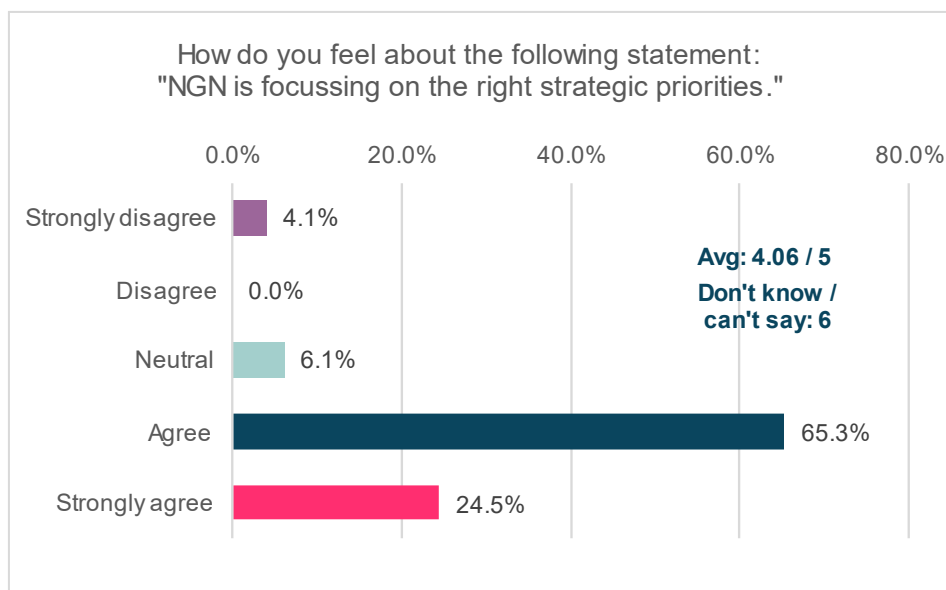
## VERBATIM COMMENTS

### 1. What is your role and what is your interest in today's workshop?



- “I represent a supplier of tools to NGN and we work closely with the company. It would be interesting to get some strategic-level input about how we can dovetail our work into NGN’s efforts.” Supplier
- “We are a UK hydrogen terminal operator and work with NGN on some of the hydrogen terminal projects in the northeast. It would be good to hear about the company’s further strategy.” Business customer
- “I’m from a small charity from Hull. We have worked with NGN for eight years and we have a very deep partnership with them. It’s a beautiful relationship.” Charity
- “I’m from NPG and we’re the DNO for this area region, so we’re a partner organisation with NGN in a way. I have a long relationship with NGN, but moved to NPG in order to work on flexibility services. I think that there are great opportunities for us to work together.” Utility
- “I manage the planning and urban regeneration team for a local council, so I want to know how you can support us in our strategic planning.” Local authority

## 2. What do you think of our approach?



- “They all sound eminently sensible, but I struggle to see how they will fit together long term. I would advocate looking to find connections between these different areas and find effective actions.” Charity
- “I was also going to suggest finding connections. Going forward, so many of these priorities will be critical. However, a balance needs to be struck between giving each area the individual attention that it needs and creating connections between these areas in order to ensure that NGN delivers on its strategic vision.” CEG
- “We also need to think about how these priorities will play out and change in the future.” Charity
- “I think it’s nice to see cyber security. I’ve spent a lot of time with cyber security firms and seeing that they’re on top of things. Good to see that NGN are aware of this, I’d love to find out more about that. Obviously in a way that doesn’t jeopardise their cyber security.” Local authority
- “My concern is engagement. Has the organisation got the skillset to reach those marginalised communities? Engagement is overarching of all these priorities. Within certain communities, people don’t even know the PSR exists, and the help that’s available now is great, so you want people to know about this. The information is not reaching people. On a strategic level, engagement needs to be addressed.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “I think it’s a good list. There’s People and Skills there, which could be coupled with the Net Zero journey, because we’ll need a lot of upskilling to meet those targets. As a university, we are interested in technology innovation, digital, and net zero carbon energy systems as well. It’s how we get to delivery on these.” Business Customer
- “I agree with that. Getting stakeholder engagement is the right way to do it. So yeah, I think it’s just the next steps, isn’t it. They’re focusing on the right Strategic Priorities.” Utility
- “The only one that is perhaps missing is Business Resilience, which could perhaps fall under Vulnerability. It’s quite a broad topic in itself.” Utility

- “The area NGN deals with is so wide-ranging with rural and urban areas, which means lots of variation.” Local authority
- “I can’t see a gap as it’s such a comprehensive approach.” Charity
- “You seem to tick all the boxes. It’s the detail below that it sits on, but it looks good.” Local Enterprise Partnership
- “Where is innovation covered?” Local Enterprise Partnership
- “On first glance it looks very good and comprehensive, but it is a first glance.” Charity
- “For young people, it’s interesting to see that they’ve noticed how important cost efficiency has become, especially now that people are unable to afford heat and power, and they’re paying attention to all the announcements on price caps and freezes on the news.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “I’m interested in people and skills, to see if diversity is included as a focus, because that’s a particular interest of mine.” Local authority

### 3. Is it ambitious enough? Is there more that we can do in this area?

- “It seems very comprehensive, but it could be difficult to narrow down the priorities, as there are lots of things to hit. The ambition shown here is worth praising, but you need to make allowances for this breadth.” Utility
- “The timescales are what worry me the most. I know a lot of things are outside the hands of the company. I feel like there’s a lack of ambition here.” Local authority
- “It shows ambition. There is a lot there within those 10 key themes. It covers a really broad area, touching on all things that are pertinent to industry and public. Are there enough people to make this happen though? I think partnership is something we’ve seen is key, working with a collaboration of partners to achieve these end goals. So for me the ambition is right, and it’s just how it all gels together.” Supplier
- “Some of these priorities interact very strongly with each other. How do innovation and hydrogen interact with vulnerability and fuel poverty? We need more information.” Local authority
- “What is the interaction with other parties in the energy sector as part of a whole-systems approach?” Supplier
- “We are worried about vulnerability and fuel poverty. People won’t have the money to have appliances serviced. We are concerned about how we are going to help these people as there are far more people going into fuel poverty now.” Charity
- “The speed and depth of how these strategic priorities are all being met was the concern of the Young Innovators Council.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “It’s a really extensive range of topics.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “I think it depends on how vague or detailed these are. As headings they seem reasonable, but if safety is just a one-liner like “we are safe” then it doesn’t mean much. If you pick things like Net Zero carbon systems, is it that you’re going to commit to being Net Zero? I need to know more details than just the sub-headings.” Business customer

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- “About the Net Zero carbon energy system – we’re going through tough times, and it needs to be affordable for everyone, but how far does this keep getting pushed back? It’s going to have to happen for us to be sustainable in the future, so it needs to become an area of focus sooner rather than later.” Business customer

#### 4. Are we focusing on the right strategic priorities? What is missing?

- “Without sitting here all day, there’s nothing that springs to mind, no.” Supplier
- “I suppose there’s one area that looks to be missing, but that could be a thread running through all of this, and that is innovation.” Academic Institution
- “The industry is a very steady and safe business, so it needs to focus on doing things right, and focus on continued improvement. And obviously the world we’re in and going through at the moment is very uncertain. So this is a wonderful opportunity for NGN to help their customers.” Business Customer
- “There’s the question around supporting customers in vulnerable situations on their journey to Net Zero. I know that stakeholders are saying that they prioritise supporting people with paying their bills, which is a massive priority at the moment. But they will need support with their journey to Net Zero as well. So it’s about how do you balance out an urgent need with a need for the future?” Utility
- “Where does climate change adaptation fit into this approach? It should probably be environment and sustainability. We focus on reducing emissions, but it’s also important to look at adaptation.” Local authority
- “I’m concerned about sustainability and would like to see other sustainable energy sources. Currently fuel poverty is a huge concern. We are looking at warm hubs in our area. If a church becomes a warm hub for the community, can the church itself even afford its gas bill for heating?” Local authority
- “They are not all equally a priority, but they all need to be there. It’s important to balance the short- and long-term priorities, and I think you are doing that, as there’s a good mix. I’m very pleased vulnerability and fuel poverty are there, but you mustn’t just focus on that.” Charity
- “They are absolutely the right areas of focus. There are some hygiene and health and safety factors, but you also have short-, long- and medium-term factors. It’s good that people and skills are still there, and good we’re still looking at Net Zero even though we’ve got that hump of fuel poverty to get over, and it’s good to see cyber security is in the top 10 as it’s become a very serious issue.” Utility
- “The only thing missing is communication and engagement. There needs to be two-way communication and consultation. I know NGN already does that, so I’m hoping it’s a common theme that runs through all your priorities.” Charity
- “I agree that the top three priorities are vulnerability and fuel poverty, reliability, and Net Zero. I would maybe expand reliability to include resilience.” Utility

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- “I imagine you have already identified these, but there are obviously subheadings under these priorities. Security and terrorism occurred to me; you’re potentially a target, so I wonder if that needs to go in there.” Local authority
  - “Also, linked to the environment is climate change resilience; this is separate to reducing carbon emissions. I also thought about efficiency and working with other utility providers to reduce carbon emissions and reduce inconveniences like supply dropouts for customers.” Local authority
  - “We are very worried that this winter people will get so desperate that they will burn anything in their fireplace. It’s really terrifying – I’ve never dreaded a winter more than this one. It only takes an extra five minutes to do a sweep test for carbon monoxide. Can we get this implemented as standard? The Health and Safety Executive would agree that it’s a safety issue and then Ofgem would find the money to roll it out.” Charity
  - “I understand NGN is a gas distributor at the moment, but it would be interesting to do research on more renewable energy sources.” Young Innovators Council
  - “There have been some excellent suggestions already. As well as cyber security, there’s also physical security, so the risk of terrorism. For instance, nuclear facilities could be targeted.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “Thinking about some of the short-term problems, what about the theft of gas by the general public? Is there an increased risk of that this winter and will it threaten the integrity of the network?” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “I’m concerned that people will be reluctant to spend money on getting their appliances checked and their chimneys swept. They may also be blocking their air grills. I’d like to see TV or social media safety warnings. We need to get that message across. Gas is probably the safest fuel, provided you use it correctly.” Charity
  - “We do a scheme once a month where we offer people raffle tickets, and the first prize is that we will pay for your gas bill. The positive feedback really shows in the high customer satisfaction scores we are getting. It’s a little thing for us to do but it goes a long way for the people who win it.” Utility
  - “I’d be interested in attending events on anything environmental or planning related. We have the hydrogen homes project in Gateshead, so we are looking forward to seeing how that goes.” Local authority
  - “The Young Innovators Council looks at projects like the hydrogen homes. We also offer ideas on how to engage the general public.” Young Innovators Council

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## WORKSHOP 2: COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS

The second session was introduced by Matt Cole from the Fuel Bank Foundation, who gave a short presentation about his organisation, the challenges that people are facing and why they have risen in prevalence in recent months, leading to the current fuel crisis. Matt then explained what it meant for people in NGN's operating area, and how the Fuel Bank Foundation is helping to address this crisis. To finish, he gave examples of partnership working with NGN and its partner charities. Eileen Brown, NGN Customer Experience Director, then gave a presentation about how NGN is supporting vulnerable communities. To begin, she outlined the immediate steps it is taking to support customers particularly badly impacted by rocketing fuel bills, and then introduced its partnership network across its operating area. Eileen gave examples of support projects rolled out through the company's operational activities and through partner organisations with NGN funding, including two newly launched initiatives. To conclude, Eileen noted that NGN intended to launch a trial of opening up office space in its Leeds Head Office for its charity partners in October 2022. Stakeholders were then invited to provide feedback about these initiatives.

