SSEN DISTRIBUTION

Sharing our learnings on online engagement

NOVEMBER 2020

Introduction

On 26 November 2020, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks Distribution (SSEN) hosted a virtual roundtable aimed at stakeholder engagement practitioners. The purpose of the roundtable was to share with, and learn from, other companies who need to engage with their stakeholders, irrespective of the circumstances, and to hear how they had adapted their approaches in light of the restrictions placed on them by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The roundtable began with a short introduction from Graeme Keddie, Director of Corporate Affairs, Regulation and Stakeholder Engagement at SSEN, after which participants were asked to introduce themselves and talk about their expectations for the day. This was followed by a discussion aimed at gaining insights into the following themes:

Embracing digital engagement

- Experiences of the digital switchover. Challenges and recommendations

Changing stakeholder behaviours

- Trends in digital engagement and changes in session planning and design

Exploring enduring learnings

- The changes that will remain post-pandemic

SSEN instructed EQ Communications, a specialist stakeholder engagement consultancy, to chair the discussions, take note of the comments made, and produce this report, which aims to highlight some of the findings of the event. The names and organisations of those who participated in the roundtable are shown in Appendix 1.

Executive summary

All participants had experienced challenges as a result of the switch to digital engagement and all were keen to share their learnings and gain an insight into how their peers had adapted their approach.

- There are a number of challenges presented by all the platforms used to engage digitally with stakeholders. Whilst Zoom is the most popular platform for those wishing to have multiple breakout rooms, certain stakeholders are not able to use it for reasons of security, which means that they are prevented from engaging.

- Whilst Microsoft Teams does not have the same perceived issues with security, the platform was designed for internal engagement meaning that breakout rooms are difficult to manage and stakeholders who do not have Microsoft Office have to register before participating in events.

- Platforms such as GoToWebinar and Webex are useful for hosting events with a large number of participants but they do not encourage dialogue and deliberation.

- Everyone who participated in the discussions said that they had experienced a certain amount of digital engagement fatigue on the part of their stakeholders, making it increasingly difficult to predict how many people would turn up to online events.

- Although high dropout rates are a problem, it was nevertheless felt that digital engagement represents an opportunity to engage with more stakeholders as those who would not normally attend an in-person event for a range of reasons are now able to participate.

- Whilst it was broadly felt there is no substitute for in-person engagement in terms of the quality of feedback that can be elicited, digital engagement will continue to play a part in the strategies of all of those who participated, in the future.
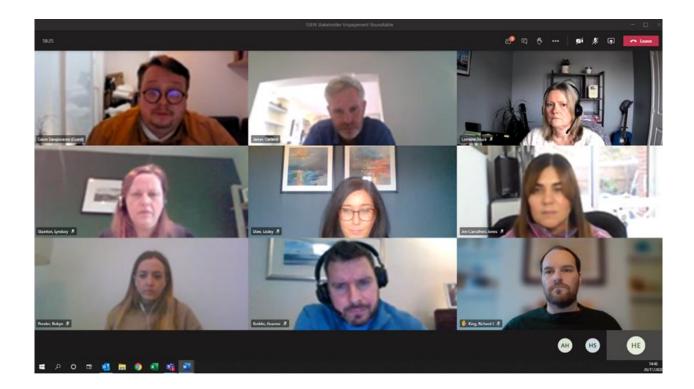
Expectations of the day

All of those who participated in the roundtable came to share the things they have learned from the past seven months and to hear ideas from other people involved in stakeholder engagement. A number of those in attendance represented other DNOs who, like SSEN, have a regulatory requirement to engage with their stakeholders as they shape their RIIO-ED2 Business Plans.

In addition, there were participants from a Gas Distribution Network, a Transmission Operator and a Water Company, who had been through the Business Plan process, as well as a representative of a national charity who worked in partnership with SSEN and some of the other companies in attendance. All participants wanted to find out how they could better use engagement to support the people they represent.

All of those in attendance were keen to share their insights and participate in a spirit of collaboration. It has been a challenging time for many in the industry who have needed to overhaul their engagement strategies, learning on the job as they do so.

