

Community Action Northumberland – Energy support for the unemployed in Northumberland

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2024
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Total cost (£k)	*detailed separately
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	*detailed separately

1. Problem(s)

This should outline the problem(s) which is/are being addressed by the VCMA Project

Northumberland is one of the most sparsely populated counties in England with just 63 people per square kilometre. 40.7% of Northumberland's population – 151,885 people live in rural areas (defined as small towns & fringes, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings). Of these more than 20% are over the age of 65, 15,075 people report themselves as having a limiting long-term illness and 17,550 people are income deprived.

The key issues to be addressed are a need for quality energy advice services to support unemployed and underemployed people living in rural Northumberland through the cost-of-living crisis.

1.1 The solution

Community Action Northumberland will provide high quality energy advice and support services to vulnerable people living on low incomes in rural Northumberland, with the aim of helping them survive the current cost of living crisis.

2. Scope and Objectives

The scope and objectives of the VCMA Project should be clearly defined including the benefits which would directly impact customers on the participating GDNs' network(s), and where the benefits of the VCMA Projects lie.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Extend their services to offer every beneficiary advice around energy management and carbon monoxide awareness throughout the year, better equipping them to cope with the cost-of living crisis
- Work and train volunteers in energy related issues to ensure sustainability of the project
- Advise on how to reduce energy bills
- Where applicable signed up to the Priority Services register
- Advise about carbon monoxide poisoning and how to reduce risks
- Signposted to wider sources of advice
- Information on energy grants including HUG, BUS and green homes grant
- Educated on the use of renewable technology

2.2 Scope

- 250 Beneficiaries will be given information about the priority services register
- 250 Beneficiaries will learn about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning
- 30 Beneficiaries will be given carbon monoxide monitors
- 250 Beneficiaries will receive advice about reducing household bills
- 30 Beneficiaries will be referred to receive home audits and energy saving measures

- Supporting all staff and volunteers to achieve a level 2 City and Guilds qualification in Energy Awareness to ensure every beneficiary has access to high level support around energy related issues
- Providing carbon monoxide awareness and energy advice to each beneficiary visiting the employment hub
- Holding regular team meetings jointly to keep staff and volunteers up to date on energy related issues
- Promoting the project widely through partners, community organisations and local press and attendance at job fairs and other networking events to ensure as wide a reach as possible.

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This should include an explanation of why the VCMA Project meets the VCMA eligibility criteria. This is a requirement

This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as it will support vulnerable unemployed customers who are living in rural isolation within Northumberland.

There will be no collaboration from other GDN's nor other funded sources.

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the Fuel Poverty and Energy affordability theme
- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI

4. Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

This should provide information of the customer engagement that has taken place in the development of VCMA Projects where appropriate. If there is no evidence of stakeholder engagement or customer support, this should justify why it was not appropriate to engage with stakeholders and customers.

Within the Northern Gas Networks region, we serve 2.7 million gas-using households. The socio-economic characteristics of our region mean that we operate in many communities that are amongst the most economically deprived in the whole country. This was a key factor in our prioritising engagement with vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups of customers, telling them about our services, about what we do and how we could improve.

Each year, we undertake analysis of all the insight we've heard in the previous year to prioritise those issues our stakeholders most want to engage on. Over the past 12-18 months, we've done this in a number of ways.

4.1 Customers in Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) Workshops

Asking our stakeholders what's important – using our wide range of engagement mechanisms from strategic workshops to customer perceptions, we asked stakeholders to prioritise what is most important to them. Since 2019 we've held regular workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject of Customers in Vulnerable Situations (CIVS). This ensures that we are well informed to address the needs of customers across our network and through collaborative projects.

Stakeholder engagement throughout 2022, told us that fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. The energy and cost of living crises have further compounded this issue. This project provides a solution to helping those customers who are financially struggling and need extra help to address energy affordability. The project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside, and Sunderland were the top five places, to emerge as having the greatest concentration of vulnerabilities within NGN's network. This was based on a combination of the following vulnerability factors:

- Fuel poverty
- Benefit claims
- No qualifications
- Long term health problem / disability

Our most recent stakeholder engagement during 2023 has informed us that financial hardship is still a key area of focus, alongside the health impacts associated with, or exacerbated by, living in cold and damp homes. Stakeholders also told us that increasing capacity for support within services would be key to addressing the immediate and longer-term impacts of fuel poverty and energy affordability. This project addresses this need and ensures additional capacity to support households who may be at risk, through a well-established and trusted advice service.