### SUMMARY

Stakeholders largely praised NGN's work around supporting its customers. When invited to vote, using Slido, on whether they were supportive of NGN's new initiatives in the area of communities and social obligations, 42.9% agreed and 34.7% strongly agreed. However, it is also worth noting that 14.3% strongly disagreed. This gave an overall Slido score of 3.82/5.00, where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5 is 'Strongly agree'.

During discussions, many stakeholders noted that they already engaged with NGN on partnership work and were pleased with their relationships thus far, noting that NGN is far ahead of its competitors in this area. Participants appreciated the localised approach to supporting local communities favoured by NGN, which taps into local existing networks and provides support where local authorities are unable to reach. There was particular praise for the proposed office-space initiative, as well as the role of engineers in identifying issues in homes and signposting residents to support. However, there were simultaneously concerns about whether engineers would be able to perform this social role properly when the expected crisis hits this winter.

Despite this widespread praise for NGN's efforts, attendees pointed to a number of areas where its approach could go further. Most notably, stakeholders were worried that not many of NGN's own customers had heard of the company and would therefore not know about the support that it is providing. As a result, there were strong calls for NGN to work to increase its visibility and make customers aware of how it can help. It was felt that these engagement efforts needed to be particularly targeted at hard-to-reach groups, such as elderly people and individuals who do not speak English as a first language, as they would be less likely to ask for help. Building on this idea, many attendees stressed that NGN should play a convening role

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and provide relevant information about support to locally well-known organisations, such as Citizen's Advice and housing associations. It was hoped that vulnerable people would be more likely to approach these trusted channels for help, and consequently receive the support they need.

On the whole, participants felt that the level of ambition presented in these social initiatives was laudable, and praised the large number of wide-ranging projects presented. However, the key message from discussions was that even NGN's best efforts may not be enough to fully support its most vulnerable customers in the challenges posed by the difficult winter ahead. This feeling was accentuated by the sobering fuel poverty figures appearing in Matt's presentation. On this basis, others argued that while NGN's intentions in this area were very commendable, it should not have had to shoulder such a heavy responsibility around social obligations in the first place. Therefore, many hoped that government intervention would provide the assistance required to deal with the potential upcoming winter crisis.

In light of the current energy crisis, many attendees therefore felt that NGN should be striking a balance between the immediate and the long term in its ambitions. Over the months ahead, stakeholders stressed that NGN should be providing practical advice to customers in order to try to provide some reassurance and ways to cope over the winter. It was felt that these long-term efforts should be coupled with work to help drive innovative solutions to prevent customers from facing this kind of dire situation again. One popular solution among stakeholders was the development of alternative fuels for houses, which they felt was worth exploring.

Participants also identified a number of gaps in the company's approach to communities and social obligations that it should explore. One major area identified was an enhanced communications operation, using its network of trusted local partners to circulate key messages about support out to their communities. As part of these efforts, stakeholders suggested that NGN should put together a list of FAQs and produce advice packs in order to dispel myths and counter misinformation about the energy crisis circulating online. Stakeholders also stressed that NGN should be careful in its message about support over this period, and ensure that it emphasises its efforts around helping the most vulnerable in order to gain local support.

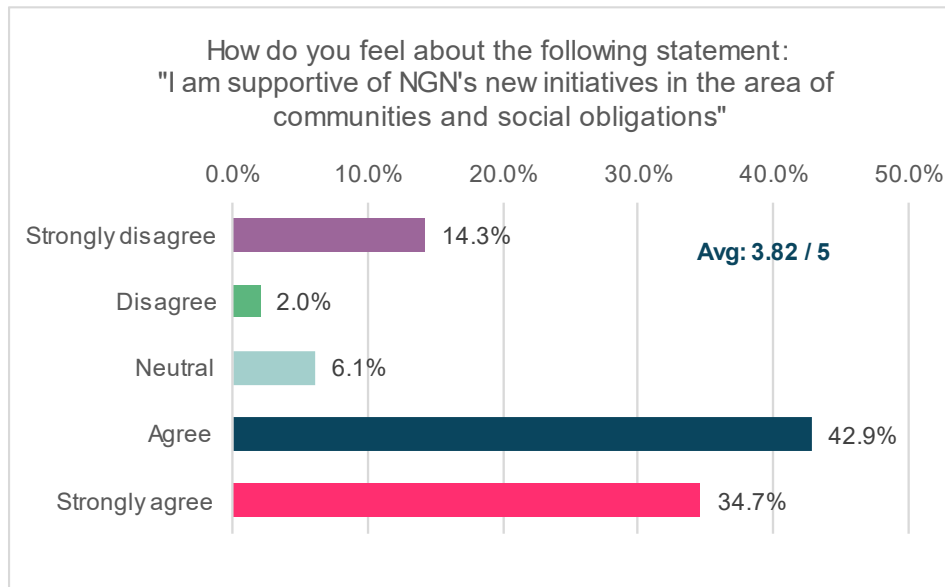
Other stakeholders felt that NGN could go further in its engagement and partnership work within local communities, highlighting schools as an untapped resource. In particular, it was felt that engagement sessions with children could be particularly useful in spreading the word about the support available, as children would be likely to talk to their parents about these issues and the support available. Other stakeholders were of the view that teachers could play a role, by being trained to identify the signs of fuel poverty among pupils and then signposting their parents to support.

The other two potentially missing areas mentioned were the Net Zero/sustainability agenda and changing fuel poverty definitions. Participants stressed that NGN should not let its Net Zero ambitions fall away while trying to tackle the current fuel crisis, and instead try to present it as part of the solution for customers. This could be done by highlighting fuel-efficient technologies that would reduce bills long term, and providing support to help vulnerable customers access them. Changing fuel poverty definitions were highlighted as a

major potential problem, as changes to eligibility modelling could result in some vulnerable people being excluded from support. This is particularly the case for individuals living alone on low pensions, whose income would be inflated through equivalation in modelling and who would no longer be classified as ‘fuel poor’ as a result. NGN was urged to bear this in mind when rolling out support to ensure that nobody is left behind.

## VERBATIM QUOTES

### 1. What do you think of our approach?



- “It all seemed appropriate, but it doesn’t solve the issue of the unit cost. Is there going to be an end to this? The support being provided by the government is a patch over things, but we need to think about how things will be in the long term. How can businesses plan?” Local authority
- “The strategy and plan are fantastic. There is no such thing as hard to reach. It’s all about the methods of engagement to use and it’s very important that we reach the most vulnerable in our communities. At a strategic level, there doesn’t seem to be an understanding of engagement, so I think this is where the changes need to be made really.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “I think a way of reaching people could be via social media. You won’t necessarily capture the adults, but you can reach the younger generation who are almost a gateway to this. They’ll pass the message on.” Local authority
- “I thought the strategy was really good. Especially the bit about the engineers getting involved, I liked that. I think the scary thing is just the sheer scale of the problem. We’ll never be able to meet the demand. I do appreciate the support being put in place. Citizens Advice are always very happy to partner up, and help. There are services there, but it’s good to get a joined-up service.” Charity
- “I think from my point of view, I am just worried that our engineers will feel like a rabbit in the headlights when it comes to social responsibility. They can do their job but it’s an extra responsibility.” Utility



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- “You support us through a Warm Homes scheme, which works really well. We mostly work to calm people down and reassure them because they believe the worst. We put out information regularly.” Charity
  - “The wage increase and energy cost increase do not match up. We are increasingly seeing people we haven’t seen before, such as working families. NGN does do a lot of work, but I would ask for standing charges to be a thing of the past. These are charged regardless of what a customer uses.” Charity
  - “I thought it sounded excellent, but I do get worried about people not knowing where to get that help initially. Elderly people don’t like to ask for help. How do people whose first language isn’t English know how to seek help?” Charity
  - “I thought the approach was very positive. I wondered to what extent NGN use partner organisations in order to achieve objectives in helping people facing fuel hardship. I was unaware of a lot of them, so do the partner organisations have the footprint and reach necessary to deliver what they need to deliver?” Local authority
  - “I’d like to be able to point residents to the help that’s out there. The numbers currently receiving help seem to be quite small, so I’m interested in awareness levels and how easy it is to access help from these organisations.” Local authority
  - “Ofgem is telling the electricity network they want us to limit our activity and work through partners who are much better placed to provide those services. As a monopoly business with a macro view of a large area, like NGN, it’s on us to be the glue to bring these initiatives together.” Utility
  - “It is worth contacting Citizen’s Advice, because a lot of support from NGN is distributed through the CAB. Through NGN, we’ve got links to lots of organisations. It’s about sharing information and resources. None of us have all the answers, including NGN, but they quite likely know someone who does have the answers.” Charity
  - “One good practice we do is we’ve organised a conference for all sorts of organisations – health, private tenants, housing associations, etc. – to discuss what we’re going to do about the energy crisis. It needs a combined approach, we need to pull in all the partners.” Charity
  - “Eileen is doing a great job, but the real problem for survivors of carbon monoxide poisoning is that medics often don’t believe that the person is being exposed to carbon monoxide because there is no proof of it. NGN engineers are in a perfect position to turn the gas appliances back on and do a quick sweep test for carbon monoxide. This can give people the proof they need and ensure they get the right medical help.” Charity
  - “A lot of my team work closely with Eileen so there is a lot we are doing, and we aim to do better. I do a lot of work with Cadent, and NGN seem to be 10 years ahead of Cadent. NGN are really slick.” Utility
  - “It was really great to hear about how far you’re going with our priorities, and I like the fact you’re prioritising the most vulnerable customers and taking a more localised approach, working with the local networks that already exist. I know that NGOs are picking up everything that councils can’t do,

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so it's great to know that they will get support in terms of using your office space to continue the fantastic work that they are doing." Local authority

- "Are you working with water companies and other energy companies to deal with these issues? How are you using data to identify what needs to be done?" Local authority

