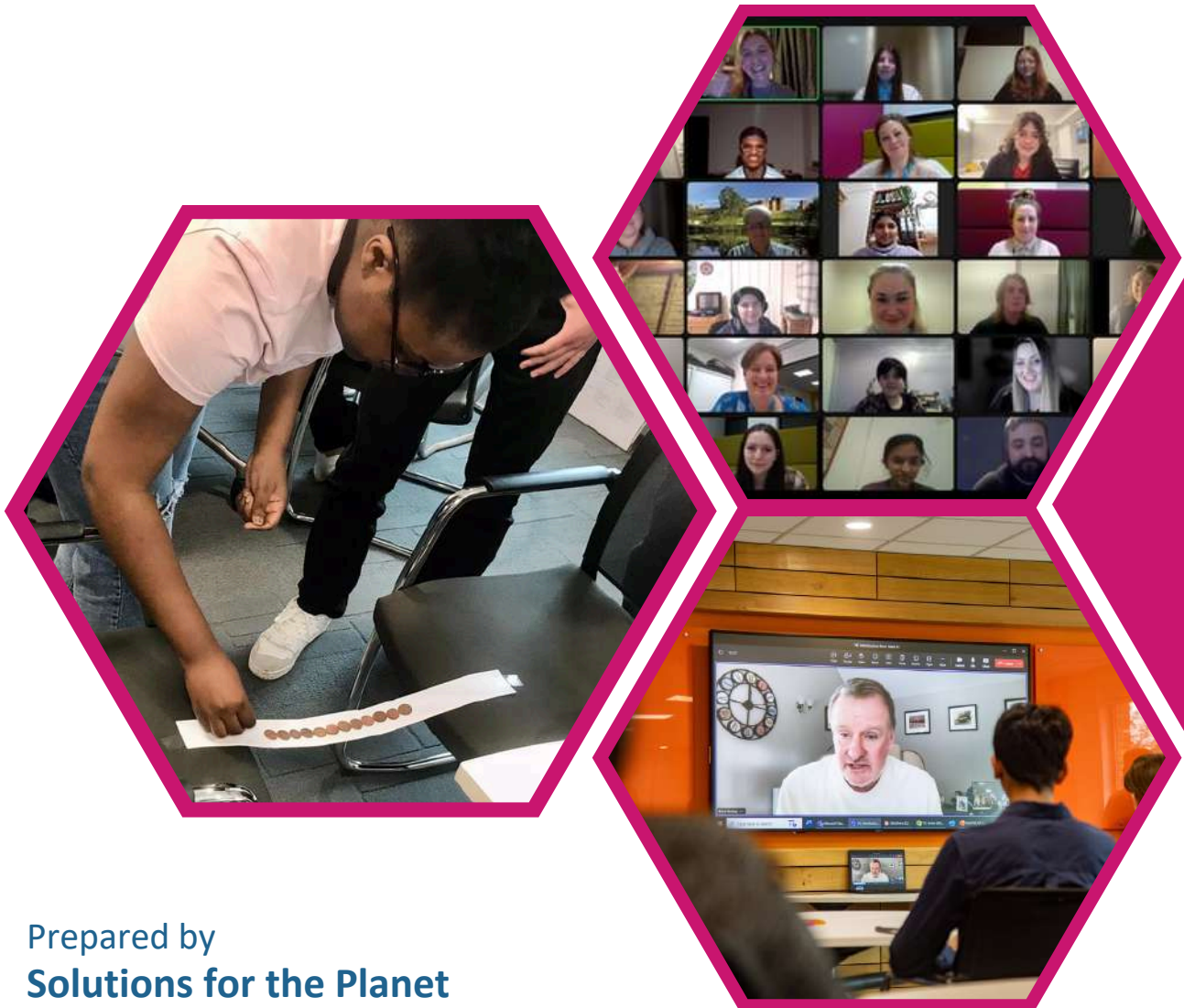




END OF YEAR REPORT 2024



Prepared by
Solutions for the Planet



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern Gas Networks' Young Innovators Council (YIC) is a panel made up of 43 14–19-year-olds (15 continuing on the panel from 2023) from across the footprint of Northern Gas Networks (NGN). The YIC continues to be the voice of young people at Northern Gas Networks. It provides young people's perspectives and Northern Gas Networks ensures these thoughts and opinions are put at the heart of the business' decision making.

The first session was held in person and gave those able to attend an opportunity to meet each other and the wider NGN team.

Five sessions covering the subjects of environmental reporting, a deep dive into the future of energy held over two sessions, vulnerable customers and finally a debate around apprenticeships at Northern Gas Networks were held throughout the year.

The Skills Builder framework is now embedded in the monitoring of the YIC.



