

Northern Gas Networks Young Innovators Council



End of Year Report 2023

Written by Solutions for the Planet



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1. Background

2023 marks the third consecutive year of Northern Gas Networks' Young Innovators Council (YIC) led and facilitated by Solutions for the Planet (S4TP)¹. The YIC is the voice of young people aged 14-19 at Northern Gas Networks (NGN). It provides young people's perspectives and Northern Gas Networks ensures these young people's thoughts and opinions are put at the heart of the business' decision making.

Each session agenda is co-created by S4TP and NGN, influenced by the YIC's input on what topics are most important to them. The aim is for meaningful and relevant engagement which provides an opportunity for the YIC members to influence decision-making at Northern Gas Networks.

Value of the YIC to Northern Gas Networks:

- Bringing in diverse young voices to their decision making.
- Meaningful engagement with key stakeholders and future customers.
- Providing opportunities to upskill future talent.
- Enhancing links with community and school partners.

Value of the YIC to the young people of the council:

- Experience of informing key business agendas and strategies.
- An increased knowledge of the workings of a major utility company, and networking opportunities.
- Skills development including teamwork, confidence, negotiation, critical thinking, and communication.
- Certificate and letter of recognition to acknowledge their role on the YIC.

Northern Gas Networks' Young Innovators Council sessions 2023
February 2023 Meet Up session
February 2023 Session 1: recruiting future talent
April 2023 Session 2: the experience of future customers
June 2023 Session 3: net zero education
September 2023 Attendance at online NGN Stakeholder Workshop
October 2023 Session 4: going low carbon: staying on track with NGN's carbon reduction targets
November 2023 Session 5: NGN's innovation strategy <i>(*NB this was an optional additional session)</i>

Table 1: Session themes; YIC 2023

¹ Solutions for the Planets' Youth Insights Programme: <https://www.solutionsfortheplanet.co.uk>

This year, the YIC was made up of 32 young people aged 14–19. 13 young people from the YIC 2021 or 2022 continued in their roles on the council, and were joined by 19 young people who were newly recruited for 2023. Four other young people were members of the YIC this year, but had to leave due to other commitments (mostly relating to school.) The recruitment process for the YIC 2023 was the same as in previous years, as it has proven effective. It consisted of a detailed application form followed by a scenario-based problem-solving activity surrounding a gas leak in ‘Faketown’.

It was important to ensure once again that we had the broadest range of possible applicants, using S4TP’s established network of schools and organisations, Northern Gas Networks’ links, colleges, youth organisations and STEM clubs. We aimed to make the group’s membership reflective of the demographic structure of Northern Gas Networks’ area of coverage, based on census data in respect of gender, ethnicity, geographic spread, and disability. In addition to these characteristics, it was also intended that the group was proportionally representative of young people who qualify for free school meals. However, this year the YIC composition did not meet every target [see Table 1 below]. This could be down to several factors, including those who applied, the areas we targeted in recruitment, as well as not having the data of YIC members who joined but did not continue on the council.

TARGETS	As per 2021 census data	Ideal for panel of 32	YIC 2023	
F	51%	16/17	20*	*plus 1 ‘prefer not to say’
M	49%	15/16	11*	
BAME	13%	4	9*	*plus 1 ‘prefer not to say’
Dis/ability	27%	8/9	3*	*plus 2 ‘prefer not to say’
FSM	19.7% (national % eligible for FSM on 1/10/2020)	6	4*	*plus 2 ‘prefer not to say’
Bradford - Leeds Central	37%	11/12	14	
North	39%	12/13	14	
East	25%	9/10	4	

Table 2: Demographic composition; YIC 2023

2. How have the Young Innovators Council's thoughts been put at the heart of Northern Gas Networks' decision making in 2023?

Session 1: recruiting future talent [15th February 2023]

Background to the session

Northern Gas Networks' aim for this first session of 2023 was to explore the YIC's perceptions of NGN as a future employer, in order that they can begin to understand *how* to make NGN an attractive place to work. Secondary to this was the question of what makes the gas sector, as a whole, an appealing, or indeed unappealing, industry. This will help to inform NGN's recruitment and workforce succession strategies.

Objectives:

- A. To begin to understand how to make NGN an attractive organisation to work at for future generations.
- B. To understand this attractiveness and perceptions of branding, job adverts, roles, reputations, etc. at NGN and within the gas industry and the wider energy industry.

YIC's key recommendations *(in no particular order)*

1. Make opportunities for school leavers (aged 16+) more visible on your website.
2. Make apprenticeship opportunities more visible on your website and opportunities for people to apply early e.g., before their 18th birthday or before they have their results.
3. Be specific about working hours (not just Mon-Fri), pay (not just "competitive") and details about company and working culture.
4. Be clear about what the additional benefits, holiday and sick pay are on the advert (where available)
5. Look at ways to provide a progressive, non-bias recruitment process.
6. Use social media, not just for advertising roles but raising the profile of your business as an employer of choice and about what your company does for younger people.
7. Simple access (online) to further information about roles and company (not "email us for details")
8. Suggestions on where to advertise:
 - School careers days and open evenings / events
 - Insight days at companies
 - Social media including TikTok ('a day in the life of')
 - On company website with all active/current roles
 - LinkedIn, Totaljobs and Indeed

Response from Northern Gas Networks

A majority of the council members agreed that career progression is the most important thing when looking for a job. This was closely followed by a competitive salary, then a good pension.

- NGN have planned to include more around development and their pension offering on their careers page and in job adverts.

The YIC told us that reputation matters to them; they would look to family and friends as well as online reviews about companies from their current and past employees, before considering applying for a job.

- NGN are now looking at how they can incorporate online review sites into their recruitment process.

The key words that the YIC cited when thinking about NGN and the gas industry were 'innovative', 'changing', 'hydrogen', 'flexible' and 'welcoming'.

- NGN will now focus on using these terms and values in their recruitment campaigns.

The YIC said that businesses need to make opportunities for school leavers more visible, highlighting the wider benefits and making roles easier to apply for.

- NGN are creating a dedicated section on their new careers page for opportunities for school leavers.

Session 2: the experience of future customers [26th April 2023]

Background to the session

Northern Gas Networks consistently receives a rating of over 9 out of 10 for customer satisfaction and have been told by their Citizens Panel (made up of adult customers) that maintaining this high performance is a key priority. However, the customer satisfaction scores drop off when it comes to customers in lower age categories and engaging with young people on the topic of the customer journey is vital to informing NGN's current customer strategy.