## 2. Is it ambitious enough?

- "This is a very live issue which is moving apace. The CEG are keeping a very close eye on this and are trying to scrutinise where stakeholders' priorities are now and where they will be in future. NGN's passion towards supporting this needs to be praised, but we are still pushing them on how much further they can go. It doesn't look like this issue is going to go away, so we are hoping that some more ideas may emerge today." CEG
- "There is an awkward circle that we need to square here. We have a really good relationship with NGN, but in order to get the money required to solve this issue, NGN would have to charge extra money to customers. However, to be honest, I don't think that this is NGN's problem to solve. I feel the tension in NGN to do more, but every pound comes from customers. I think that NGN should do everything that it can, but it shouldn't be expected to solve the entire problem." Charity
- "I agree that there's only so much that NGN can do, even if it does want to do a lot. However, without increasing prices, there is little that can be done. The ambition shown here is good, but a balance needs to be struck between delivering immediate support in times of crisis like these and helping drive systemic change so that we're not constantly firefighting. I think that NGN does manage this." Charity
- "I saw something about NGN only engaging with customers once every 40 years, I think this needs to change. You need to have a network that is established in the long term, it needs to be an ongoing relationship. To keep that, you need to be part of the community and make sure you are visible." Vulnerable customer representative
- "I think what we've heard sounds brilliant in terms of what they're doing so far. It's well-considered, reaching customers in different ways, through NGN colleagues as well as through partners. We have to consider what is within NGN's reach to achieve. How much money is there available at the end of the day. It seems from the context given by the Fuel Bank Foundation that there is a need for a lot more money." Utility
- "I'm not sure that anything is ambitious enough, given the scale of what's coming this winter and the bills that people are already getting." Local authority
- "These all seem to be short-term quick fixes, but I think we need to look longer term to find innovative ideas to mitigate against these circumstances, from an innovation point of view. For example, I'm hearing discussions around building houses that use alternative heating systems. So, I think, long term, the solution is innovation and looking at different ways to build houses." Academic Institution
- "I think there's a twin approach, obviously there's the long term with climate change. But everyone is recognising that this winter is going to be savage for a lot of people. People are in fear and are

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vulnerable. What NGN, with their large customer base, can do is to give reassurance and give some uniform practical advice.” Business Customer

- “From the limited view I have, I think they’re probably putting in as many resources as they have available. But again, all this work takes time. I think the strategic aims are right, but I don’t know if anyone can do anything about this winter.” Supplier
- “I was overwhelmed to hear about all the different projects they have their fingers in. The only area they could improve on is in cross-organisational support, as in more support from managers. We have a policy where staff are entitled to two volunteer days per month to be involved in volunteering projects. But we’ve found that there’s a struggle to find the time off, and for managers to allow staff this time off. This is the only problem that I’ve found with NGN so far.” Utility

### 3. What is missing? Is there more that we can do in this area?

- “One challenge is that so many people don’t know what to do, as we’re in unprecedented times. There is never a silver bullet to solve all of the problems that are appearing, but messaging is really crucial. NGN is really special in that it has a regional footprint and convenes a wide range of other representatives, meaning that it can play a useful role by distilling practical energy-related advice. We need sensible voices to provide advice here, and NGN can be one of those voices.” Charity
- “Disinformation is a whole-sector problem, so DNOs can help here too. We need to use the roots that we have access to in order to counter the negative effects of the false information in the press that has everyone’s attention at the moment.” Utility
- “Even the trusted voices have had issues with that recently, due to the lack of clarity and pace of change, but NGN has done well with getting advice out to customers.” CEG
- “FAQs and advice are somewhere where we can help, as residents will actually trust us on that. One of my colleagues is responsible for giving advice and support on this to people, so anything that NGN can provide would help. In addition, lots of people don’t know who you are, so charities and local authorities can help bridge that gap.” Local authority
- “I was pleased to hear our council’s energy roadshows mentioned. The big focus for the council is cost of living and reducing carbon at the same time. We support this because it’s the right thing to do. We could look at this more broadly, though, in terms of cost of living. How else can we help people reduce their everyday expenditure and therefore help people pay their energy bills?” Local authority
- “The Net Zero piece is going to fall down people’s agendas, but I think it will still come into it. If people are reducing energy usage and that helps reduce carbon emissions, that’s great and there’s still action behind the scenes.” Local authority
- “Quite often, the first point of contact when a family is in dire straits is that the children tell a teacher why they are tired or cold or haven’t got clean clothes. I wonder if the Young Innovators Council could engage with students and pass messages back to families. I like to think of myself as well-informed in this area, and I didn’t know there was a fuel bank.” Vulnerable customer representative

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- “Our area of supporting NGN and customers is the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme. It was based on the idea that people who live off the gas grid are at greater risk of fuel poverty. The government has diminished all the grant funding, meaning that there is less money to deliver the scheme at scale. It’s been disappointing, as it could make a difference and help them to switch from old, ineffective electric heating or solid fuel to gas.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “The definition of fuel poverty in England has serious flaws. In Wales and Scotland, it’s defined as spending 10% or more of your income on energy. In England, the government has changed its definition and that makes a difference when you’re figuring out eligibility. There are older people who have paid off their mortgage but have a very low income and aren’t eligible. I’m not suggesting that NGN can do much about it, but people need to be aware of this.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “The new definition of fuel poverty is based around LILEE, or ‘low income, low energy efficiency’. Under this definition, you need to have an EPC rating of D or worse and have a certain household income after fuel costs. The problem is that we see people living on their own who have low housing costs, but they also have a low income from a low pension. Equivalisation artificially inflates a single person’s income after housing costs on the assumption that their income can stretch further than it would in another property with more residents. It’s frustrating, and many customers struggle to understand why they don’t qualify.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “The initiatives are great. There are massive problems, and it is difficult to pull everything together. When things people really hit crisis point, what about the workers? Will they be getting abuse? What about their mental health?” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “I’m not sure if this has been considered already but what about partnering with social care and health providers to help spread the word in terms of support and advice, but also to alert relevant people when they have been in people’s homes? I have heard that home chiropodists are perfect for this as they are in the home, can have a chat to the customer and ascertain whether it’s cold or damp.” Local authority
  - “How much work does NGN do with local councils? We’ve had people from around the district writing in to us and asking about what schemes are happening so that they can include it in their parish newsletter, and I’m writing a green-themed newsletter on this. Do you have a newsletter-style thing that I can email out to people across the district?” Local authority
  - “We go into schools with the ‘Big Ideas’ programme, and so we have those conversations with young people in Years 7 to 9. Even last year the energy crisis was a big topic in those discussions. When we have NGN come into schools as mentors it would be great if they were briefed on how to talk about their initiatives in an appropriate way. Children go home and talk to their parents, which opens up conversations.” Business customer
  - “I think teachers and parents are not really used a lot. Once in high school my classmates’ parents were going through a difficult situation, and teachers helped them through that. If teachers have that information, then the school can put them in contact with the right people to help them out.” Business customer

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- “The severity of the situation that we’re in means that we’re giving out a lot of advice; people want to know this information so they will be more amenable to it, but it’s the way that it’s communicated as well. If the emphasis is on helping vulnerable customers then it might come across better. Who you’re impacting and how it comes across is crucial to the communications.” Business customer

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## WORKSHOP 3: THE FUTURE OF ENERGY: OUR NET ZERO/WHOLE-SYSTEMS FOCUS

The third session was introduced by Mike Foster from the Energy and Utilities Alliance, who provided a brief overview of trials and projects in Birmingham that bring together electricity, gas and water sectors to find whole-systems solutions. Mike's introduction was followed by a presentation from Greg Dodd, NGN Head of Strategic Planning, who discussed NGN's strategic planning for a whole-systems future. He began by setting out NGN's approach, which involves developing illustrative scenarios for its energy system and the role of hydrogen in its drive to Net Zero. Greg noted that these scenarios will need to be dynamic in order to adapt to evolving external conditions. He then presented NGN's Net Zero strategy and roadmap. This is made up of low-, medium- and high-cost activities with short-, medium- and long-term priorities across six different workstreams, such as 'Preparing the workforce' and 'Advancing R&D'. After setting out the proposed timings and sequences of these activities, Greg then identified the priority activities for each pillar and noted that robust delivery plans would be developed for them in the future.

### SUMMARY

Stakeholders were generally pleased to see that NGN was developing hydrogen resources, and pointed to some noticeable progress that had been made already, particularly around data management and internal systems. However, a variety of concerns were expressed about the timescales for the priorities within the strategic plan presented. At a general level, some thought that the timelines for the activities leading up to 2028 were unrealistic and would take longer than projected in the presentations.

Many participants were of the view that NGN should bring forward some of its medium- and long-term priorities in order to support its work to develop a whole systems approach more effectively. A number of stakeholders believed that labour market engagement should be covered long before 2026, in light of the specialist skills required for this industry transition and of recruitment challenges. It was argued that NGN should be trying to engage young people about this, and encouraging them to choose school and university courses that would lead them to work in this particular field. At the same time, attendees suggested that NGN should develop its internal systems upgrades in parallel with upskilling its workforce for the transition ahead so that it can deliver its plan smoothly.

The other two areas where stakeholders thought that NGN should roll out its initiatives more urgently were around financing and working partnerships with local authorities. Some participants were of the view that 'Financing decommissioning' should be moved from a medium-term to a short-term priority, as they felt that finances were key to this entire plan. It was also argued that 'Local government partnerships' should move from a medium-term to a short-term priority, due to the perceived slower pace of working among public bodies. There were concerns that if local governments begin work to launch these schemes too late, it will cause problems later in the decade.

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Attendees suggested two new main areas that could be incorporated within the strategies. The first was wider engagement and communications with the general public about Net Zero and whole-systems approaches in order to increase general awareness about what they involve. It was also stressed that these engagement campaigns would undoubtedly play a useful role in gaining customer support for these measures, as they could help to dispel negative perceptions of hydrogen. In addition, it was felt that there should be closer working partnerships with other gas distribution networks (GDNs), Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) and local councils. By working more closely with third parties, it was hoped that NGN could create an aligned strategy for a single comprehensive network. Wales & West Utilities was identified as a particularly good GDN to contact in this area. The point was made that close working relationships with local councils is vital. This is because the different hydrogen switch-on dates forecast will have major knock-on effects on councils' Local Plans (LPs) and Local Authority Energy Plans (LAEPs). By working more closely with NGN, it was felt that councils would be able to plan properly and embed the company's Net Zero priorities into their own planning frameworks.

With this appetite for greater engagement and quicker delivery of priority actions, it is unsurprising that stakeholders largely approved of the approach overall. When asked to vote, using Slido, whether they were in favour of the actions that NGN is undertaking in order to support the decarbonisation of the gas network, 44.7% of respondents agreed and 39.5% strongly agreed. This gave an overall Slido score of 4.21/5, where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5 is 'Strongly agree'.

In the discussion sessions, many attendees also expressed their support for NGN's efforts around hydrogen. They strongly encouraged the company to continue pursuing these efforts, and to play a key role within the industry in the drive to Net Zero. Building on this idea, others were of the view that the transition to hydrogen would be less difficult than expected, but recommended rolling out a communications campaign to win support among the general public.