“An overall incredibly positive and eye-opening experience that I would fully recommend to anyone with an interest. I think it was such a great opportunity to be involved with a company that operated in a field I am interested in and to feel as though me and other young people are collaborating to make positive change.”

YIC member 2024 3

MAKE UP OF PANEL & RECRUITMENT

The recruitment process for the YIC 2024 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'. Application numbers were high with the overall total being 72. Again, Solutions for the Planet (S4TP) strived to meet demographic targets for NGN's footprint.



PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

Each session continued to build on a cocreation model, with YIC members being given the opportunity to take part in facilitator training this year and continuing to enhance their skills following the Skills Builder framework. Plenary discussions were introduced giving an opportunity for the YIC members to formulate and express their opinions on a variety of subjects.

In the final session, a debate format was trialled which ensured that the YIC members could develop their opinions further by researching viewpoints that may have been different to their own. The YIC is now clearly embedded within NGN's business planning framework and it has continued to influence NGN's new business plan for 2026 – 2031. Two alumni of the YIC have progressed to join NGN's Independent Stakeholder Group, providing focus to future customers' needs and preferences and holds NGN accountable for its business plan outputs and commitments.



Being heard as a young person is more difficult than ever... I believe we need to stand up and encourage the vocality of our thoughts and interests. Often problems, such as the cost-of-living crisis impact, are not considered for younger people.



YIC member 2024

SESSION DETAILS

Session Date	Session Subject	Witnesses
Session 1 February 2024	Getting to know you & environmental reporting (In person)	Neil Whalley - Head of Environment and Sustainability, NGN
Session 2 March 2024	The future of energy – decarbonising our communities	Maggie Bosanquet - Net Zero Team Leader, Durham County Council Sajalu Greenall - Energy Strategy Manager, NGN
Session 3 May 2024	The future of energy, part 2 – ‘low-risk’ approaches	Sajalu Greenall - Energy Strategy Manager, NGN
Session 4 July 2024	Vulnerability Strategy	Laura Ratcliffe - Vulnerability Lead, NGN
Session 5 September 2024	NGN’s Apprenticeship Offering	Claire Allcock - HR Director, NGN Chris Adair - Training and Apprenticeship Manager, NGN

I was given amazing insights into how NGN runs and how it interacts with young people and the general public. The YIC allows young people to feel responsibility for changes made on a national level.

Session 1 – Getting to know you & environmental reporting

Objectives

- That YIC members understand and feel confident they know the basic role of NGN: distributing gas to people's homes.
- That all members get to know one another and the facilitators and feel comfortable.
- To have agreed a set of common guidelines for the council in conversation.
- To host Session 1 discussions about NGN and some of their environmental responsibilities.

YIC's key recommendations (in no particular order)

When explaining particularly statistical or scientific information, e.g., gigawatts of CO₂, the YIC said that using real world examples does help with understanding, as would the use of graphs and infographics.

When targets around emissions are not met by Northern Gas Networks, the YIC want the business to be transparent and honest. NGN should NOT change the targets, neither does the YIC believe that NGN should 'offset' missed targets retrospectively. There was little appetite for the idea of tree planting to offset missed targets as the YIC felt that the timeframes did not match the urgency of the situation. The YIC believe that NGN should maintain focus on missed targets, and one option was to internally offset by reducing leakages from pipes.

When asked about the level of influence young people should have on NGN's agendas as opposed to bill paying customers, the YIC believe that they should have the biggest influence on NGN's environmental and sustainability agendas. They strongly believe that these issues will not only affect them directly but also overarch many other issues, such as cost and innovation.

Creating a group agreement

15 minutes



What expectations do you have for:

- Yourself on the YIC?
- Other people on the YIC?
- Northern Gas Networks?

Write each new point on a different post-it note. Talk about it in pairs and with your table.

We'll share our priorities, and turn these into a group agreement for the year ahead

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Summary of response from Northern Gas Networks

- We will include relatable, real world examples in our environmental reporting moving forward to help our stakeholders visualise the data.
- We will review the possibility of developing innovative ways to compensate the environment if we miss an element of our carbon reduction targets as an alternative to traditional offsetting schemes.
- We have agreed to buy our first 10 electric vans and will look to purchase more in the future if their deployment is successful
- We are exploring the possibility of deploying hydrogen vehicles.



Session 2 - The future of energy – decarbonising our communities

Objectives

- For YIC members to begin to understand the concept of energy decarbonisation in communities.
- To understand what the YIC imagine a decarbonised energy community might look like and include.
- To identify what a just transition might include: who should pay what, and when?

YIC's key thoughts (in no particular order)

The Young Innovators Council 2024 are preoccupied with the financial cost of the energy transition, and more specifically their focus on low-income families and consumers in vulnerable positions. Many of the comments throughout the discussions referred to affordability, disruption to the individual and a just transition. These complicated factors are often the source of any opposition or hesitation from the YIC. Interestingly, some of the YIC are conscious of employment ramifications within the industry, thinking forward to their career choices.