At the beginning of 2023, Northern Gas Networks hosted a meeting with their Citizens Panel to examine NGN's customer journey and what made that experience good. The objective of that meeting was to find out from that representative group of people what is important and relevant to them regarding their customer experience of NGN. Session 2 of the Young Innovators Council was the opportunity to gather insight on this topic from their future customers (14-19 year olds).

Objectives:

- To understand what young people want from their customer journey.
- To understand what young people expect a good customer experience to involve, and why.
- To discover how they might be more innovative and improve customer service and experience.

YIC's key recommendations *(in no particular order)*

1. Utilise social media, especially Twitter, throughout the customer journey.
2. Live chat functions are a first port of call for the YIC when contacting a business.
3. Chatbots are the least preferred means of communicating, with the majority of the YIC finding them unhelpful beyond very specific, instantaneous questions/answers.
4. Provide clear options for customer contact and publicise them across each of those platforms so that customers can choose to escalate/switch between them.
5. Demonstrate a clear overview of each individual customer's circumstances when they call to speak to a business, passing them on as few times as possible.
6. Customer service operatives should listen actively and show business accountability in both scenarios.
7. Reassurance will be best given through continuous, relevant, accurate updates.
8. Provide clear and thorough timelines in all scenarios.
9. Conversations with customers should not be scripted or outsourced, so the conversation flows and they are being related to as a person.

Response from Northern Gas Networks

When it comes to NGN's customer strategy, the YIC want businesses to demonstrate transparency, authenticity and an understanding of customers predicaments.

- NGN will ensure that these principles are central at all points where they interact with customers.

The YIC told us that customer service team should actively listen, provide clear guidance and accountability, and that the roles shouldn't be outsourced.

- As a result, NGN have reviewed their training to make sure all of these elements are covered in their customer roles, and will keep their customer call centre based in their Sunderland office.

The YIC said that when customers call to speak to a business, they should be reconnected or passed on to other people as few times as possible. This is in order that a business can have a clear overview of each individual customer's circumstances and needs.

- NGN will make sure this is covered as a basic principle in their customer service training.

The YIC want NGN to provide clear options for customer contact and publicise them so that customers can choose what best suits them. They also want businesses to utilise social media, especially Twitter (now X), throughout the customer journey.

- NGN are ensuring all contact options are on all their customers facing material, and are reviewing their social media activity. They also now have an Instagram account.

Live chat functions are the YIC's first port of call when contacting a business, whilst chatbots are their least preferred contact method because they perceive them to be unhelpful beyond very specific or instantaneous questions and answers.

- NGN are trialling a chatbot to deal with basic enquiries and will explore whether they can and should introduce live chat as a result of their call centre team then having more time.

Session 3: net zero education [28th June 2023]

Background to the session

NGN has appointed a dedicated net zero educator who is designing an education programme around net zero, aimed at young people from Key Stage 1 (primary) to Key Stage 4 (school and college leavers), as well as work with university students. This third session of 2023 offered the opportunity for the current YIC to interact with this key role within NGN and discuss how best to utilise this new strategy.

Objectives:

- A. To understand what the YIC expect to see from an education session about net zero.
- B. To identify the benefits of this programme being delivered by someone from industry.
- C. To begin to understand how the National Energy Research Village (NERV) and Hydrogen Home can be used effectively as part of this programme.

YIC's key recommendations *(in no particular order)*

1. Use Minecraft Education – it is a largely shared language across the age groups (for those that use it) and therefore very relatable, and as not all schools are able to afford this resource full time, it is a point of difference that NGN can bring into the school setting.
2. Talk to the young people as human beings, not as children. It will make it clearer that this topic affects them directly.
3. Practical activities and experiments demonstrating hydrogen will be memorable.
4. Answer 'What is net zero?' and 'What is hydrogen?'
5. Both the positive and negative of all discussions should be shared, to allow everyone to make their own minds up.
- A. Rewards based activities work.
7. Explain why this is both an international AND a local goal, with positive examples.

Response from Northern Gas Networks

The YIC want a programme designed with activities for each age group that builds on the previous stage's learning and progresses knowledge and skills in this area.

- NGN have developed a range of free resources across primary, secondary and post-14 that can be delivered by NGN facilitators or teachers.

Gamification is very popular with the YIC, as they said it helps young people to understand this complex topic and encourage them to attempt to engage those around them on it.

- NGN's resources have been developed around games and challenges, including a carbon footprint calculator and showing how individual footprints can be reduced by setting challenges.

The YIC said that content needed to include practical activities and demonstrations, as well as basic messaging around what net zero is, why it is important, and how young people specifically can make a difference.

- NGN took all the YIC's comment on board around this, and have built a long list of options to create a range of resources such as quizzes, board games, energy trumps and many more.

Session 4: going low carbon: staying on track with NGN's carbon reduction targets [4th October 2023]

Background to the session

NGN know that their customers value transparency and accountability, and are therefore considering options for what they should do if they miss non-incentivised carbon emissions targets. In this fourth session of 2023, NGN wanted to know what the YIC think they should be doing to hold themselves accountable for these targets. Currently, they publicly report on all their carbon emissions and explain why and what they are doing to improve. The YIC explored whether this is sufficient, or if NGN should have to do something more.

Objectives:

- A. To understand the YIC's views on the options NGN are exploring for the business' responsibility and accountability if they don't achieve their voluntary carbon targets.
- B. To gauge the YIC's prioritisation of five options being considered by NGN.
- C. To explore other options or questions around NGN's accountability for their voluntary carbon targets.

YIC's key recommendations *(in no particular order)*

1. Make the reporting on this as concise, accessible and visible as possible.
2. Post across social media platforms directly about this topic and what NGN are doing.
3. Put notices/information up around gas works, e.g., "We are replacing our pipes to help reduce carbon emissions. Find out more about here...", with a QR code.
4. Create simple infographics to present emission targets, what they mean, what is being done to achieve them, and what impact the missed targets will have.
5. If there was a particular department or project within the business that caused higher emissions (or missed targets) how can those be targeted now to improve?
6. In addressing the public, include presentations to schools to spread awareness of what is being done, and to encourage people to reduce their use of gas in order to help to reach the targets that NGN is trying to reach.
7. Apologise if voluntary targets are missed, but only in combination with direct action.
8. Eliminating one's own greenhouse gas emissions is always better, but carbon offsetting can offer interim benefits.
9. Incentivise suppliers to improve their performance on carbon reduction targets (CRTs).
10. If you were to introduce voluntary compensation payments, these should always support the local communities by giving directly.