Despite this support for NGN's approaches, other stakeholders expressed a number of concerns. A major worry among attendees was the uncertain nature of the approach, as without buy-in from the government and regulatory bodies, NGN will not be able to proceed with hydrogen projects at its desired pace. Stakeholders noted that due to this lack of government support at present, there is still a great deal of market uncertainty around hydrogen, and trial projects are currently reduced to small pilots. As a result of the small number of hydrogen projects in place, many participants were unsure about whether hydrogen could work in domestic settings at a large scale, and about whether enough could be produced to make this whole-systems approach work. There were consequently calls for more information gathering at this early planning stage to ensure that this approach is feasible.

Some stakeholders felt that the approach was ambitious enough, but some noted that factors beyond NGN's approach could affect delivery. Others wanted more details about NGN's strategy before giving an opinion. They particularly wanted to know more about whether older appliances would work with hydrogen, and around the scope for consolidating against extending the gas supply network as the hydrogen conversion process develops.

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Attendees largely agreed that work to address public concerns about hydrogen was missing from the approach. These worries could be overcome by upgrading pipes and valves in order to establish confidence that the network is ready for hydrogen, and, more crucially, reassure people who are worried about potential leaks. In addition, other participants felt that publishing authoritative independent advice about the effectiveness of hydrogen as an energy source would help people to feel more certain that it would work. The Hydrogen Village in Elsmere Port was also mentioned as a good engagement tool for this kind of work, as people could see hydrogen networks in action and can have their questions answered. There were also suggestions raised about replicating this model within inner-city areas in order to get more people visiting these types of sites and distributing more information about hydrogen as a power source.

## VERBATIM QUOTES

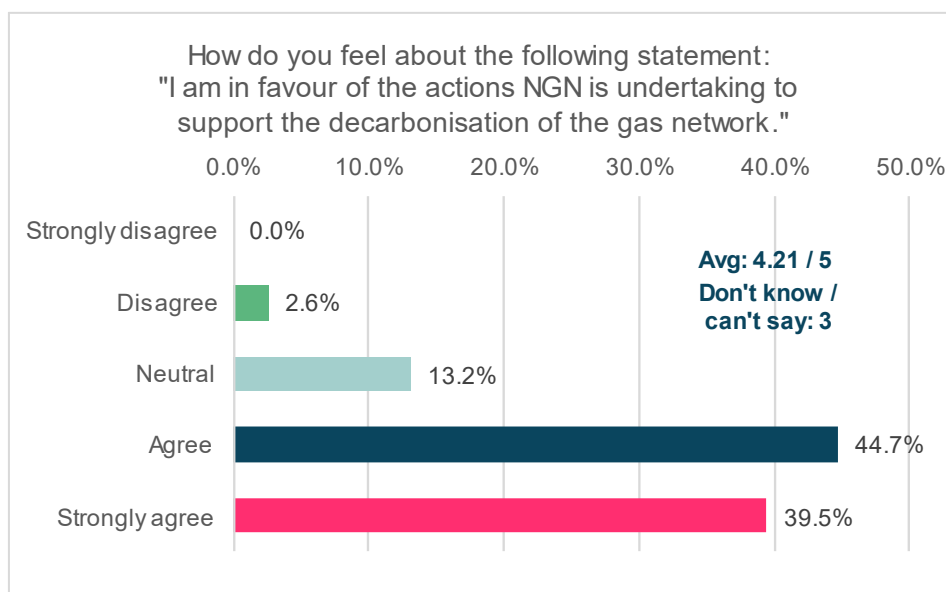
### 1. Is there anything that should be brought forward in terms of timings? Are there any medium- or long-term priorities that should be brought forward sooner?

- “It’s crazy to leave labour market engagement at medium term. That needs to be a priority. Young people need to know about green jobs now. Otherwise they will enrol on the wrong course, and it will be too late.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “Immediately, I’d say that it would be good if you could bring upskilling and recruitment forward. The work we’re doing in terms of energy efficiency is quite difficult to do in order to get that engagement. Here it’s described in the long term, so to bring that forward would be quite good.” Local authority
- “I thought that you’d be developing a plan for internal systems upgrades at the same time as upskilling in order to work in conjunction with the plan being put in place.” Local Enterprise Partnership
- “I agree that you need to be working on upskilling at the same time as planning the systems upgrade. You don’t want a gap between bridging the skills gap and the planning. The urgency to do that first goal is not going to be there otherwise. You’ll think that you still have time, until the point that the time runs out.” Business customer
- “The financing decommissioning is in the medium term, but surely financing is absolutely key to being able to do anything. I would presume that financing and actually getting those funds would be a high priority right now.” Local authority
- “I’ve pushed a lot for moving up timescales in working with local governments across Leeds and Newcastle, and I feel like putting that off is leading yourself into having another gap. Historically, local councils take a while to kick things off, and you’re giving them more optimism than is probably allowable with local councils, as they’re not the most efficient.” Local Enterprise Partnership
- “I think that focusing on hydrogen capacity is the right thing to do and NGN has done well with explaining the timeline. However, there is a serious misunderstanding about the time required, and some of our 2026-2028 objectives are still very ambitious. While we are managing each other very well, we do need to think about how we communicate externally in order to bring investors, regulators and end users on board.” Business customer



- “It would be good to have an update of how the research is going. We had a similar thing in Leeds a few years ago, but we had no clarity on it or any updates.” Local authority
- “From what I’ve seen internally at NGN, some of this is already happening, certainly in terms of data and internal systems. If you’re looking at repurposing the network, you need to look at pipes, valves etc., and management of that data is really important. Just to echo those sentiments, that there seems to be a lot of good focus already going on.” Supplier
- “I think some of it is already in flight. You see a lot of trends in industry with people rebranding themselves as technology companies that specialise in X. I’ve seen it across other utility organisations and other sectors as well. I don’t know if it’s just my bias, but anything around internal systems and data would be right at the forefront of the priorities.” Supplier
- “Feasibility is a very important one. What I understand from feasibility studies is that it includes everything, so that should be higher on the list surely. Before you do anything, you need to know how feasible it is, you don’t want to start a project and then hit the challenges.” Business customer

### 1. Is there anything not included that we should look to include?



- “We did research last year into clients’ understanding of Net Zero, and found their knowledge to be very poor. It’s something that we are very concerned about. We do feel that the customer engagement is key in getting that knowledge across.” Charity
- “I agree that customer knowledge of Net Zero could be a problem. If we don’t have the understanding then it’s going to be difficult for us to relay this to the community we serve. I think the blank look on everyone’s faces just shows really. I don’t have enough understanding to confidently take this information away from me and to spread the message.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “In North Yorkshire, the local councils are working with NGN on supply and demand to 2050, and the switch-on date for different hydrogen systems has wide-ranging effects on the forecasting picture. For example, we don’t have the exact number of houses involved and the infrastructure

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required within these networks, so it's a big challenge. Therefore, some flexibility within the gas network needs to be built in." Local authority

- "I hope that this can happen and will help to reduce bills. It's essential that NGN focuses on that. There are negative connotations around the term 'hydrogen', so NGN needs to work around that." Charity
- "I've been doing lot of work with Wales and West Utilities, who have lots of strong initiatives, like NGN. There needs to be more strategic alignment between all gas distributors in the UK, because ultimately you'll need one comprehensive network. It won't be solved in the short term, but it will in the medium term with the right planning." Business customer
- "You should be looking to engage with councils now so that they have this on their radar and can engage with these conversations, plan properly and get schemes approved. For example, at North Yorkshire Council, they're going through a reorganisation, and that's coming into effect in March, so we need to be planning our priorities so that they are included as part of the reorganisation." Local authority

## 2. What do you think of our approach?

- "I worry that hydrogen is too expensive to transport and store for use in a domestic setting, other than as a 20% mix." Charity
- "NGN focuses a lot on transitioning from methane to hydrogen. Hydrogen is the way to go. It won't be as stark a transition as customers might think, but there needs to be thought about how the transition is presented to the public so that they feel reassured and buy into the approach." CEG
- "PV Magazine is a useful source in terms of hydrogen as an option. Green hydrogen might work, but it seems unlikely we'll have a hydrogen-based domestic grid." Charity
- "Regulatory engagement in the short term is the right approach. However, there needs to be something coming out now to reassure the market that things are going ahead. You don't want things to be too speculative." Business customer
- "We know that climate change is coming down the road much faster than any of us would like to admit, and NGN can be a front leader on helping to deal with these problems through schemes like these. They have a good team working on it and I hope that they can keep going as they are." Business Customer
- "It's very important that the government gets behind this whole concept. The big fear for NGN and anyone leading the charge on hydrogen is that if the government is not fully behind it, it could be slow and difficult to achieve. But there's a team at NGN looking to drive this forward, and I'm sure that they're in conversation with the government about that." Business Customer
- "Where is the hydrogen coming from? You need a clear strategy on that. Have we got the capability to produce hydrogen with methane, carbon capture or nuclear? Where is our capacity for using hydrogen? This seems to be missing. Is it a means for replacing natural gas in our own homes or for energy-intensive industries that will struggle to use electricity for their needs? This is very complicated and we are at an early stage." Local Enterprise Partnership

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## 2. Is it ambitious enough?

- “From the little knowledge I have, I think it is about right. They can be as ambitious as they want, but there are a lot of other factors that will have influence over it.” Business Customer
- “Help is needed for people with older gas appliances to see if these appliances are ready for hydrogen or blended hydrogen.” Charity
- “Is there scope for consolidation versus extension of the gas supply network as the hydrogen conversion process progresses?” Charity
- “The blocks are there, but the devil’s in the detail. As an overall plan, yes, it’s ambitious enough. But the details determine whether it’s successful or not. You need various forms of engagement with the wider population and those who want to go into much more detail.” Local Enterprise Partnership

## 3. What is missing? Is there more that we can do in this area?

- “A lot seems to be happening at an increasingly rapid pace, including key decisions. I don’t know why the government has decided to kick all the big decisions down the line to 2026; all it does is create uncertainty in the energy market. There’s not much we can do apart from trials and pilots until then. How can we accelerate the work in this regulatory period?” Vulnerable customer representative
- “We’re excited by hydrogen, but are concerned about the gas pipes and whether there will be more leaks. We understand hydrogen is more likely to leak. Is that correct? We also understand that hydrogen has a much broader flammability range in air.” Charity
- “I would sort out the pipelines first because then whatever source you swap it to, the pipelines can handle whatever mix you go for.” Young Innovators Council
- “In terms of sorting out the pipes, the sooner the better for me. The problem is, I’m not convinced about the safety of hydrogen. I’m told we can add 20% hydrogen to the gas, and this will make it safer. Who is doing the research to convince me?” Charity
- “It’s getting that realistic, scientific analysis for me. I need some scientists who I trust and are independent to convince me. I agree about the pipes, that’s an excellent point.” Charity
- “Rather than looking at hydrogen villages, could you do part of a bigger city rather than just villages? Then people can relate to it and see it going on. Say if you did it in South Shields; people would be able to see how it’s going.” Young Innovators Council
- “I agree that we need to inform young people about the hydrogen economy now.” Young Innovators Council
- “I started off as a plumbing and heating engineer. I went to the hydrogen village and had loads of questions. Every question I had, they were all answered. It’s free to visit, you can book to go, and I’d really recommend it. I can’t wait for it to happen.” Utility
- “Hydrogen could be fantastic; I could retire, and no one would be in danger of carbon monoxide poisoning. However, I’m not convinced yet..” Charity

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## WORKSHOP 4: BUSINESS RESILIENCE – PEOPLE AND SERVICE

The fourth session was introduced by Olivia Porteus from Business In The Community (BITC), who delivered a short presentation about the workforce challenges facing the gas distribution sector. These included a lack of diversity, issues relating to social mobility problems and a lack of opportunity. Lindsey Filer, NGN HR Director, then provided an overview of how NGN is trying to respond to some of the challenges introduced by Olivia. To begin, Lindsey looked at sector challenges, focusing on workforce planning to tackle industry and regional challenges and creating green jobs to deliver the clean infrastructure of the future. She also touched upon apprenticeships and in-house development programmes as avenues used for upskilling workers. Lindsey then discussed inclusion and belonging, which are driven by objectives and policies to create a diverse workforce. She explained that these inclusivity policies are underpinned by awareness courses and colleague communities to help retain staff from diverse groups. To finish, Lindsey looked at social mobility, and NGN's initiatives built around working with schools and local authorities to deepen its connections with local communities and provide work experience to people from deprived backgrounds. Stakeholders were then invited to discuss these measures in the breakout rooms.