The YIC perceive the sheer scale of the transition, regardless of the chosen direction, to be a huge challenge that NGN need to confront straight away. They feel strongly that this can't be in isolation, but should be in partnership with other GDN's and the wider energy sector. For example, they questioned why the general public isn't seeing what is currently happening more widely, why the discussion isn't being promoted.

It is very revealing that the YIC don't believe these to be in the public domain yet. One young person commented that we have a "louder voice together, making it clear where the pressure needs to be put on."



Would a hydrogen-based network be reliant on changes within homes and businesses?

Answer from NGN: Yes! We would need to upgrade appliances in homes. This is something that has been produced now but is not yet readily available to buy. The transition should be made easier with hydrogen ready appliances when they are available.

Will moving homes onto hydrogen and electricity as their primary sources have a financial impact on communities?

Answer from NGN: Large scale changes tend to have some sort of financial implication. It is unclear how big or small this impact will be, at this current stage. Government energy policy decisions will provide better information.

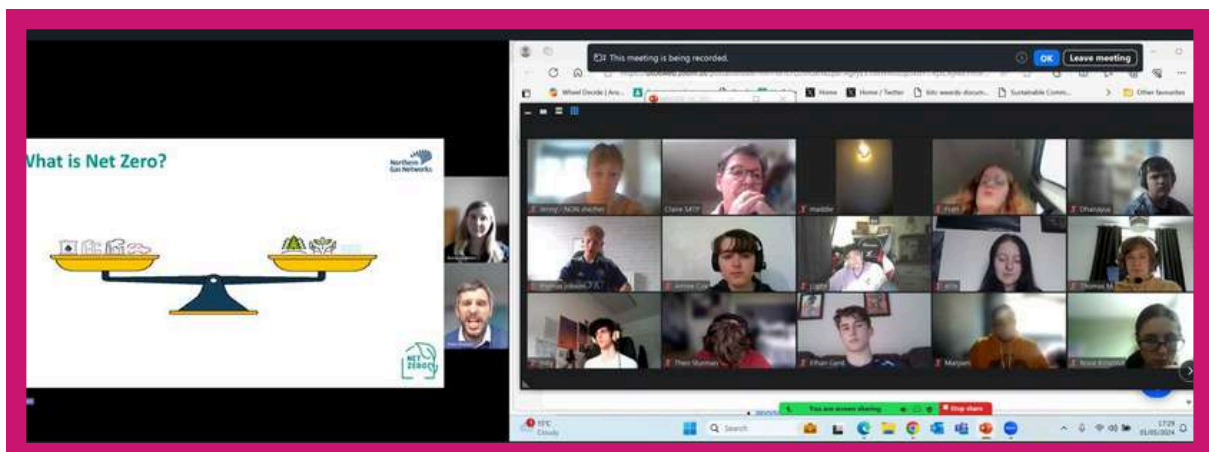
What would happen if people were against these goals and ideas for the future of energy?

Answer from NGN: Public perception is a key element for enabling net zero and might be a factor in the way government makes its decision.

Isn't hydrogen a big risk?

Answer from YIC member: No more than natural gas.

Answer from NGN: Hydrogen does have a risk, just the same as using methane or petrol/diesel, etc. We have carried out in-depth projects to look at risks of using hydrogen and produced mitigations around using it.



Objectives

- To help clarify the net zero future and NGN’s potential role within it, for the YIC members.
- To understand the YIC’s perspectives on NGN’s priorities for future energy in GD3.

YIC’s key recommendations (in no particular order)

This session was a particularly dynamic response from the YIC to NGN’s key questions. Most of the young people did understand that taking a pragmatic approach until key governmental energy strategies are decided is reasonable.

Having said that, they also made it very clear that NGN has a key role in driving forward the net zero agenda by partnering with other organisations around research and development of new technologies, educating around net zero, continuing to develop low carbon alternatives to natural gas and leading by example in the move towards net zero. Many of the YIC felt that although many decisions are, and should be made nationally, a local approach to energy production would be a more just transition that would take into account local needs and local opportunities.

The YIC were clear that NGN should not give up or defer innovation and should in fact lead other organisations in a whole systems approach to net zero whilst taking a pragmatic approach to decarbonisation in the very near future. This should not be a long-term plan.

Summary of response from Northern Gas Networks

We agree with your points and understand that you think NGN should be more ambitious. We are now working to triangulate this engagement with insights gathered from our other stakeholder groups, and this will help us to share well as our future focus and direction.