Response from Northern Gas Networks

The YIC understand that NGN are holding themselves accountable because they are so closely involved and understand NGN's work. However, they told us that NGN need to be clear and make information readily available to the rest of the public and communities that the business serves.

- NGN will continue to post updates and reports (such as their Annual Environment Report) onto their website, to keep stakeholders updated.

- Since these reports are regulated and sometimes difficult to follow, NGN will be preparing a shorter 8-page version which will include a flavour of performance, a case study based on what's most important for stakeholder to learn about, and further signposting to additional materials.

Most of the YIC agreed that giving public apologies for missed CRTs without subsequent actions are worthless. One YIC member called it 'sugar coating' and stressed that people will increasingly see through apologies if they are overused. It was said that apologies could be effective if delivered alongside meaningful related action.

- Moving forward, NGN will ensure to communicate clear actions and outcomes to go alongside any public apology.
- If deemed effective and useful, then it may be something NGN review in the future, however this will be siloed and separate to any wider PR pieces.

The YIC told us that messaging such as "together we are a network" is an important message that implies NGN is more than just a gas company. The YIC want to see a responsible business showing this by going above and beyond. They also said they'd like to see the onus spread to the entire energy supply chain, by putting pressure on NGN's suppliers and contractors as well as other big energy companies, to do their own public reporting on emissions.

- NGN will work with their supply chain moving forward to ensure they are also accountable.
- NGN will ensure that whichever approach they take in the future, it will involve positive action and long-term sustainable change.

BONUS Session 5: NGN's innovation strategy [8th November 2023]

Background to the session

NGN is now reflecting and updating its innovation strategy, evaluating the current price control period and planning for the next. The business believes it is continuing to push boundaries, and therefore needs to make sure that their innovation strategy can help create a network that meets future customer expectations and needs.

Objectives:

- To understand what innovation means to the YIC.
- To understand what the YIC's priorities and needs are for the future of innovation at NGN.
- To understand where the YIC think NGN should focus its innovation funds.
- To have a set of principles that can create a manifesto to underpin NGN's decision making around innovation, mindful of the priorities and needs of our future customers.

YIC's key recommendations *(in no particular order)*

The Young Innovators Council were asked to discuss what they each think NGN's priorities should be for their innovation strategy in the coming years; what values should be at the heart of NGN's innovation projects, regardless of what Ofgem's stipulations are?

1. People being at the centre of everything: responsive to people’s changing needs, with public engagement underpinning all innovation.
2. Communicating with customers is key from an innovation project perspective; if NGN is going to be doing something different, clearly the public want to know about it and feel safe.
3. Social and environmental responsibility go hand-in-hand:
 - Prioritising work that impacts the environment positively will have a trickle-down effect to the communities that are most heavily impacted in the energy industry.
 - I.e., Considering vulnerable customers, you can’t help them transition to sustainable options and renewable energy if you haven’t actually got the things there to help everyone transition fairly.
 - NGN as a gas company should be working to reduce waste and issues caused by procuring gas and distributing gas, by investing money into greener ways to improve energy circulation.
4. Collaboration within the decommissioning agenda is an important priority. Many of issues with taking down the old system come from other companies laying utilities on top of unused infrastructure. This could cause issues if it needed to be removed, as work will take longer to complete, putting strain on vulnerable communities.
5. Innovation projects should efficiently deliver both short-term impacts with long-term benefits. This will help to ensure long-term thinking and have reputational benefits for NGN as they’re seen to be at the forefront of innovation.
6. Continue to include and actively seek and listen to different voices and perspectives, ensuring they’re included in the decision-making process.
7. There should be absolutely no negative impacts on the environment or communities.
8. Targets should be in place so that NGN can be held accountable.

Response from Northern Gas Networks

- NGN have fed the YIC report from this session into the wider Energy Networks Innovation Strategy consultation to shape innovation themes, principles and objectives across all the Gas Distribution Networks.
- The feedback from the group included that NGN should prioritise their spending to focus on Whole Energy Systems & Decommissioning. This is a principle which will apply to the business’ remaining RII02 & forthcoming RII03 Strategy to deliver projects that focus on those areas as a priority, whilst maintaining a balanced approach. NGN will also use the values identified by the YIC to inform an updated set of 5 key principles/objectives designed to deliver improvement through innovation as part of our new strategy.
- NGN will use all the conclusions drawn in this session to inform their outline thinking for a new innovation strategy for 2026 – 2031. We recognise the feedback that it is key to ensure that people are at the centre of all innovative solutions, taking an “innovating *with* in contrast to innovating *for*” strategy.
- YIC explained their desire that as many parties as possible be kept informed of project progress and outcomes. NGN is looking to improve on this in 2024 & beyond,

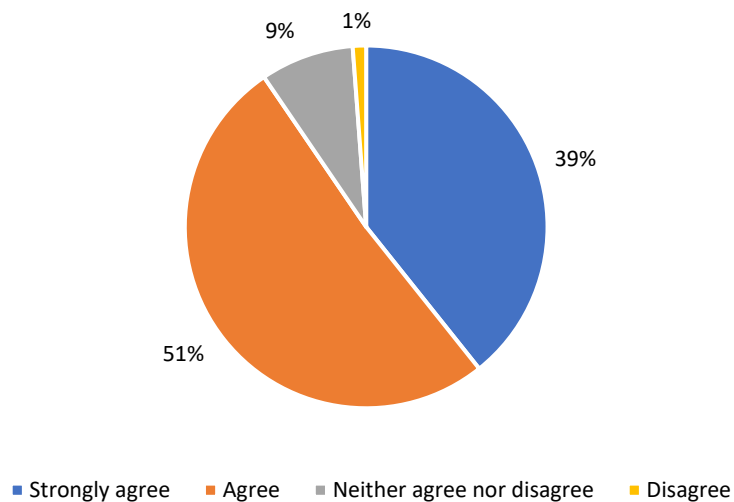
especially when it comes to sharing lessons learnt and presenting project outcomes to ensure new ideas are been developed in collaboration with our key stakeholders.