### SUMMARY

There was a good level of support among stakeholders for NGN's approach to creating a diverse and inclusive workforce. When asked to vote, using Slido, on whether they supported NGN's approach to ensure that the company's workforce is diverse and inclusive, 45.7% agreed and 31.4% strongly agreed. However, it is also worth noting that 8.6% strongly disagreed, 5.7% disagreed and 8.6% were neutral. This gave an overall score of 3.86/5, where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 5 is 'Strongly agree'. There was a general feeling that NGN was making encouraging progress, but still had much to do and should pursue any further initiatives at a quicker pace.

The importance of achieving gender equality dominated discussions. Many attendees felt that the utilities industry was still seen as white, male and middle-aged, and encouraged NGN to go further and quicker in order to dispel this perception of roles both in offices and on the ground. Some participants encouraged NGN to amend the language used in job adverts to make jobs seem more female-inclusive, while others recommended work in schools to break down gender stereotypes around these types of roles. It was hoped that these kinds of efforts would bring more females into the industry. While many saw gender inclusivity as a keystone to efforts here, others were of the view that ethnic diversity should be prioritised equally, through both ethnicity and gender splits on interview panels, for example.

When discussing sector challenges, many attendees expressed concerns about the industry's ageing workforce and the lack of skills in retrofitting in particular. On that basis, NGN's focus on apprenticeships and in-house development was warmly welcomed. Many wanted to see efforts continued here, and thought that they presented an opportunity to appeal to young people. A sizable number of participants expressed

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their concerns that young people are generally pressured to go to university, and therefore wanted apprenticeships to be an even more prominent aspect of NGN's recruitment drive. It was also thought that green jobs could play a significant part in this solution, as they could tap into young people's passion for the environment and sustainability and enable them to be part of the solution. Participants also supported NGN's focus on upskilling and reskilling, and wanted assurances that existing employees could develop new skills within the company without being penalised.

During discussions about tackling the sector challenges outlined in Lindsey's presentation, flexibility and remote working were also identified as important considerations when recruiting staff. Due to the rise in prominence of remote working since the pandemic, it was acknowledged that many applicants have new expectations around working patterns and arrangements. Therefore, NGN was encouraged to embrace this in order to attract new workers. Others made the point that this could work to the company's advantage, as, by fully embracing remote working, it could open up its careers to a wider geographical area and potentially create a more diverse workforce.

Attendees unanimously supported NGN's measures to support individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular around efforts to appeal to local people from deprived households, disabled people and, more widely, non-university-educated individuals. Participants were of the view that it would be really effective to engage in a targeted awareness-raising campaign that would demonstrate potential career pathways ahead so that those targeted would feel confident that they could progress within NGN in their local area.

Participants believed that these measures showed a good level of ambition around gender diversity. However, others thought that efforts needed to be made to ensure that they are matched around race, household income and disability. Attendees were, however, of the view that the current framework for driving gender inclusivity could also be used to drive diversity in these areas, and encouraged NGN to follow a similar strategy. Building on this idea, others felt that there was more to do in making diversity in all of its forms central to NGN's corporate identity. Accordingly, NGN was encouraged to work harder to ensure that it presents an image of a diverse workforce in its online and paper marketing materials. Such examples were sending a cohort of LGBTQ+ workers to Pride events and including images of these types of events on its website. The point was made that the young workers who NGN was trying to target really value inclusivity, so this sense of inclusivity must shine through.

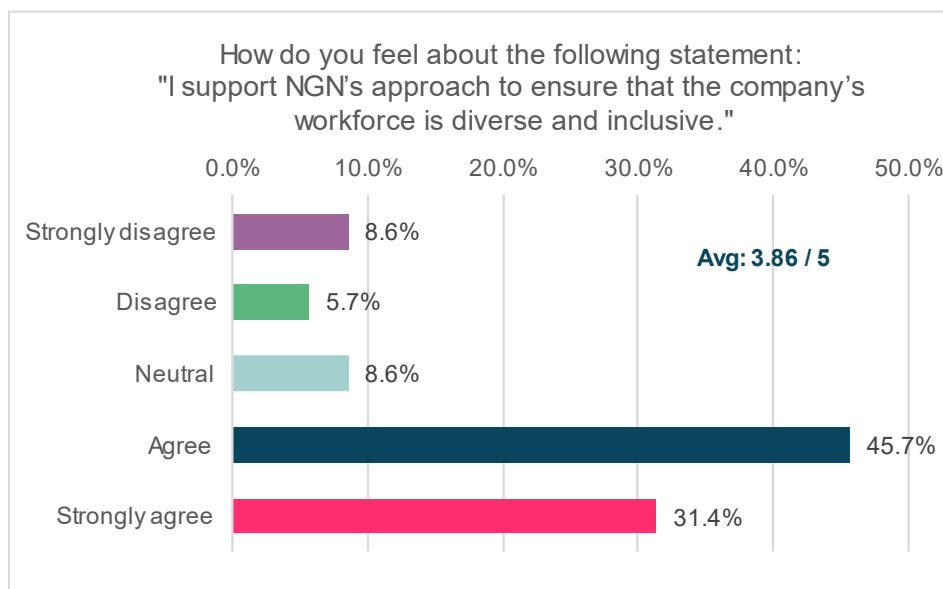
There was also a widespread feeling that NGN could do more to appeal to young people, and a number of avenues that it could follow were put forward. A key message within these discussions was that NGN should find ways to make itself look more inspiring, such as tapping into young people's enthusiasm to tackle the climate crisis. This could be done by rewriting job adverts to make them more mission-driven, and showing young people that, by working at NGN, they can be part of the solution to climate change. The other main route strongly mentioned was deep engagement work with schools and young people. Attendees urged NGN to go into schools as early as possible so that they consider the gas industry when considering career options, and use bodies like the Young Innovator's Council to reach out to children from disadvantaged

backgrounds. Others called on NGN to target technical colleges in particular, and to arrange mentoring programmes for female pupils in order to show them long-term pathways into the industry.

Finally, while attendees largely thought that NGN is doing many of the right things in its recruitment drive, they were also keen to suggest a range of other approaches that could be useful. One stakeholder discussed using local workforce development centres and local community networks, which could be used to raise awareness of NGN and its roles among local communities. Another potential avenue was using LinkedIn posts depicting females enjoying and thriving in traditionally male-dominated roles. It was hoped that such an approach would make these jobs seem more accessible for females. One final potentially useful channel could be targeting local declining industries, such as hospitality. It was suggested that there is an untapped well of talent here which could be harnessed and used to plug NGN's skills gaps, particularly around retrofitting.

## VERBATIM QUOTES

### 1. What do you think of our approach?



- "One perception coming up from community groups is that you need to move far away in order to get to a certain level of seniority within a utility company, which puts people off. This could be an issue for NGN too. Therefore, I would put out that you don't need to be sat in a meeting room in Leeds to work for NGN. Flexibility and diversity will be key." Charity
- "I agree that maximum flexibility around your role with NGN will be key now." CEG
- "Always when you look at diversity with any method, the first basic is male and female. That's the starting point when you're thinking about inclusion. For an organisation to show understanding, they've got to implement inclusion." Vulnerable customer representative
- "The thing that interests me the most is attitude and capability. We've got an ageing workforce, so I feel that we need to invest in the youth, by drawing on apprenticeships and feeding into education."

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Things have got to change and we need to move away from male dominance within the industry.”

Utility

- “We’re very keen on the green jobs component, terms of green jobs, so that’s fantastic.” Local authority
- “My industry is very male-dominated, so I’m also involved in trying to get more female candidates involved. When it comes to the application process, people tend to see these roles as male jobs. However, you could make small changes, such as using the title ‘coordinator’ rather than ‘manager’.” Local authority
- “I think that going into schools is great and can really help you change attitudes among young people.” Local authority
- “The right things are being done around the approach, in terms of getting into schools and ensuring that NGN represents the community that it serves, which helps with building trust. Within job descriptions and adverts, you could include statements around diversity and inclusion.” Supplier
- “As a result of COVID, location is not always a necessity for employees. That means that you can potentially select staff from a wider area and also improve your diversity.” Supplier
- “When I worked at Leicester Council many moons ago, they were very strict on recruitment policies. Even in terms of interview panels, they would have an ethnicity and gender split, to at least be visually diverse. This could be a useful approach for NGN.” Local authority
- “So many people go to university now and have degrees. If you have a higher level of education, you’re likely to be better at applying for jobs. So, I’m wondering whether that means that the roles aren’t available for people without that education.” Local authority
- “Beyond recruiting new staff, how do you upskill people with lots of experience in one field who want to move into a different field?” Local authority
- “You could offer opportunities to learn on the job so there is no major salary cut involved.” Local authority
- “To what extent have NGN outsourced work over the past 10 years rather than use in-house capacity?” Charity
- “In retrofitting, there is a lack of skills and there are no training courses in colleges. The insulation industry is trying to rectify that as we need the skills to fix leaky roofs, floors and walls, which you all see in rented housing and lower-income houses. There’s lots of work going on there.” Utility
- “Gas boiler engineers are an ageing workforce. Companies are currently trying to reskill them into air source heat pumps, but there will be a big lack of skills around Net Zero, so we need to address that early on otherwise we won’t reach the national targets.” Utility
- “Efforts to diversify the workforce are dead right. If you look at younger teens at secondary school, lots of girls and boys still see lots of occupations as gendered, and a lot of girls don’t realise the amount of income they would gain if they were to do these occupations instead of hospitality, hair and beauty, all the traditional paths for working-class girls, so the message needs getting across.” Local authority