Session 1: Embracing digital engagement

Those in attendance had used a range of platforms including Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Vimeo, GoToWebinar, Webex, and Google Meet, as well as bespoke platforms, in order to engage with their stakeholders.

It was acknowledged that the switchover to digital presented several challenges. Firstly, it can be difficult to give stakeholders an incentive to participate – such as providing lunch or networking opportunities. Notwithstanding this, the point was made that digital provides an opportunity in that those people who are time poor or who may not be able to travel to events, due to cost or time constraints, are more likely to attend.

For those participants who ran events based on splitting attendees into breakout rooms, Zoom was the most popular choice of platform as its functionality allows stakeholders to be moved seamlessly into multiple 'rooms'. However, it was noted that certain organisations including local authorities, community councils and, indeed, some utilities were unable to use Zoom as there had been examples of security breaches earlier in the year.

Microsoft Teams was used by a number of those in attendance, particularly for their own internal meetings. However, a number of issues were raised with this platform. Firstly, it is difficult to manage breakout room events on Teams if participants haven't paid for an upgraded package. In addition, Teams requires participants to go through a sign-in process if they don't have a Microsoft Office account which can put off people who are not joining from work. Helpfully, one participant is currently carrying out some research into which platforms people prefer. It was agreed that it would be interesting to hear the outcomes of this piece of work.

Vimeo was used by one participant for sharing videos using social media, but this was seen as something of an interim measure and was not necessarily suitable for meaningful engagement. For primarily one-way engagement, aimed at sharing information rather than seeking feedback, platforms such as GoToWebinar, Webex and GoogleMeet had been used. However, it was acknowledged that these platforms, which were widely used before Covid-19, are not without their issues. For example, some utilities have security settings on their computers that prevent audio being shared.

One participant shared their experiences of having to demonstrate that they had engaged with communities in support of planning applications. They had consulted with the Scottish Government on best practice and, as a result, had commissioned a bespoke platform which mimics a public exhibition, allowing members of the public to view content, leave feedback and, importantly, 'meet' the project team to ask questions at set times – as they would at an in-person public exhibition. This provided a solution that had unlocked many of their projects. However, the point was made that, whilst this approach satisfied planning authorities, certain communities did not see digital engagement as an alternative to meeting in person.

The experience was shared of using a bespoke engagement platform, but this was not without its issues. The platform in question made it difficult to manage breakout rooms and would not allow for live presentations, without using Vimeo. The point was made that pre-recorded presentations do have their benefits in that they can be used a number of times, which can free up the diaries of staff who may not usually be able to attend multiple events. However, it was commented that some stakeholders do not respond well to pre-recorded presentations as it may give the impression that companies are too busy to give up their time to engage with their stakeholders.

Slido is the most popular polling platform used at digital events. Slido has better functionality than Zoom polls, which only allows for very simple polling questions to be asked. It can also be built into PowerPoint presentations, enabling workshop participants to vote using their smartphones with the results being shared live.

In order to bring an element of co-creation to events rather than just voting, Google Docs and Miro were suggested. Google Docs enables workshop participants to build on certain propositions that have been written – although this might not be the most engaging approach. Miro, however, is a platform that provides a 'whiteboard' allowing workshop participants to collaborate by using 'digital post-it notes', which is a more interactive option.

Session 2: Changing stakeholder behaviours

All participants said that they had experienced a certain amount of engagement fatigue on the part of their stakeholders, as exemplified by lower turnout rates at recent events. It was also acknowledged that concentrating for long periods of time was tiring for delegates and organisers.

The point was made that these aren't normal times so one cannot expect stakeholders to behave as they usually would and that it is quite understandable that some people may become fatigued and that people may not attend events if something else is dropped into their calendars. It was also noted that, in current times, many people are working from home and have additional things to contend with such as childcare.

It was commented that participation rates can be 'patchy' and hard to predict and that people increasingly have a tendency to sign up to lots of events but, unlike in-person events, there is no real onus on them to turn up. In order to try and mitigate this, many send out multiple reminders to stakeholders and even call up every participant the day before to check they still intend to participate. The point was also made that following up on each event is one way to build a sense of buy-in and that it is more important than ever to follow up in a timely way.