Summary of YIC 2023 session feedback forms

At the end of each session, the young people of the YIC are invited to complete a feedback form for that session. This is to help us to evaluate the engagement from their perspective; to understand how far they feel involved and listened to by Solutions for the Planet and Northern Gas Networks. It is vital that the YIC members themselves feel that they're thoughts have been put at the heart of NGN's decision making.

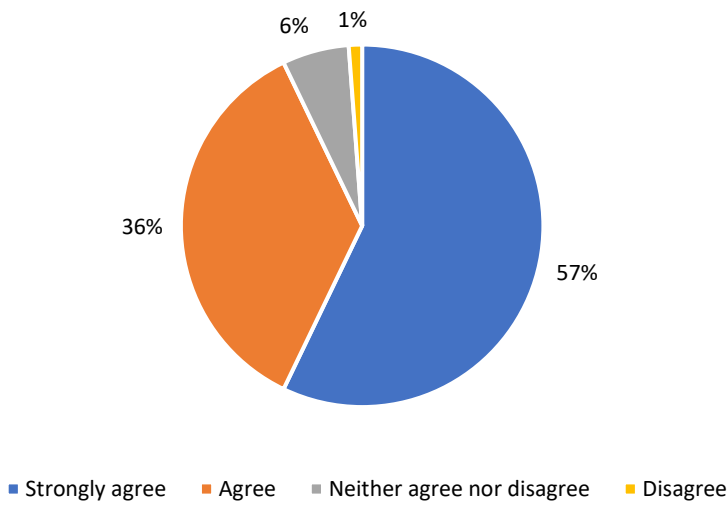
A large proportion of the YIC 2023 felt very involved in the discussions this year and were satisfied that their insights had an influence on Northern Gas Networks' key business agendas and strategies. It is worth noting, however, that each of the figures is down very slightly from the equivalent numbers in 2022. This is certainly something that we need to pay attention to in YIC 2024, to ensure that NGN accountability remains high in the YIC's opinions. That said, it is our suggestion that one of the main factors here could be that YIC attendance across the 4 sessions was not as consistent, leading to some members not feeling the continuity of the conversations or hearing each of the 'You said, we did' elements. The following graphs provide a summary of those insights.

Do you feel that you were given enough information about the session topics?



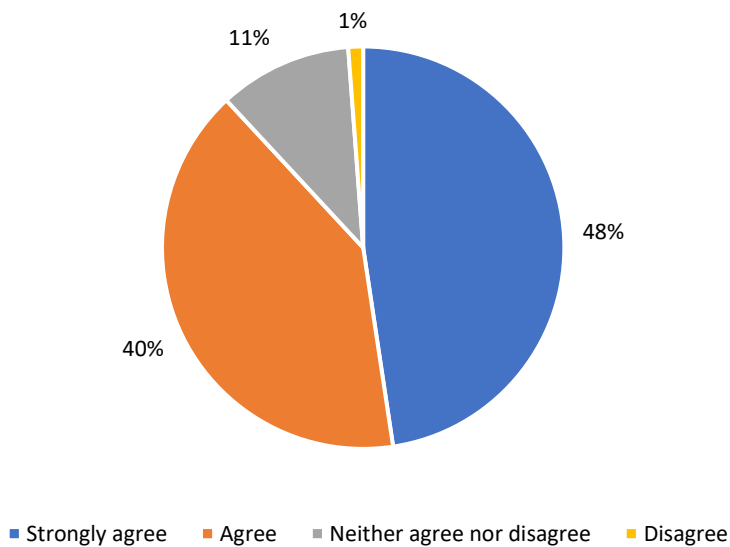
90% of the YIC strongly agreed or agreed that they were given enough information about the session topics.

Do you feel that you had the opportunity to contribute to the discussions in the sessions?



93% of the YIC strongly agreed or agreed that they felt they'd had the opportunity to contribute to discussions during the sessions.

Do you feel that your ideas were listened to?



88% of the YIC strongly agreed or agreed that they felt their ideas were listened to across the 4 main sessions.

Figure 1: Extracted graphs from Sessions 1-4 feedback form responses; YIC 2023

2. How did the Young Innovators Council 2023 give value to the young people taking part?

- i. **Enhancing opportunities:** over 83% (or $\frac{5}{6}$) of the YIC told us that they have evidenced (or intend to evidence) their role on the council in various applications and awards, including:
 - CVs
 - UCAS
 - Job applications
 - Work experience applications
 - Duke of Edinburgh Award
 - Academic summer camp applications

- ii. **Business insight:** When recruiting to the Young Innovators Council, it is our aim that the young people:
 - “Gain an increased understanding of the working of a major utility company.”
 - “Learn from the session materials and industry experts, to increase their knowledge about the UK energy infrastructure.”

The following offers some examples of *how* the YIC’s business understanding and learning has changed this year, in their own words.

How do you think your business knowledge and view of Northern Gas Networks has changed because of your time on the YIC?

It’s been good to listen to NGN's ideas for the future and their investment into greener energies.

Before I didn't know much about Northern Gas Networks or their environmental impact, but now I know lots of things about what they are trying to do in terms of emerging strategies.

I didn't really know much about NGN before the YIC and enjoy learning about the hydrogen home and everything they do.

I now understand that some gas suppliers are investing in newer technology in order to battle the climate crisis, which I hadn't seen or heard of before.

My knowledge on Northern Gas Networks and the gas network in general has expanded.

I have gained more knowledge on how Northern Gas Networks works.

I understand how complicated change is for a large business like NGN.

It's made me think of real-world issues businesses need to face.

I've gained a lot of knowledge on the industry and NGN’s plans and how they're changing with our ideas

I think I have been able to find out about different parts of NGN’s business and how big it is.

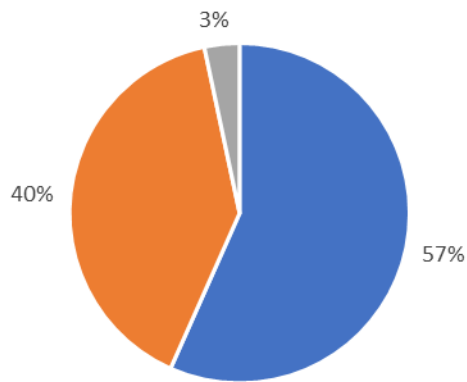
I view NGN as a more environmentally conscious company.