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- “I think that insulation is a moderately skilled job and is very accessible for lots of young people leaving school. It’s good that there are efforts to diversify the network and promote this to a wider demographic. Having so few women means that half the workforce is being ignored.” Local authority
  - “I think it’s very important so that people of all genders at a young age are able to see their options for when they are older and are not limited to gender stereotypes.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “The messaging is so heavily geared towards higher education instead of vocational training. This needs exploring.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “Using initiatives like the Young Innovators Council to engage with young people would be a great idea. It would be useful to focus on people who perhaps haven’t made those career decisions yet. I just chose my subjects quite randomly and by the time I did have an idea, it was too late, and I’d have to have retrained.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “An important aspect of engaging with young people is making it clear that it isn’t just a job that they do for a couple of years, but that there is a clear pathway for them and career progression.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “A good way to get young people involved is showing the future of the industry. As a young person, I want to think about the sustainability of the industry and how people see their roles in the future. For gas companies, people maybe don’t see it as a long-lasting job or something that will be rewarding in the future.” Local Enterprise Partnership
  - “I have a lot of thoughts on them. What was said about us going through a recruitment crisis is true, all I hear is that we have these crises and yet no one to deal with them as we’re struggling to fill roles. I like the fact you’ve focused on people to attract, such as people from disadvantaged backgrounds and disabilities. Access into careers for disabled people is definitely an area that can be explored.” Local authority

## 2. Is it ambitious enough?

- “This sounds very reasonable: all the utilities will be in a similar situation. This isn’t really my area though.” Supplier
- “It’s interesting that we are leaning into conversations about gender, because that’s an area where it is very clear and obvious to everyone that there’s a discrepancy. But it is also important to recruit from the entire demographic, including race, household income, disability, and some of these initiatives could tackle all of those things.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “In my first job, my manager was female. She was fantastic and showed me how I could have a place in the industry. She helped me to feel like I was capable and showed me that I was good at this. My learning from this is that female mentors are really important, if you can show that there are strong females working in the industry that would be fantastic.” Local authority



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### 3. What is missing? Is there more that we can do in this area?

- “I think that there’s a lot that NGN can explore with alternative routes to employment, especially those struggling to get into the labour market, such as elderly and disabled people. Making roles exciting for future generations will be equally important. There is a lot of uncertainty in the gas industry due to Net Zero drive and geopolitical stuff, so a stable roadmap about where a recruit’s career would go is needed.” CEG
- “Kids are making decisions about what they want to do at aged 10, so NGN needs to intervene at that age and make them see how inspiring things like renewable energy can be. It’s really important to tell them about routes into employment and how they can make a success of themselves in NGN.” Charity
- “I agree that working with schools and telling them how great green energy and renewables are could be a big draw.” Charity
- “If you’re recruiting people, think, ‘would I want this job?’ The market has become much more competitive, so you need to make any advert appealing.” Utility
- “In terms of pay, student loans are very expensive, so the going rate is not enough. I would also suggest building in the climate crisis, as it has resonated with young people, and really tell people about the value that they can bring to the role. You need to make any job advert mission-led, with an emphasis on what you could achieve in the role and how you can be a solution. This will be empowering and inspiring for potential recruits.” Utility
- “There are specialist recruitment agencies and job sites, with some sites focusing on ethnic minorities, for example.” Local authority
- “There are specific recruitment agencies that target minority groups, which is a great thing. It’s also about being really visible where the things are celebrated. If there’s a Pride event, for example, you can put that in the public eye. It’s important to ensure that diversity and inclusion elements are front and centre on the website or in the media elements.” Supplier
- “Diversity in today’s world is foremost in the thoughts of a lot of young people. Industries need to be inclusive and show what’s available. Teachers want to guide students effectively but need the right information.” Charity
- “I heard about the Young Innovators Council from the school careers service. I think probably advertising to people who have just finished school in disadvantaged areas would be good. There will be people with lower grades and lower attendance that you could capture.” Young Innovators Council
- “I first heard about the Young Innovators network through my school counsellor, so the outreach is working, but I think focusing on technical schools would be a good idea for NGN.” Young Innovators Council
- “Maybe look at schools in disadvantaged areas that might not be doing all that well for qualifications and results.” Young Innovators Council
- “I only really got into this because my mum is really involved in CVs and jobs as she is a university teacher. For others, you need to get that information out there sooner.” Young Innovators Council

- “If there was more media portrayal of women in these jobs, for example, that would definitely encourage people. Also, with university fees going up, there will be more people going into apprenticeships.” Young Innovators Council
- “I’d just encourage more companies to include young people’s input and have things like a Young Innovators Council.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “I went to an engineering college and it was probably around 15% girls in the whole college. What my school did was try and get as many people talking in assembly as possible. We also had a room where girls could talk to females that are already working in the various areas so they could see that there are possibilities for them there.” Local Enterprise Partnership

#### 4. Is there anything we can learn from your organisation or any other companies with regard to recruitment? What approaches have you used?

- “We’re struggling with recruitment and retention. We’re increasingly picking up people from industries that are suffering, such as hospitality. We’re trying to reach people who had lost their jobs from declining industries and telling them how they can transfer their skills or upskilling them to push their career path in a different direction. That is helping us with recruitment lower down. They feel empowered and needed.” Local authority
- “We had a successful work placement programme with Newcastle University, and that has been successful, as these people have worked for us after university.” Local authority
- “Obviously getting paid competitively is key, but other benefits are important too, such as sick leave and maternity policies. If that benefits package was good enough and it was a nice place to work, that might tip the balance, even if you had a better salary offer from elsewhere.” Local authority
- “I come from a nuclear background. NGN is heading for a transition with hydrogen which will require different skills. We have a national college for nuclear. Is NGN contributing to similar initiatives in the gas industry? I think that this is an effective approach in the nuclear sector. It also helps to address diversity and inclusion. People coming to new facilities makes them want to play a part.” Local Enterprise Partnership
- “We have a huge drive at the moment to get people to work in our green department. We’re making redundancies in other areas, but it is growing around hydrogen, windfarms, solar and similar types of technologies.” Utility
- “We used to run a schools poster competition on carbon monoxide awareness, but it seems to have fallen down the priority list, perhaps due to COVID. Children know about gas cookers and it’s a way in for you as employers to interest children in your business and the careers available.” Charity
- “Young people still see the gas industry as an old-fashioned career, but actually the AI side of things is really appealing.” Vulnerable customer representative
- “We work in schools and NGN is a regional partner of ours, so we use a lot of NGN’s mentors on our Big Ideas programme. This is a fantastic opportunity for young people to understand what your job is and what you do day to day. We want to brief NGN’s mentors before they go in so they can communicate more effectively in schools.” Business customer

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- “My classmates often ended up with jobs from people that went into schools, and my experience helped me see what I was learning was relevant to potential future careers. My school had these employment fairs where every now and then someone from the sector would come in and show us how what we are learning is relevant to the job they work in now.” Local Enterprise Partnership
  - “Creating a network that is going to be there for you to link in with the communities. You just have to have that desire to do it.” Vulnerable customer representative
  - “We really rely on larger organisations such as NGN for guidance on this. But it’s important to include everyone as this white male bugbear is challenging.” Charity
  - “We are trying to broaden the workforce but it’s an uphill struggle.” Local authority
  - “The centre we are developing in New Bedford here in the US is a workforce development centre. We will be going into disadvantaged communities, heightening awareness of how to get into these jobs and not be precluded in your own mind from getting into them.” CEG
  - “We have about 240 staff. We even have a couple of women who dig for us. There’s a full profile on LinkedIn about one of our female staff members, how she came to get the job and why she loves it.” Utility

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## Q&A SESSION

Following the main conference, an online Q&A session was held on Zoom, where stakeholders could ask NGN senior management representatives further questions.

A wide range of topics were covered, most notably diversity, inclusivity and the incorporation of hydrogen into NGN's network. The questions can be found below.

### VERBATIM

- "Would the GDNs please ask HSE to state that testing for carbon monoxide (CO) is a safety issue? When a customer calls the gas emergency service the customer is told to turn everything off, open windows and doors and get out. Therefore, by the time the First Call Operator arrives, any CO will normally have disappeared."
- "Could NGN ask HSE to look at NGN's own brilliant 2016 research which showed that it would only add 5-7 minutes on to the time of a call if the FCOs did a sweep test for CO? If HSE says this is a safety issue (and how can it not be?), then Ofgem would fund this. There are already funds for 'vulnerable customers', and we say all customers are vulnerable to CO."
- "Do you think that there is a possibility that the government will not let you use hydrogen as a replacement? If so, what will you do about it?"
- "You talk about diversity and inclusion, yet your board does not reflect this. If you cannot address this within your own organisation, how are you going to address the wider issues?"
- "How can NGN ensure that the hydrogen villages (which are being used for research) are typical of real houses with their own safety issues, old gas pipes and gas appliances which are not regularly serviced or not serviced at all? Are the GDNs going to visit every home before the changes are made? This happened with the change to natural gas."
- "What can NGN do to help to streamline the entry of more females into the company as more gravitate towards it over time, particularly with the business' efforts to get more people to apply for roles?"
- "I love the points about how is NGN engaging with primary school-level children and the Safety Seymour initiative. Are the GDNs holding a prize-giving event next summer? Could the GDNs appoint some pupil ambassadors?"
- "Do you think that in the future people will stop using gas altogether and use electrical heating that is powered by nuclear fusion?"
- "What experts in hydrogen does the HSE have? We'd like to know how many experts there are, what their qualifications are and what research has been done and published?"
- "Could assurance be made publicly that there will be a visit to, inspection and check of every home before hydrogen is put through the pipes to power all gas appliances?"