Session 4 - Vulnerability Strategy

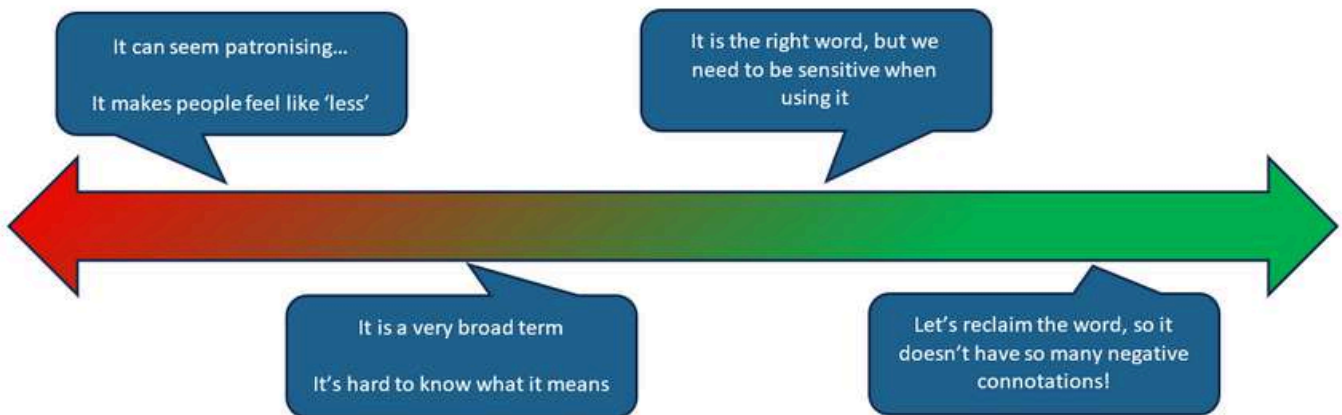
Objectives

- To understand what “vulnerability” and “most at risk” means for future customers
- To understand what “being a customer in a vulnerable situation” looks like to this group of consumers (i.e. is their understanding defined by the definitions established during the Covid era)
- To help identify what future areas of vulnerability might look like for this generation of consumers
- To test our vulnerability strategy with our future customers and stakeholders and identify where we need to amend or adapt our thinking to reflect future customer expectation and needs.

YIC’s key recommendations (in no particular order)

It was clear that supporting vulnerable customers is important to the Young Innovators Council 2024, and they felt that there are ways of continuously improving how Northern Gas Networks do this work. What was also clear is their concern for future customers, and the range of ways in which our changing world will affect them. Their discussion of the terminology used was very interesting and, whilst it didn’t point Northern Gas Networks to a specific answer, it should certainly prompt further reflection in the business.

“Are we disengaging this generation by using the term ‘vulnerable’?”



Summary of response from Northern Gas Networks

Demographic changes: The YIC highlighted that we have an aging population and so this group who may have a range of vulnerabilities will get larger and NGN need to prepare for this.

NGN responded: We have now expanded our VCMA collaborative Age UK project until the end of GD2 and will be supporting phase 2 of The Carer's Room collaborative VCMA project to the end of GD2.

Political Changes: The YIC wanted NGN to be aware of any political changes that could impact on people's vulnerabilities.

NGN Responded: We have looked at how we can support partners such as Age UK and Citizens Advice to raise awareness of changes to eligibility for the Winter Fuel Payment, and have included signposting to support for benefit checks in NGN's recent communication campaigns.

Use of Language: The YIC felt that the word "vulnerability" was very broad and could make it not only difficult for people to identify themselves as "vulnerable" but also risked people misusing the benefits available to them.

NGN Responded: In NGN's new draft strategy we have continued to use the term "vulnerability" but have been specific about who we will support and have clearly defined who we believe to be most at risk. We will also continue to use a three tier model to describe the levels of support offered through our social strategy work to make our commitments more transparent to our customers.

Connecting with customers: The YIC felt that NGN should have a more direct line of communication with customers.

NGN Responded: We have included proposals in our new business plan to establish dedicated mobile community vans to provide direct advice and information to customers.



Session 5 - NGN's Apprenticeship Offer

Objectives

- For the YIC to better understand more about apprenticeships at Northern Gas Networks, the types of opportunities currently available, and the importance of apprenticeships.
- For the YIC to better understand the current challenges that Northern Gas Networks is facing with its apprenticeship offering e.g., struggling to recruit for certain roles, lack of diversity.
- To get the YIC's perspective on the kind of apprenticeship offering that they think would attract people into 'difficult to hire' areas e.g., data, technology, finance, legal.
- To understand how the YIC feel about NGN offering more apprenticeships opportunities, even if there isn't a guaranteed job at the end of it.
- To understand how the YIC feel about focusing on general apprenticeship opportunities rather than specialist ones.
- To understand the types / levels of apprenticeships that the Panel thinks Northern Gas Networks should focus on offering.
- To understand how the YIC feel about Northern Gas Networks using focused recruitment methods to ensure a more diverse set of applicants into their apprenticeships.