It has changed massively, there were a lot of things regarding the whole sector which I didn't know or even knew existed until now. I also found out how many different branches there are to NGN.
Expanded my knowledge on the topics discussed and given me a well-rounded understanding.
I understand the impact a lot more.
I've gained a wider insight about NGN, and it's helped me under how crucial feedback is to a company.
Increased - I feel more knowledgeable now
I have learnt a lot about the work that NGN does and how the gas is delivered.
I understand what Northern Gas Networks does a lot better now, and how companies could operate to ensure sustainability and benefits for its customers.
I think it has improved as now I understand a lot more about the functionality of energy businesses.
It's improved, I definitely feel like I know way more now.
It's helped me learn that there will always be challenges and new problems to face when you are in a business, no matter how much you try to solve problems. Despite this what matters the most is trying to overcome them, staying resilient and positive about it, and thinking about how the positive side can over weigh the negatives.
I have a slightly better idea of what a business wants to achieve, but what it can realistically achieve due to finances and resources.
Quite a lot in a positive way.
Improved dramatically.
I think my business knowledge has been broadened a little bit, as I now have a better understanding of all the smaller intricacies of a business like NGN. This will undoubtedly help me in the future, but I wouldn't say I've gained much more business knowledge when it comes to running one myself. My view of Northern Gas Networks has been changed though, from something initially boring to something that has a lot more thought behind it, e.g. behind things like the robot compared to the engineers and vans most people see out and about.
It has given me more understanding of the works going on and better about the sustainability aspects.
I think I have a clearer understanding of the difference NGN and the companies that we as consumers deal with. I now understand that they all lead back to one company so we as consumers get to choose who the middle man is but the gas itself comes from one place. I also understand more the considerations businesses need to make when starting new projects or changing the way they do certain things.
For the better, it has really given me a better understanding of how businesses operate.
I feel informed at how gas works impact the world.

Table 3; YIC's business knowledge; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

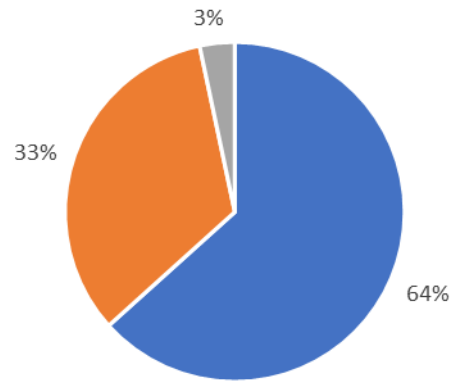
iii. **Skills development:** How do you think the below skills have improved through your time on the YIC 2023?

Listening



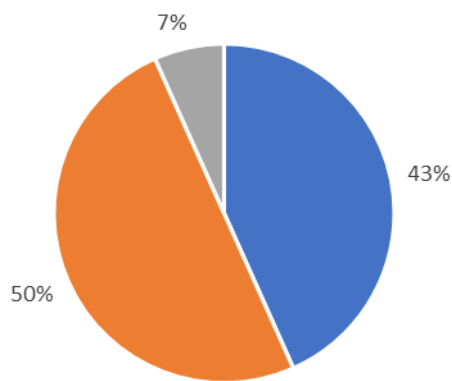
■ Greatly ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all

Speaking



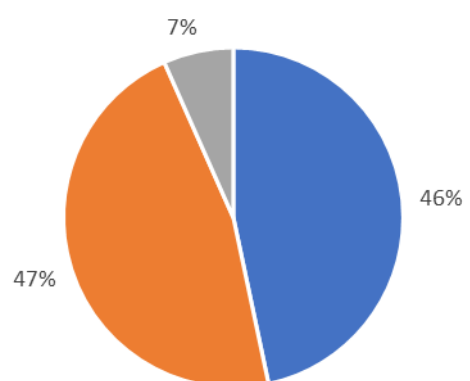
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Problem solving



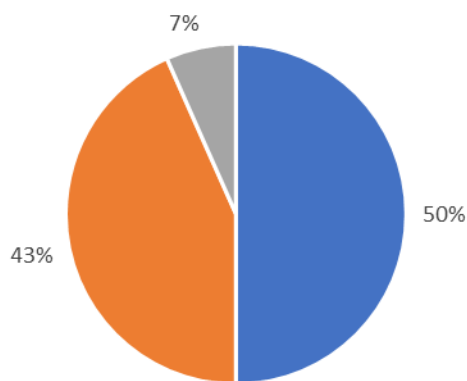
■ Greatly ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all

Creativity



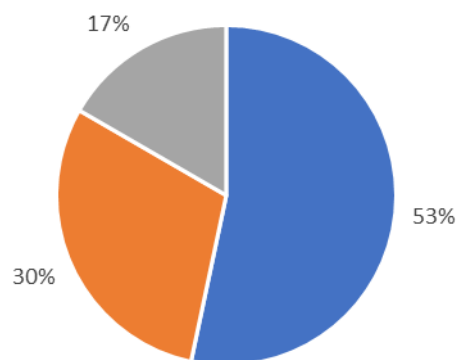
■ Greatly ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all