## APPENDIX 1: WORKSHOP ATTENDEES

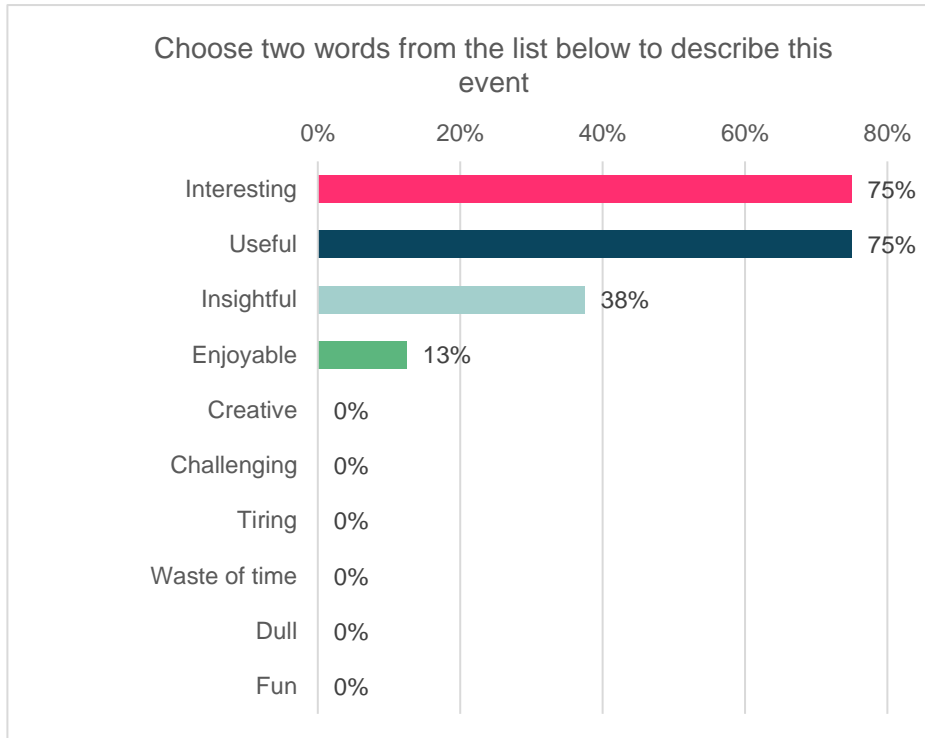
The following organisations were represented at the stakeholder conferences:

1Spatial	Kellas Midstream
Affotek	Keswick Town Council
AVK Donkin	Lake District Foundation
Bradford	Leeds City Council
Caecillian	Lomax Training Services Ltd
CBMDC	M&G Paulson Ltd
Charis	Navigator Terminals
Citizens Advice Newcastle	Newcastle University
City of York Council	Newground
CK Phoenix	North of Tyne Combined Authority
CO-Gas Safety	North Tyneside Council
Communitas Energy	Northern Powergrid
Community Action Northumberland	NTCA
County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service	Persimmon Homes Lancashire
Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership	Radius Subterra Ltd
Darke Engineering Ltd	Redcar and Cleveland Council
Doncaster MBC	Scarborough Borough Council
Eden District Council	Scottish Power
Gateshead Council	Shell Hydrogen
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	Solutions for the Planet
Groundwork Yorkshire	Speedy Hire
Harrogate Borough Council	Stockton and District Advice and Information Service
Highfield Food Co-Op	The Katie Haines Memorial Trust
Hull & EY Children's University	Utilergy Gas Ltd

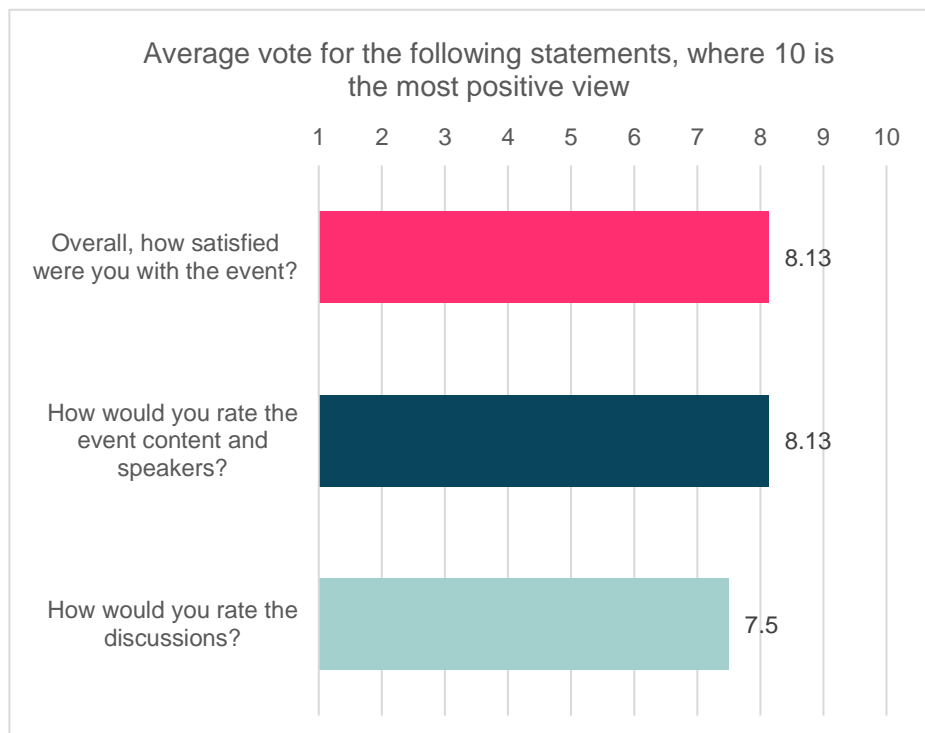
## APPENDIX 2: WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

After the workshop, stakeholders were asked to complete a short feedback form. The feedback was as follows:

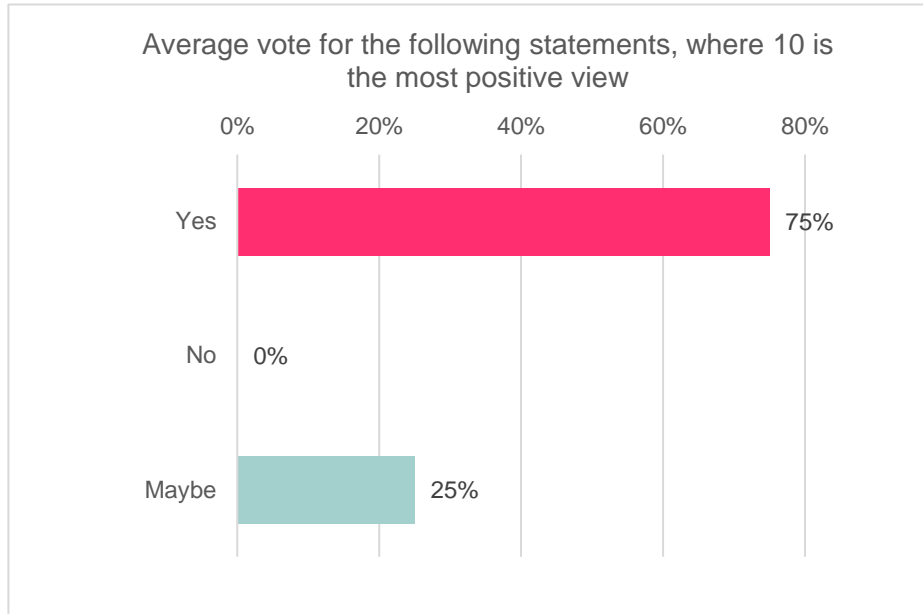
### 1. Please choose two words from the list below to describe this event.



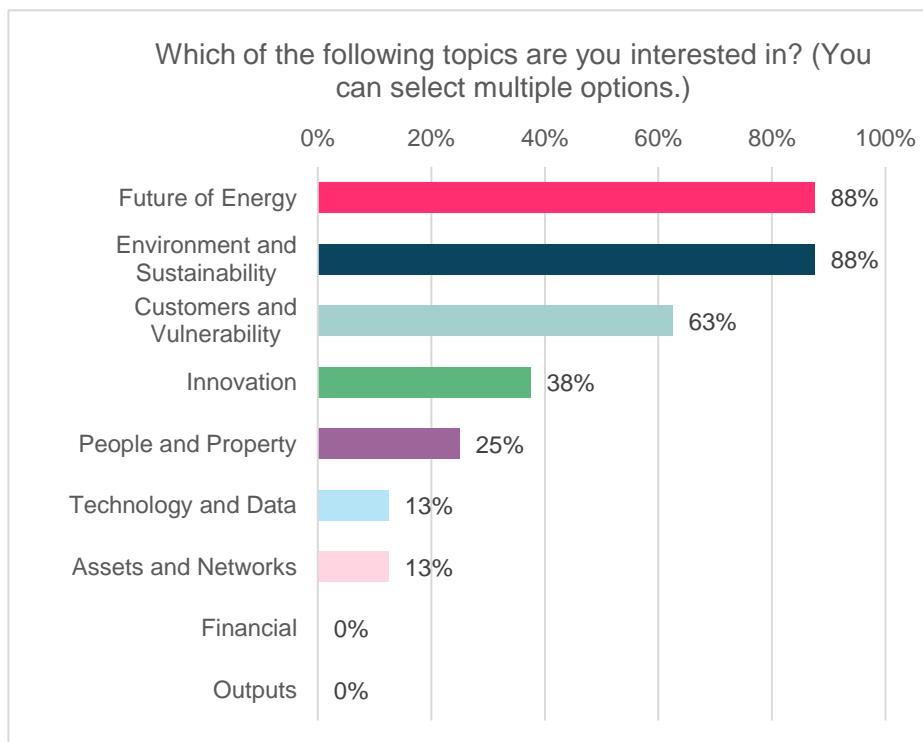
### 2. Overall, how satisfied were you with the event? How would you rate the event content and speakers? How would you rate the discussions?



### 3. Did you find it useful to have a subject matter expert presenting in the session?



### 4. Which of the following topics are you interested in? (You can select multiple options.)



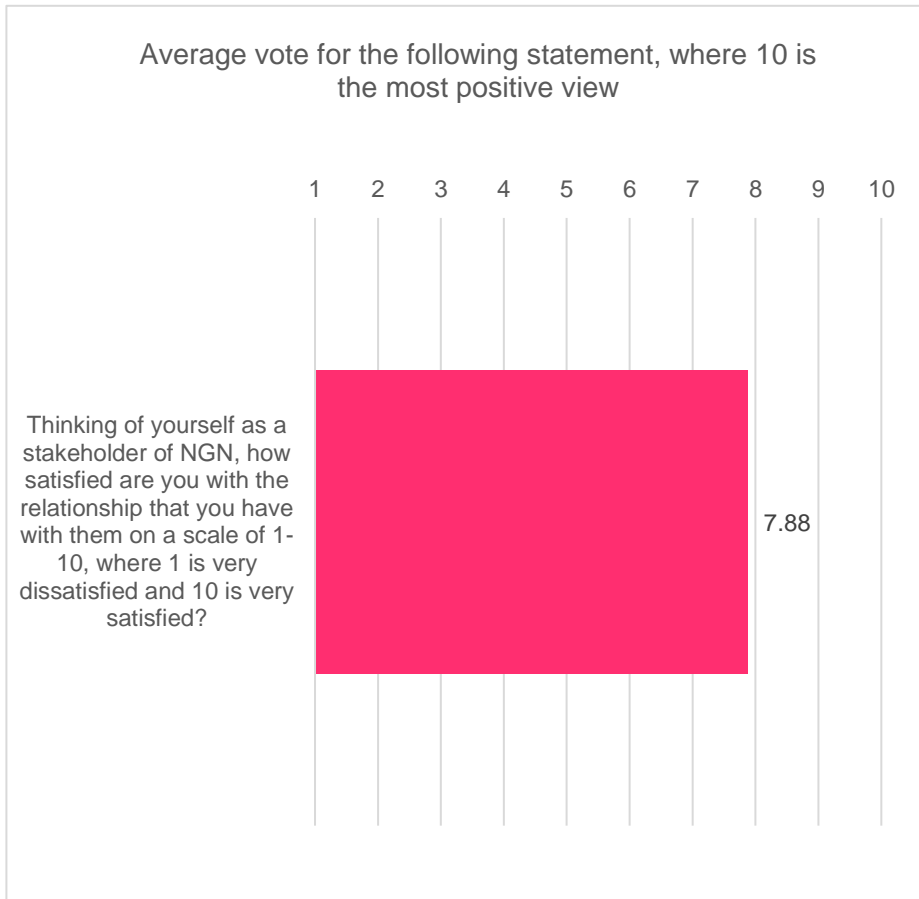
### 5. Is there anything you think could be improved/changed for future workshop events?