Despite the increase in stakeholder fatigue and the resultant higher drop-out rates, digital engagement was seen to provide an opportunity. The point was made that it enables companies to engage with stakeholders who may not be able to attend in-person events, such as those living in remote areas and those working for organisations which may not be able to afford to pay for their travel. It was added that digital engagement provides an opportunity to engage with people who may not be able to attend an in-person event for religious reasons.

It was noted that there had been an increase in participation on the part of elected representatives from local authorities and from MPs since the switch to digital engagement. Many of these people previously found it difficult to attend in-person events during the day but are more likely to participate in something that doesn't require travel and that can be attended from their homes. It was also commented that engaging digitally has resulted in attendance from a younger demographic. Typically, participants at in-person events are aged 45+ but examples were given of events where those aged 25 – 45 were much better represented. This trend

included community events, where younger people may not necessarily wish to give up their time to attend a public exhibition in a village hall.

In terms of how people participate, the point was made that some people who may not wish to speak freely at in-person events can be more likely to give their views at an online event. It was also noted that the chat function provides an option for those who are reticent. It was acknowledged that, whilst online events tend not to engender the type of deliberative feedback that might be derived from sitting around a table in person, it often results in more relevant feedback as most people only speak up when they have something useful to say.

It was widely felt that online events should be shorter than those carried out in person. It was also felt that digital engagement lends itself more to topic-specific events, rather than those aimed at a broad range of stakeholders. One of the main challenges cited regarding digital engagement was how to encourage stakeholders to network. None of those in attendance felt that they had managed to address this, as networking online can feel a little forced and unnatural.

Session 3: Exploring enduring learnings

Participants broadly thought that the events of the past seven months have altered how they will engage with stakeholders in the future. Whilst it was felt that there is no substitute for face-to-face engagement, it was also thought that digital engagement would remain part of their ongoing engagement strategies and that a blended approach will be adopted.

The point was made that, whilst many stakeholders and customers will wish to engage in person in the future, some have seen how much more efficient it can be to engage online.

All of those who participated were looking forward to the time when things return to normal so they can interact with their stakeholders in person. It was commented that, whilst digital engagement will continue to play a part in the future, it doesn't elicit the same quality of feedback as in-person engagement, so a hybrid approach is likely to be adopted in the future.

It was commented that one of the outcomes of the last few months is that people tend to have multiple meetings and events that run into one another, meaning that diaries become completely full. This can lead to fatigue on the part of many people working in a digital world.

The point was made by one participant who had engaged with local residents on their projects that people can be more adversarial when engaging online than they would be in person and that it is far more difficult to build constructive working relationships when engaging online.

When asked what the next steps should be, following this workshop, participants said that they would continue to engage with stakeholders over the coming months and, in the case of some, would begin to

broaden the scope of their engagement. Therefore, it was deemed a good idea to hold another of these events in a few months to share any further learnings.

Conclusion

It is clear that the events of the last seven months have irrevocably changed the way companies engage with their stakeholders.

Whilst all participants have experienced challenges, including with the types of platform available and with the level of engagement from their stakeholders, it is clear that digital engagement presents an opportunity to engage with more stakeholders, including those who may not attend an in-person event. Therefore, it is envisaged that digital engagement will remain part of stakeholder engagement practitioners' strategies in the future. Participants said that they welcomed the opportunity to share learnings with their peers and felt that it would be a good idea to hold another similar event in the future.

Appendix 1: Participants

Name	Role	Organisation
Lorraine Bruce	Corporate Communication Events Manager	Scottish Water
Jen Carruthers Jones	Head of Business Growth and Partnerships	National Energy Action
Lesley Dow	Communities and Consumer Engagement Manager	SHE Transmission
Aimi Haymen	Stakeholder Engagement Programme Lead	UK Power Networks
Richard King	Stakeholder Strategy Manager	SGN
Robyn Pender	Stakeholder Engagement Manager	SP Energy Networks
Gavin Sangiovanni	Stakeholder Advisor	Northern Powergrid
Graeme Keddie	Director of Corporate Affairs, Regulation and Stakeholder Engagement	SSEN
Lyndsey Stainton	Head of Stakeholder Engagement	SSEN
Heidi Simpson	Lead Stakeholder Engagement and Consumer Vulnerability Manager	SSEN