Staying positive



■ Greatly ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all

Aiming high



■ Greatly ■ Somewhat ■ Not at all

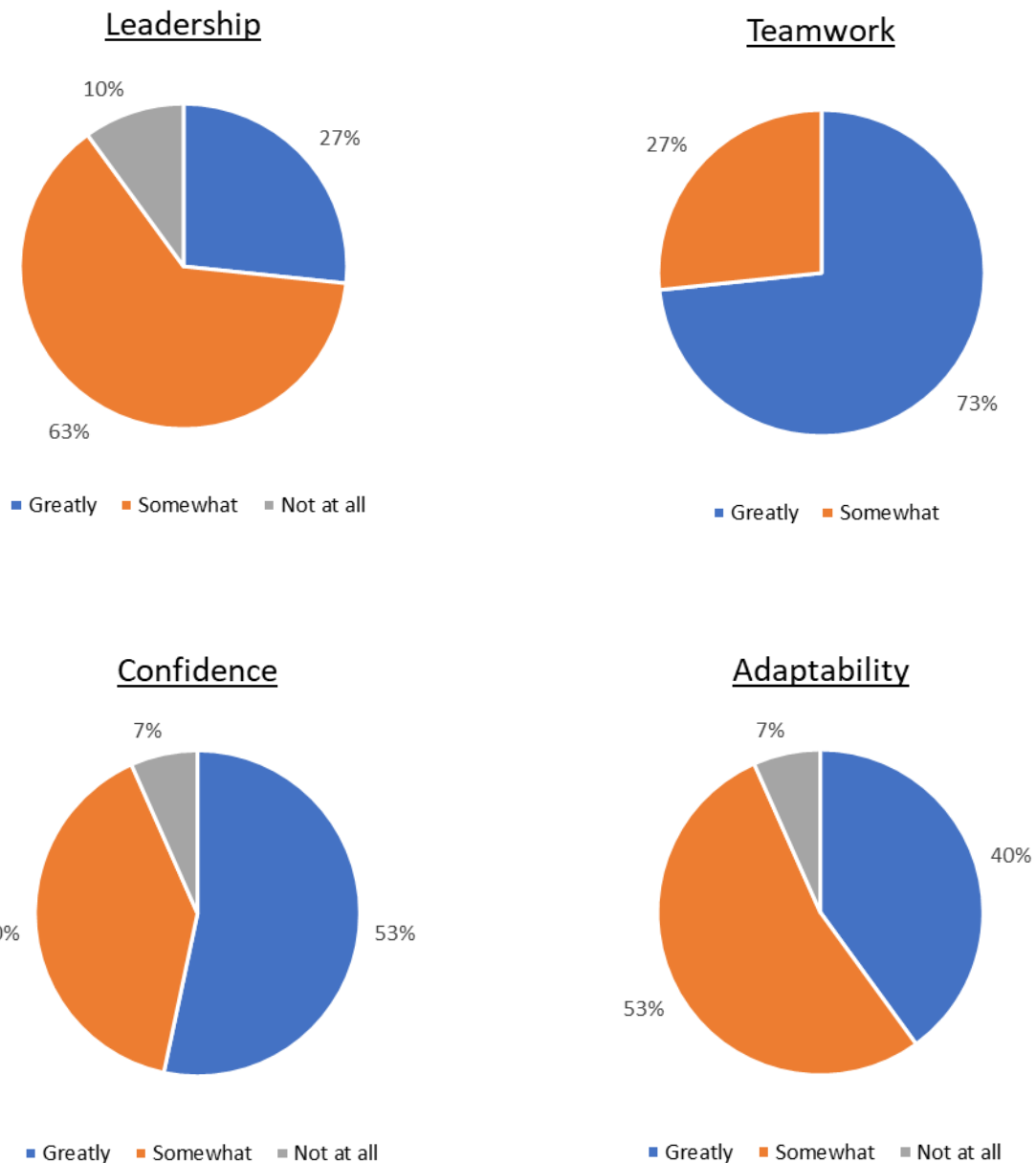


Figure 2; YIC's skills; extracted graphs from Sessions 1-4 feedback form responses; YIC 2023

The above skills align with Solutions for the Planet’s Youth Insights programme [Skills Builder Partnership](#) accreditation. A large majority of the YIC felt they had greatly improved across most of these key skills, especially in communicating, teamwork and confidence. Two areas where they could have experienced a greater sense of improvement are aiming high and leadership. This is somewhat understandable, given that inclusive group discussions are encouraged throughout the sessions, and these are led by facilitators. There are opportunities for YIC members to nominate themselves to feed back to the whole group, and perhaps more opportunities could be embedded for the young people to lead the activities and discussions.

All these skills are demonstrated in Tables 4-7 below, in which the YIC explain in their own words the impact the council has had on them this year, and what they would like to share with future members of the YIC.

- iv. **Career development:** Over 36% (or $\frac{1}{3}$) of the YIC 2023 told us that being a part of the council this year had an influence on their education choices or career aspirations:

Has being on the YIC influenced any of your education choices or career aspirations?
I always wanted to look into the gas industry, but the YIC opened my eyes more to the future and greener energies.
I've taken a greater interest in the world around us and learning about the different ways we can help change the world and innovate our planet, even if it is only small scale at first. It's shown me how much I love the environment/geography related things.
Applied for (and have offers for!) degrees in chemical engineering and renewable energy engineering!
Influenced me to explore other options in higher education.
I picked A-level Geography due to my increase in interest of carbon sustainability.
Looking into sustainability/energy sector jobs.
By learning about NGN and the roles of NGN I think it has had a huge impact on my choices, for example NGN sustainability could be my backup plan.
I've always wanted to study natural sciences, so maybe YIC will have helped with this, veering me towards earth and climate science, but it's too soon to tell honestly.
By showing the difference in stereotypes to reality.
I would like to specialise in environmental economics at university.

Table 4; YIC's career development; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

v. Learning and experience:

What has been your favourite thing about being part of the YIC this year?
The meeting in Leeds was fun to meet everyone and learn more about the energy industry and robots.
The day at Leeds where we all got to take part in activities and talk to each other.
Learning about how a gas supplier operates was interesting and eye-opening. Spending time with everyone on the council was also enjoyable.
I quite liked the group interview meeting where we came up with solutions to the problem with the gas leak in a town.
Being able to work with so many amazing people and learning new things.
Understanding the corporate structure and workings of NGN.
I really like how interactive every session is.
The meetup!
Talking to people in the business and finding out about many different roles.
Session 4, enjoyed the discussions.
I've loved the discussions.
Meeting new people.
Meeting up and having so fun with the group.
Engaging discussions and Fran being such a G.O.A.T.
Despite not being able to attend all sessions, the new ideas I have seen have been amazing! It seems like it has been a much more interactive year, I really enjoyed the icebreaker questions too!

The pipe fixing robot that I got the chance to drive.
Getting to see how our talks and suggestions are actually being taken on by the company.
Meeting everyone and forming friendships, learning more about sustainability.
The people.
I've missed a lot of meetings, but always find people, especially Fran, so welcoming and friendly. Hydrogen technologies have been a theme throughout my time at YIC that I've enjoyed learning about, and future potential uses.
Hearing what ideas other people have and how creative and innovative some people can be. Sharing what I think about certain things - it really improved my confidence when people heard what I had to say and actually thought it to be meaningful.
The enthusiasm and atmosphere created in the sessions.
My favourite thing has been the exposure to people from many backgrounds across the country and their views on the topics discussed in the YIC meetings. I have found this incredibly useful because it has developed my ability to defend my own ideas while being welcome to others too.
I liked the style of talking through breakout rooms so you can feel more comfortable as your in smaller groups.
Leeds meetup.
Feeling like I as a young person have been able to make changes and give my opinion in a big company like NGN. I think it has been really eye-opening to see how these companies work and the ways in which we can make changes, especially regarding the environment.
Being able to hear the opinions of peers and like-minded people. And contributing towards a bigger project.
I enjoyed the trip/conference.