Session 5 was full of pros and cons, agreeing and disagreeing, and for and against. The topic really lent itself to asking yes-no questions, and the Menti voting allowed us to capture that quantitative information. Equally, the breakout room discussions ensured that the YIC could also explore the nuances of the topic.

What are the opportunities?

Examples of our Non-operational teams – predominantly based in Leeds & Sunderland

Regulation,
Compliance, Comms &
Engagement

Human Resources

Finance

Legal

3iG
Innovation,
Improvement &
Information

Energy Futures

Commercial &
Procurement

Internal Audit

Apprenticeship Challenges/Opportunities

- Attractiveness of the sector
- Diversity of applicants
- How we recruit/where we recruit/systems & reporting
- Maximising apprenticeships – degree and graduate link
- Should we go further?

YIC's key recommendations (in no particular order)

1. Think about offering more broader apprenticeships, that offer experience across the business. This is especially beneficial to those who aren't yet sure what direction they want to take but are keen to gain employability skills and work experience.
2. There is still great value in the focused apprenticeship roles, for those who have a clearer idea of their career, because it's more direct and they won't be wasting their time and efforts.
3. Consider offering more apprenticeship opportunities even if there isn't a guaranteed job at the end of it. The YIC reference a lack of options available to them, and a role like this would still allow them to gain valuable skills and knowledge that they could take elsewhere.
4. There is still a place for apprenticeships that guarantee a job at the end. The YIC also understand the competition for finding full-time roles and feel that a guaranteed job would lead to greater motivation.
5. Keep focusing on lower-level apprenticeships, which will allow people to get to the know the business sooner.



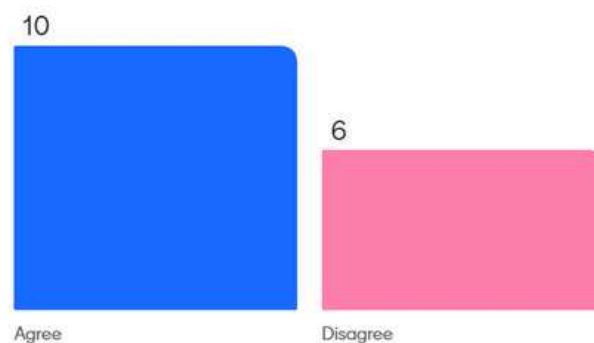
6. Consider how to ensure that apprenticeship roles are accessible to those with additional needs. The specific conversation at this Session referred to a physical need, but this could be extended into neurodiversity and emotional and mental health needs.

7. The business should be focusing on increasing diversity, because it brings benefits in terms of decision-making, reputation amongst customers and employees, and possibly even financial benefits as a result.

8. Light-touch targeted recruitment could be a solution that helps underrepresented groups feel more confident in applying to Northern Gas Networks. If they see an opportunity targeted at them, then they'd think 'the business wants me!'.

9. Care should be taken in not moving into positive discrimination by not recruiting people just because you are trying to increase diversity. The YIC mentioned high profile cases of this and noted the reputation damage it would cause.

"NGN should use targeted recruitment / positive action in order to encourage a more diverse set of candidates to their roles"



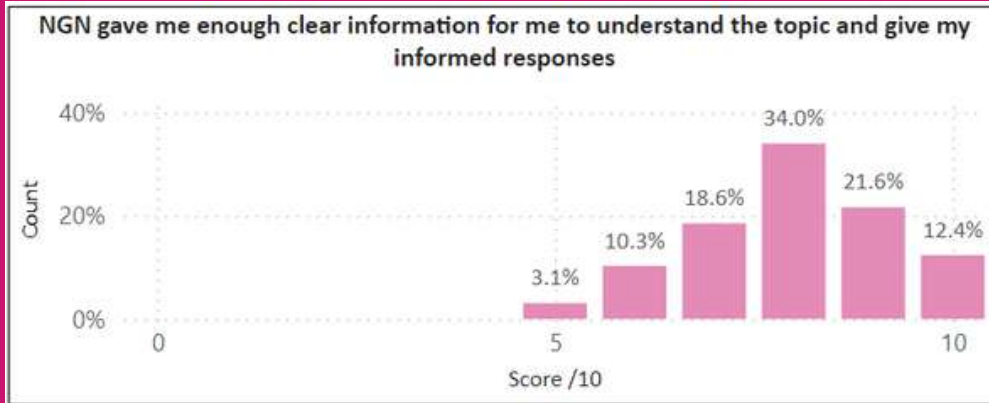
It could be done to subtly encourage people from different backgrounds to apply, but that doesn't mean the jobs should only be targeted at one group.