Each year we use our annual Customer Perceptions Research to understand the priorities of our customers. Amongst a set of general tracker questions i.e., same questions that are asked year on year, the evidence in the most recent research (March 2023), indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly, than providing a safe and reliable supply of gas. This is a clear indication, as to how concerned customers are about the cost of energy and the subsequent impact this will have on other bills. Customers were also asked to prioritise the list of vulnerabilities listed below:

- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability
- Physical challenges
- Financial Hardship

This was the order of priority from the customers surveyed:

- Financial Hardship

- Physical challenges
- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability

Financial hardship continued to be the dimension of vulnerability that most customers prioritised, with more customers in the most recent survey selecting this as their top priority. Physical challenges were second, closely followed by Mental well-being third. Rurality and Temporary vulnerability were ranked fourth and fifth.

Very recent (Autumn 2023) Bespoke Vulnerability Stakeholder Mapping research identified categories of stakeholders that are hard to reach, this included:

- People living with a disability
- Senior citizens with long term conditions
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Mental health

Health conditions which are prevalent in the NGN region are:

- Cancer and chronic kidney disease
- Musculoskeletal conditions
- Respiratory
- Mental health

Through the research carried out, the findings show that the 5 original NGN vulnerability categories have now evolved to 10 categories. These are:

1. Physical challenges, inclusive of communication issues, physical space
2. Mental wellbeing
3. Financial hardship
4. Temporary vulnerability – including post hospital recovery and pregnancy / maternity
5. Socio Demographic
6. Household composition
7. Rural Vulnerability
8. Accessibility Including language
9. Medical Dependant on Energy
10. Cultural

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support our customers in vulnerable situations (CIVS). Checking we've got it right – using a range of engagement mechanisms to assess and challenge our response to stakeholder feedback, ensuring we are responding in the right way. This has offered us robust challenges into how we deal with customers in vulnerable situations which meets the needs of our stakeholders.

4.3 Vulnerability Strategy AAA Framework

Within our vulnerability strategy we have developed, with the help of our stakeholders, the 'AAA' framework. This helps us support our customers in vulnerable situations. Awareness, Accessibility and Action. By adapting this principles-based approach into our AAA framework, we will ensure that

all customers are treated fairly and consistently. The themes of rural and financial vulnerability within the project, align to NGN's Vulnerability Strategy.

5. Outcomes, associated actions, and success criteria

Details of the VCMA Project outcomes and the associated actions to achieve these, interim milestones and how the Funding Licensee will evaluate whether the project has been successful. Each action should have a proportion of the funding allocated.

5.1 Outcomes

- 250 Beneficiaries will be given information about the priority services register
- 250 Beneficiaries will learn about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning
- 30 Beneficiaries will be given carbon monoxide monitors
- 250 Beneficiaries will receive advice about reducing household bills
- 30 Beneficiaries will be referred to receive home audits and energy saving measures

5.2 Success criteria

- Supporting all staff and volunteers to achieve a level 2 City and Guilds qualification in Energy Awareness to ensure every beneficiary has access to high level support around energy related issues
- Providing carbon monoxide awareness and energy advice to each beneficiary visiting the employment hub
- Holding regular team meetings jointly to keep staff and volunteers up to date on energy related issues
- Promoting the project widely through partners, community organisations and local press and attendance at job fairs and other networking events to ensure as wide a reach as possible.

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

The rural employment hubs are a partner in the new Sound Foundation Programme for Northumberland which expects funding from UKSPF to support economically inactive people (EIs).

Other partners will offer EIs a wide range of additional support including:

- Benefits & debt advice – Citizens Advice Northumberland
- Basic maths and English tuition – Northern Learning Trust
- Basic IT tuition – BRIC
- Cygnus (providing counselling and life coaching)

- Northumberland CVA (providing one-to-one support through dedicated workers who will support each beneficiary through their time on the programme)

7. Potential for new learning

Details of what the GDN(s) expect to learn and how the learning will be disseminated.

Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

The Funding Licensee(s) should justify the scale of the VCMA Project – including the scale of the investment relative to its potential benefits. As part of this, it should provide the SROI calculation.

This project has a positive SROI return.

VCMA Project start and end date

Detail start and end date of the VCMA Project and, where relevant, the VCMA Project that preceded this initiative.

1st November 2023 – 31st October 2024

Geographic area

Details of where the VCMA Project will take place. If the VCMA Project is collaborative, the Funding Licensee area(s) in which the project will take place should be identified.

This project will take place in Northumberland.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director