Table 5; YIC's learning and experience; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

What's the biggest thing you have learned through your role on the YIC this year?
How much NGN takes on in advice from the council.
The transitioning of energy.
I have become aware of the different things that NGN is doing to give us a better future.
How a gas supplier works and operates.
I've learned a lot in general about the environment and what companies do to combat climate change.
About environmentally friendly ways to provide energy.
I've learnt more about the costs of things and how NGN actually do the practical stuff they deliver.
Net 0 and its challenges.
I've learned that NGN isn't just a gas business, but a business as a whole and how it runs.
I've learned that NGN actually is a company that cares about what their consumers think.
How companies deal with the changing world.
Gas pipes are being replaced with plastic ones to avoid leakages.
The number of job roles there are in NGN.
Future energies and future planning.
How NGN works and the considerations they have to make to keep all parties happy.

The impact of what we do every day.
How much of an impact we can actually have.
How to create different ideas and be able to be vocal with any knowledge that I'd like to share.
Just how to maintain a positive, open-minded way of thinking.
How similar most people's ideas are and how quickly you can get into arguments over semantics.
Group work skills.
I've definitely improved in my communication skills and thinking on the spot, it has given me more confidence.
I need to be more confident when in the sessions, sometimes I fear I sit back too much.
How to work effectively as a team to bring together ideas and suggestions.
I believe the skills I've gained through these sessions had the biggest impact on me. I never expected myself to gain the confidence to speak in front of many people who I haven't really met but I believe this is all because of the positive welcoming by the staff.
How any idea that I may have may actually be beneficial as other people can comment on it and find ways to improve it and take it further.
How to communicate ideas to a group of people effectively.
The impact of our voices.
I would say the biggest thing that I have learnt... the fact that I've developed debate and discursive skills in groups of people, which is really good because it simulates future work/ study environments that I haven't yet experienced, where there'd be many different people with different thoughts.
I feel more confident now at speaking out in a zoom meeting and with people I don't know.

Table 6; YIC's learning and experience; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

What advice would you give to new YIC members for 2024?
Give it a chance, it will grow your confidence.
To share honest opinions and ask questions.
Not to be afraid to voice your opinions, everyone has different ideas and they could be great ideas that are worth trying out.
Keep going to these sessions, they are every interesting and you learn something new every session and the YIC helps to widen your connections in the world of work and expertise.
Enjoy the experience and don't be afraid to speak your mind.
Always be prepared to learn something new!
Enter with an open mind and a willingness to converse and discuss.
Don't be scared to get involved. The more you participate in the activities, the more you get out of it.
It's such a great opportunity to learn more about such an important part of our lives. You gain so much knowledge and it's such a unique and important experience.
Prepare as much as you can for the sessions so you can get the most out of it and contribute more.
Talk to everyone, make sure to contribute and listen because you'll learn heaps.
Enjoy the time, take the information on board and learn from it.

Don't be scared to give your opinions.
Get involved and never be scared to put something out there or ask, as no doubt someone will be thinking the same thing.
Don't be shy.
100% take part!
It's an amazing year and it provides you with so much knowledgeable on the industry!
Enjoy it and take everything in.
Go for it!
Everyone's opinion is valid and wanted in any given conversation, don't be afraid to share.
Have fun and enjoy it!
Just try and join in even if you don't fully know what going on.
Don't feel shy about your ideas even if you think it might be silly because your small ideas/contributions can really make a huge difference to this planet as well as the people.
Share your ideas, even if you think they may not be realistic or achievable, it's still fun to see what other people can do with it.
You might be nervous at first but after the first session you'll be fine :)
Say whatever your thinking and don't be afraid to build on or respectfully challenge another's opinion.
I would tell them to get stuck in, to use every opportunity possible to give your thoughts (because they matter)... You've signed up for YIC to make a difference, so do your best to do that, and actively participate.
Don't be afraid to share ideas.
Take part in conversations and discussions and always ask the representatives of NGN any questions you have because you want to get the most out of every meeting.
Don't be afraid to speak on the calls. It's not scary at all.

Table 7; YIC's learning and experience; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

Describe this year's Young Innovators Council in 3 words:



Figure 3; Word cloud; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

3. How has the Young Innovators Council 2023 met expectations?

Young Innovators Council feedback

Do you have suggestions on how to improve the YIC?
There could be more varied activities and more sessions.
More variety in sessions, not just assemble, breakout rooms, summary.
More pre-information.
Perhaps share more knowledge on the topic we will be discussing in the session as not everyone has knowledge on how businesses are run and what work NGN does and whom it provides for.
If meetings were easier; I was unable to use the Slido or add to the mind maps when on Zoom.
More collaboration, e.g. breakout rooms.
Longer sessions or breakout rooms and time for everyone in the group to feedback, as sometimes it's the same people doing it and they only feedback their ideas.
Have meetings that are shorter but more often.
Shorter sessions might be more efficient and engaging.
Shorter meetings, possibly more frequently.
The meetings could be slightly shorter and more frequent because they tend to go on for a while after school which doesn't give time to do other things.
It also tends to be a lot of discussion work rather than maybe a group quiz that we do. Something like the 'Faketown' example in the first session was really nice because rather than each person giving individual experiences, we were all talking about one situation so it was more anchored to the topic rather than it be open ended discussion.
The information also tends to be repeated at the end when break out rooms are reporting back so it could be nice to give each group a subtopic so when everyone comes back at the end, we have more discussion points to give back to NGN. It would also be nice to see the effects of our conversations, like any changes NGN do for example in their customer service as per our meeting or how they use that information in their consultations.
Is there a way that people could be in contact with each other outside the sessions? This may allow people to be less nervous when interacting with the session and could possibly improve the outcome.
Maybe more SMS communication as well as emails. For people who don't check emails.
Collaborative online workspace for everyone, e.g. MS Teams.
I think that more face-to-face meetings would work best because the team building exercises we did were really good and as a social person I found it much easier to interact with people when I could talk to them and read them. I also think that the meetings could start with more of a 'this is NGN's problem, discuss how to solve it', before we get given any information. This could be done as a starter to get ideas going which people can then think about during the lecture-style part of the session from the professional, followed by longer group work at the end. I think there'd be more creative ideas this way because people would be encouraged to use intuition even when they know little about the topic.
Any chance for more in person meets?
More in person meetings.
I think YIC is amazing as it is, however maybe we could have an end of YIC mini award ceremony for the contribution and for the hardworking members of Solutions for the Planet.