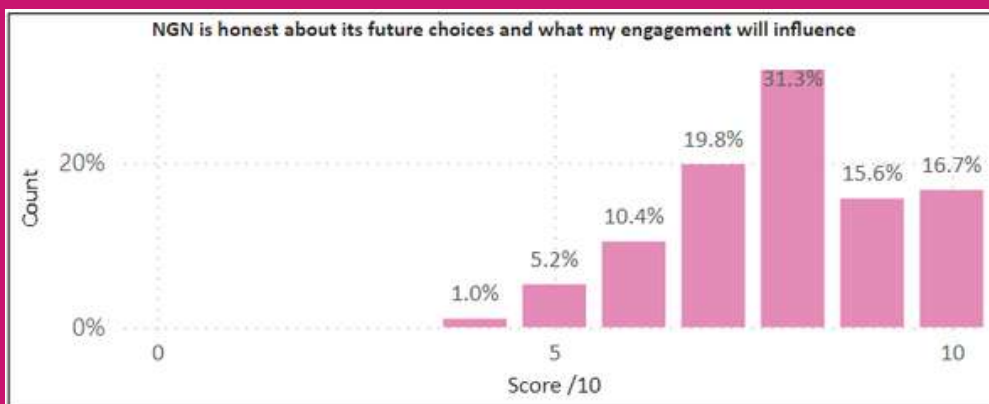
IMPACT

Overall Business Feedback

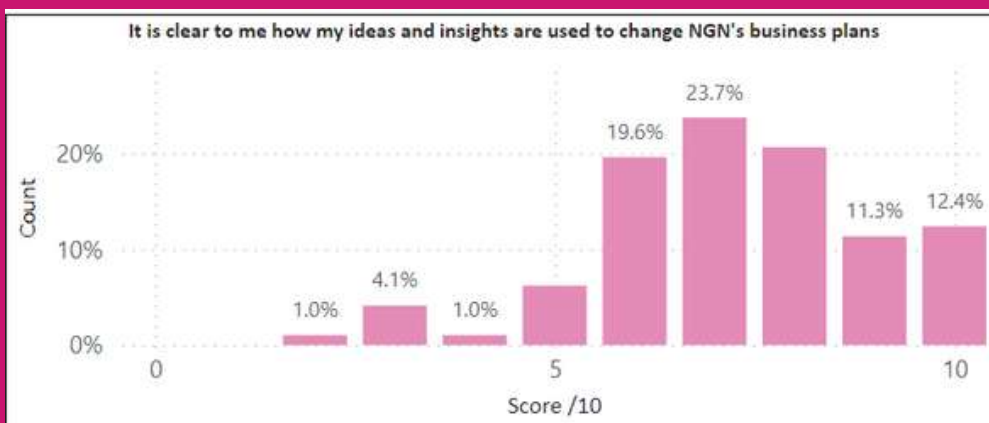
This is out of a total of 102 responses to the surveys, which covers Sessions 1-5.



With an average score of 8/10, the panel thinks that it is getting the right amount of information to give informed views. This year the YIC was given the option of additional reading in their prework email and it is clear that many have read well around the topic to be discussed.



With regards to the ability to influence decisions at NGN, the average score was 8/10. This tells us that the YIC remains confident that NGN is honest and clear about what it has influence over.



The average score for the statement for this question was 7/10. The 'you said, we did' format is continuing to work well. However, in order to increase the satisfaction we might want to consider doing an update from all the previous sessions during the final meeting of the YIC.

I've enjoyed being on the YIC, it's interesting to see how our ideas impact Northern Gas Networks and how they respond to our feedback. We have an opportunity to impact what NGN does.

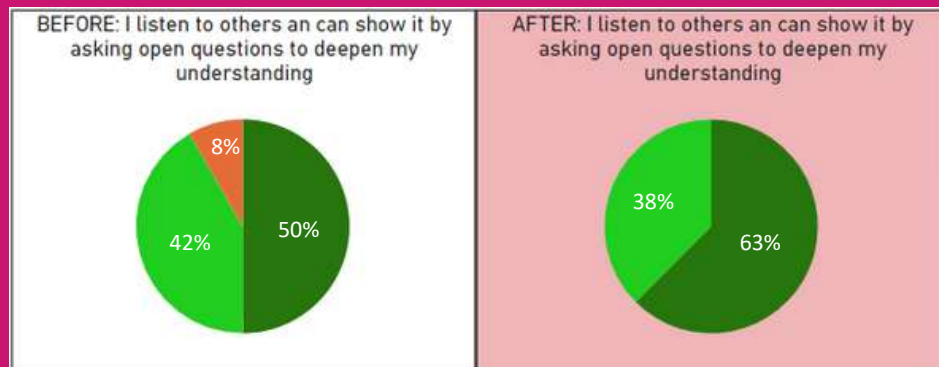


S4TP uses the Skills Builder Framework to assess the types and levels of skills that the young people are developing by being on the YIC. The Youth Insights Programme is helping young people develop their skills at level 3. In the workplace, the Skills Builder Universal Framework can be used to support personal and professional development as well as improve leadership skills of both individuals and their teams. Businesses can also use the Framework in their recruitment practices, as well as in outreach and work experience programmes.