- “No, I thought that the event was well-run and well-paced.”
- “Consider adding a few more NGN team members to cover all the breakouts.”
- The questions in the first breakout room were difficult to answer without seeing the presentations and having discussions. I would have this at the end. It’s hard to say how ambitious we thought the strategy was without really hearing the detail about the strategy.”

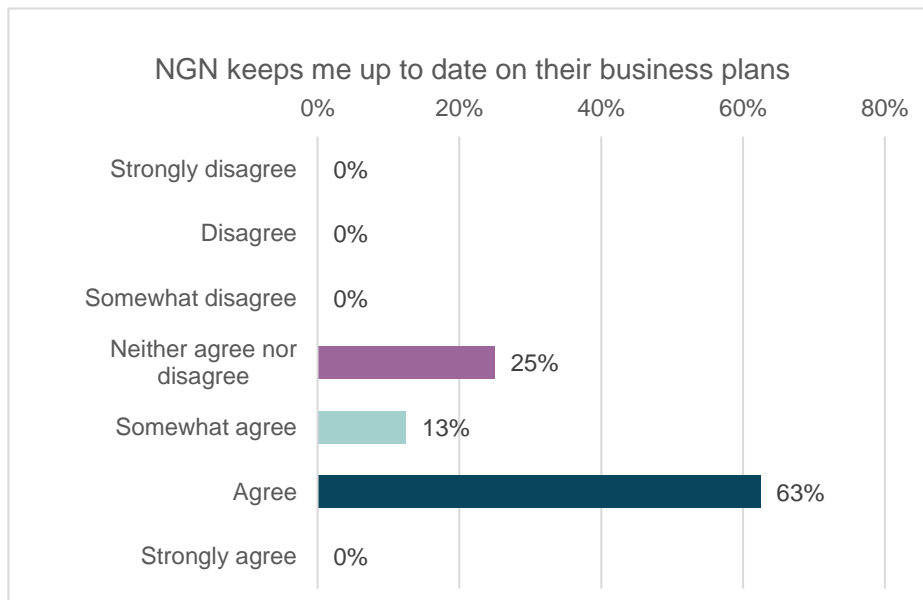
**6. Is there anything that you would like to tell us?**

- “I enjoyed the event.”
- “Thank you for hosting!”
- “The event being remotely accessible was very useful as I’m based in the north of the region.”

**7. Thinking of yourself as a stakeholder of NGN, how satisfied are you with the relationship that you have with them on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is very dissatisfied and 10 is very satisfied?**

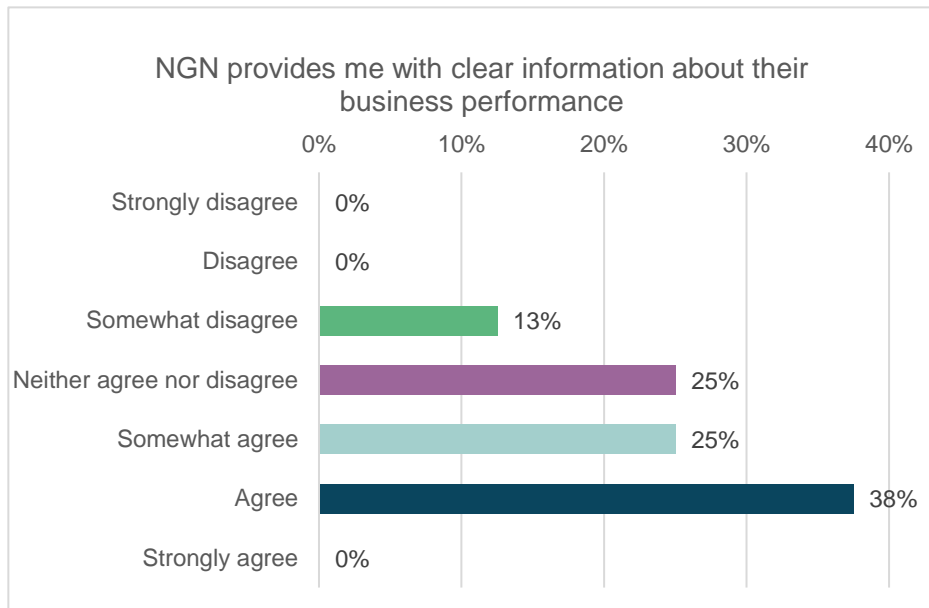


**8. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “NGN keeps me up to date on their business plans”?**

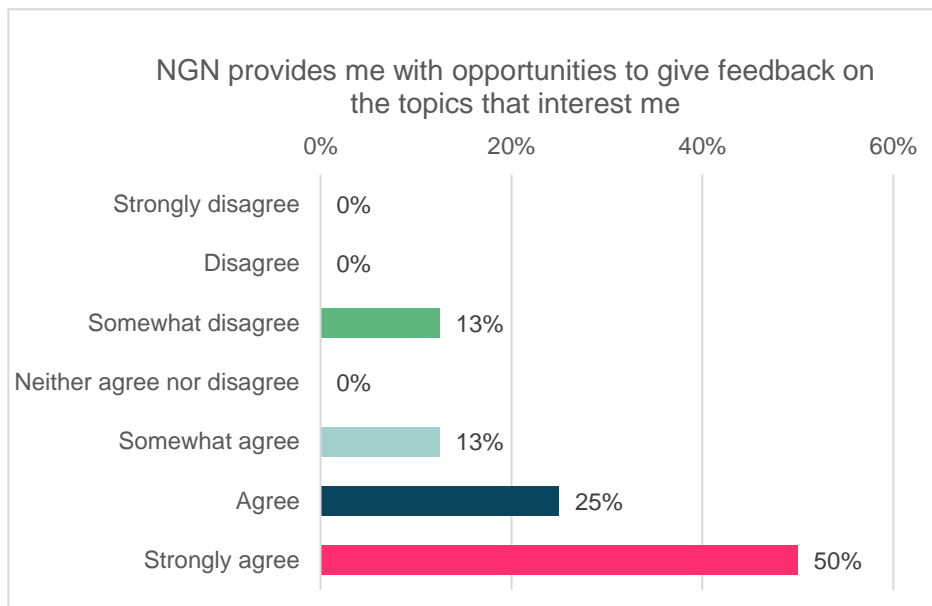




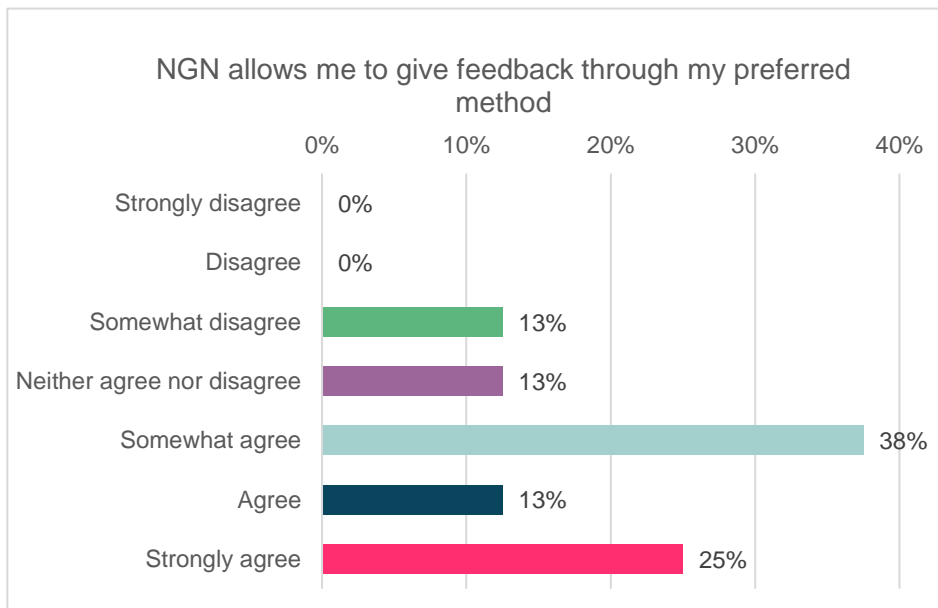
**9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “NGN provides me with clear information about their business performance”?**



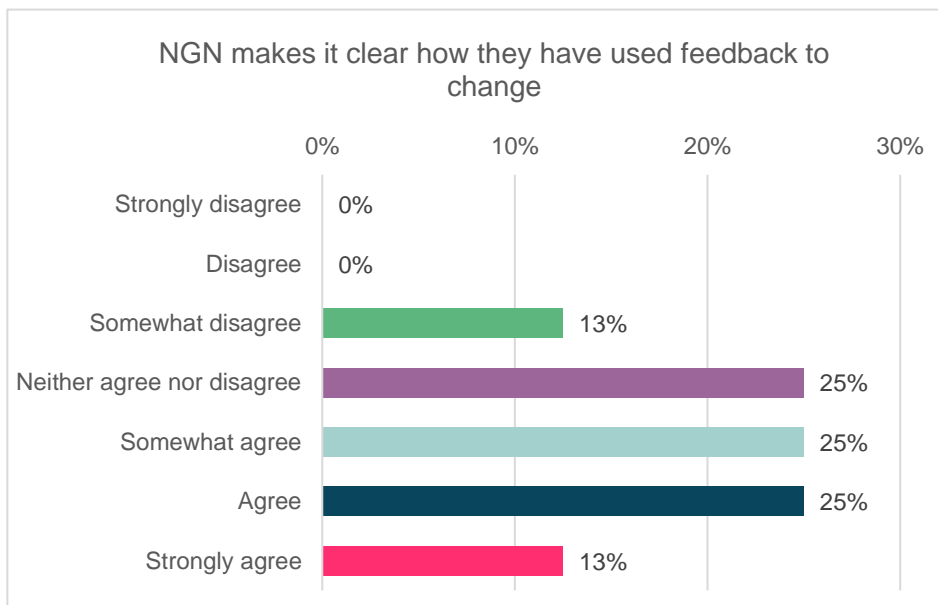
**10. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “NGN provides me with opportunities to give feedback on the topics that interest me”?**



**11. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “NGN allows me to give feedback through my preferred method”?**



**12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “NGN makes it clear how they have used feedback to change”?**



**13. How else you would you like to engage with NGN in future?**

- “I’m happy with the level of engagement that I currently have with NGN.”
- “Potentially we could work together on a project?”
- “It would be good to have joint NPg/NGN workshops where appropriate, if possible? If we are allowed to?”



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