Table 8; YIC's expectations; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

Are there areas of NGN's business that you would like to explore more of?
Contact with suppliers.
Giving school leavers a chance of apprenticeships would be in my mind more helpful for both young people and for NGN to have home grown workforce.
The personal side really interests me, i.e., the way that the company interacts with their customers and meets their needs.
Customer interaction
Customer engagement
People and public relationships
The economic impacts of projects on people and the environment.
Environmental impact
Environment
Minimising pollution and the effect NGN has the environment.
What is being done for the future environmentally friendly NGN, other than hydrogen.
Sustainability, repairing and replacement of gas pipes.
Changed in demand for gas as more people buy electric coolers.
Areas that aren't progressing as fast as others towards net zero.
I would like to look more into the science behind renewability and progress made in that field by NGN.
The engineering and continued updates about the hydrogen plans.
Hydrogen power
More about tech that they are investing in.
More technical side of their operations.
Transferring how the gas gets from the supplier to NGN and from NGN to the consumer (possibly not through mains pipes)
The more scientific stuff on where the gas comes from.
Sciencey/gas bit – or the finance between distribution of gas
Maybe real-life projects (ongoing, future one or ones that have been anonymous).
More of the business management side, how everything is coordinated. Who decides the order of importance.

Table 9; YIC's expectations; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire; YIC 2023

Facilitator and Witness feedback

How has the relationship between NGN and the YIC evolved in the time that you've been facilitating.
They are able to be more open and critical of us with their familiarity and connection grows
Still appears to be a very strong relationship delivering value for both sides.
I think it has got stronger. They recognise members of NGN each time and you can tell they come out of their shells a bit more.

What do you think could be improved about the YIC?
Better facilitation
More volunteers across the business to have input from a range of colleagues.
Potentially look to increase engagement with our innovation team through project delivery, could get some more project specific inputs/sessions on specific technologies.
Not much! Maybe a mid-year meet up to encourage working relationships with everyone?

Do you have ideas for how else we might engage with the YIC during the sessions, and/or throughout the YIC year?

Trialling using both a facilitator and a YIC member to lead discussions and engagement, giving them both new experiences and learning but allowing the groups to engage differently with their peers.

From the innovation team, it could involve planned engagements with specific projects.

Maybe a second catch up, or hold one of the sessions during the day somewhere within the network?

Why do you think it is important that young people's perspectives are listened to through engagement like this?

Young people are the future, they may have little to do with decisions made today due to issues in society and ageism but they will be living with our decisions for longer so they should have a say, a direction and a vote in what happens.

It can be refreshing.

Key for the group to understand the future outlook for energy networks, including future opportunities and career paths.

Everything we do, whether it is with BAU or Energy Futures, is for their future, to ensure we are a business they can be proud of. It is important to listen to what their beliefs are to ensure we start to shape that for our future too.

Tables 10-13; stakeholder and witness expectations; extracted from YIC 2023 end of year questionnaire for stakeholders; YIC 2023

4. Conclusion

The Young Innovators Council 2023 was largely successful in its aims of bringing a demographically representative and diverse youth perspective into Northern Gas Networks, facilitating meaningful engagement between these young people as future customers and NGN's key business decision makers, and having a valuable and tangible impact on the young people who participated.

Where there have been gaps between ONS Census 2021 statistics and representation on the YIC 2023, we will work to improve on these in the next iteration of the YIC. This includes broadening the reach of recruitment materials across NGN's operating footprint, and further conversations with organisations like Skills4Work Gateshead and the National Development Team for Inclusion.

Across the session feedback forms and the end of year questionnaire, both the YIC and facilitators have provided some excellent suggestions for evolutions or improvements they'd like to see in the practical delivery of the sessions, all of which will be explored by Northern Gas Networks and Solutions for the Planet in planning for the YIC 2024. These mostly cover things such as session length and utilisation of the technology, and naturally there are some contradictions across the board. For example, several young people called for shorter sessions that are more frequent, whilst the same number would like to see longer sessions with more time for detailed discussion.

Something that has been requested repeatedly throughout the YIC 2023, from both the young people and the NGN stakeholders, has been the possibility for more face-to-face time. It is acknowledged that online delivery of the Young Innovators Council remains the most accessible way to reach young people from across the very wide geographical spread of NGN's operations. However, it is also clear that the YIC take huge value from meeting in person, with NGN, S4TP, and with each other; this is something that must definitely be taken into consideration when planning for YIC 2024.

Each of the sessions differed slightly from one another in structure and activities this year, which the YIC definitely responded well to. They fed back that they work well with dynamic and challenging delivery methods, such as quizzes, changing breakout rooms and scenario-based project work. It is important that this is built on in the next year of the YIC. Connected to this, a number of the young people have asked for a space for them to connect and collaborate outside of the YIC sessions. Whilst this is practically a complex ask and one that must be carefully considered, it does speak to their successful engagement with one another and their desire to continue the challenging and rewarding conversations they are participating in.

"It was nice to learn about Northern Gas Networks in depth. I don't think I would have ever acknowledged how much hard work Northern Gas Networks goes through each day to maintain a positive, efficient, stable and reliable company. It was beautiful that we got to learn the challenges the company faces and how each member of NGN tries their best to overcome them. Furthermore, it was really nice to also know that NGN never gives up and always tries to find a solution to all situations. Moreover, I think being part of YIC meant that I was able to learn resilience, confidence, communication, active listening, creative skills, analytical skills and problem solving, which I believe is so important wherever we go. Therefore, being part of YIC meant that I had a special role and was able to be part of an incredible experience. Thank you once again for the opportunity."

[YIC member]

"Being a facilitator within the YIC community is so beneficial. We are sometimes so tunnel visioned that sometimes we forget to look outside the box a little bit. The ideas and conversations shared with YIC really open your eyes and they are such a great group to work with!"

[NGN Facilitator]

"Really enjoyed engaging with the YIC in 2023, found it extremely valuable to have the opportunity to talk with customers of the future on our current and future innovation plans on how we deliver a fair energy system transition through researching and developing new technologies."

[NGN Witness]