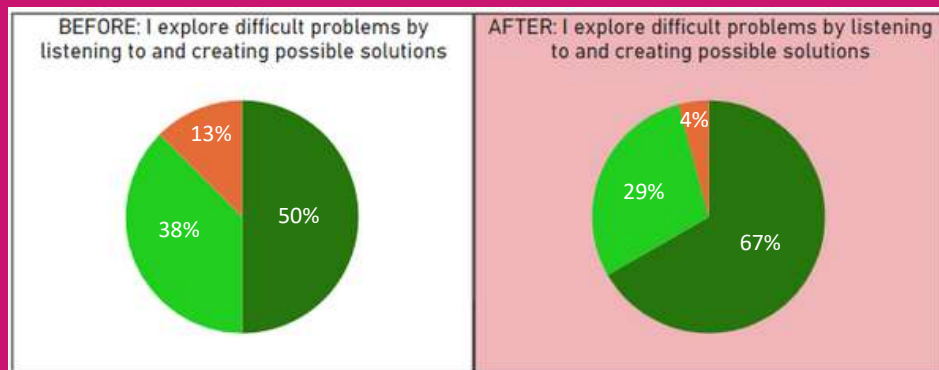
In our surveys this year, we asked the YIC how often they demonstrated certain skills. We asked them at the beginning of the year, and then again after Session 5.



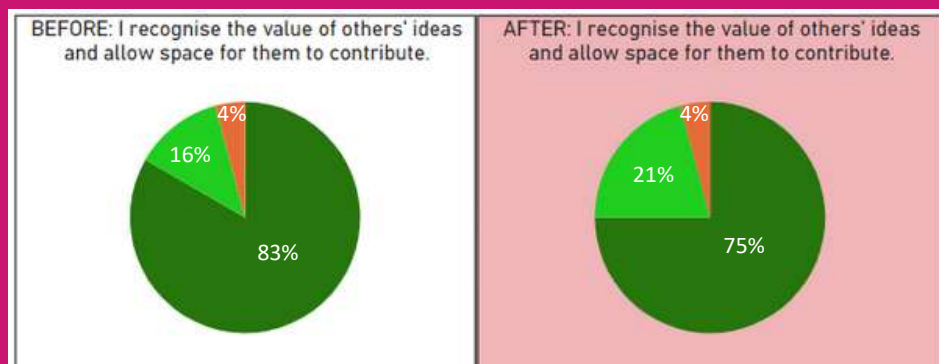
The left side show feelings BEFORE and the right side AFTER taking part in the YIC.



Listening skills:
There has been an increase in confidence, with all members saying that they often or almost always use this skill. The breakout rooms and plenaries are used to develop these skills.



Similarly, for problem solving, the data shows an increase in those who almost always use this skill. NGN presents various challenges for the YIC to solve.



When it comes to recognising the value of others' ideas, we see room for improvement. The newly introduced debate format could help the YIC to practice this skill.

Below, Session 1 covered the more focused topic of how information is presented in Environmental Reporting, whilst Session 2 looked at the broad topic of The Future of Energy. The results below suggest that covering a more complex topic in our relatively short sessions can impact the YIC's belief that they had enough information to give informed responses, and that they felt they could contribute to the discussion. We should continue to reflect on the topics, timings, pre-work and witness input in to the Sessions.

Question	Average Score across all Sessions	Average Score in Session 1: Environmental Reporting	Average Score in Session 2: The Future of Energy - Low Risk Approaches
NGN gave me enough information for me to understand the topic and give my informed responses	7.9	8.8	7.4
I felt I had the opportunity to contribute to the discussions in this session	8.2	9.1	7.7

Another key factor here is that Session 1 took place in-person, which is likely to have impacted the feedback around having the ability to contribute, since virtual sessions can be more challenging for some young people.

Employability Skills

"Gave me a lot of knowledge and life skills such as problem solving, communication..."

"Great, I loved debating and discussing various ideas or solutions to different topics."

Empowering Young People

"Allows young people to feel responsibility for changes made on a national level."

"It's been nice knowing we can influence our future and actually get a say."

How would you summarise your YIC 2024 experience?

NGN Knowledge

"Amazing insights into how NGN runs and how it interacts with young people and the general public."

"Great insights into the work NGN does."

Confidence

"It has greatly improved my self-confidence and ability to speak to people which I am not as familiar with."

"It has helped me come out of my comfort zone."

Industry Knowledge

"Brilliant and very informative in an industry I want to have a career in."

"Helped me develop a deeper understanding of energy and how it is used in the UK and what has to be done and considered."

Following the Session 3, Northern Gas Networks were interested in finding out more about the climate and net zero education of the YIC members. Where were they learning about these topics? Were they satisfied with the learning provided? What was missing from this aspect of their education?



The climate change information we have been taught in school is very limited. Going into the YIC, I had no idea about the scale of the implications.

A lot as part of Business Studies, Media, and Geography.

The topic has been briefly touched about in various subjects such as Personal Development, Biology, Chemistry and Geography

Briefly explained what climate change is in a citizenship lesson.

My current school focuses on engineering, so the environment is an important topic. We talk a lot about it in values lessons, and also had a climate expert come in from Leeds Uni.

This section contains five thought bubbles with white outlines and teal backgrounds. Each bubble contains a snippet of feedback text. The bubbles are arranged in a cluster, with some overlapping. The text inside the bubbles includes: 'The climate change information we have been taught in school is very limited. Going into the YIC, I had no idea about the scale of the implications.', 'A lot as part of Business Studies, Media, and Geography.', 'The topic has been briefly touched about in various subjects such as Personal Development, Biology, Chemistry and Geography', 'Briefly explained what climate change is in a citizenship lesson.', and 'My current school focuses on engineering, so the environment is an important topic. We talk a lot about it in values lessons, and also had a climate expert come in from Leeds Uni.'

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES

The YIC continue to request opportunities for work experience at NGN with 4 members undertaking this opportunity over the last 4 years. As expected the YIC use their experience as evidence for the Duke of Edinburgh Award and as evidence of extra curricula activities for their UCAS forms.

By using the Skillsbuilder Framework it is now possible for the young people to self asses how their skills have been developed over their time on the YIC.

NGN have developed a number of pathways for those who are aging out of the YIC to continue to engage and work with NGN and develop their skills, including joining NGN's Citizens Panel, and a selection of stakeholder groups.



I joined the YIC when I was 16 in Year 12 because I was figuring out what I wanted to do and thought that the council was a great opportunity to gain skills and knowledge about an industry I did not know much about. Not only did the YIC provide me with knowledge on how NGN works, but it also allowed me and everyone in the group to give our opinions and see them being considered within the business. It also allowed me to network with experienced professionals outside and within NGN, which helped me form a much clearer career path. The YIC gave me transferable skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking, which I use not only at the ISG but also at university.

Yvana, YIC alumni and ISG member



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The YIC has now become an integral part of NGN's stakeholder engagement work, with different departments now seeing the benefit of having the input of the YIC into various strategies. Moreover, the panel has fed into the next round of NGN's business planning framework. This is in no small part due to the championing of the work of the YIC within NGN by Jenny Wilkinson, NGN Stakeholder Engagement Lead. Having clear data from four years of panels now enables planning to be increasingly focussed on not only what NGN requires but also on what skills the YIC would like to develop. The systems that are in place to decide the session topics are clear and work well, as do the witness briefings prior to the sessions. The YIC continue to gain both opportunities and skills whilst on the YIC and NGN continue to gain benefit from their continued support of the panel.

S4TP recommends that the YIC session format should continue to include a plenary session and that when appropriate each year the YIC has an opportunity to debate an issue that matters to them. S4TP will continue to record data on the skills that the YIC are improving whilst on the panel and a data meeting will be included prior to the beginning of each YIC year to coordinate data collection. As suggested earlier in the report the YIC may find it useful to have a 'round up of the year' meeting to cover ALL the areas of NGN that the YIC have had an impact on.

The in person meet ups have proved popular and out of the 13 young people who attended the in-person session 12 have chosen to remain on the panel next year, indicating a correlation between in person events and retention.

Several of the YIC have commented that they would like to have more of a leadership role and although the opportunity for training in facilitation skills was available last year several of those interested could not attend due to timings. It is recommended that applicants are asked of their interest in facilitation during the interview/application process and a separate training session be held with those interested.

The opportunity to attend NGN wider stakeholder conferences and events has been welcomed particularly by the older members of the YIC giving them further insight into the business and an opportunity to network with employers within the sector as has the chance to join NGN's Independent Stakeholder Group. It is advised that NGN seizes any opportunities to highlight the work of the YIC at appropriate conferences, awards and other events to widen the knowledge of the benefits of working with future customers.

In conclusion it has been another great year for the YIC!



I want to collaborate, share ideas and work on projects with other people my age. I'll have the chance to connect with other creative minds, gain valuable insights and make a positive impact."

YIC Member 2024

