

Groundwork – Energy Matters Yorkshire

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

1. Problem(s)

There is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel poverty. This project will support vulnerable customers in the Yorkshire area.

Groundwork Yorkshire already support many vulnerable customers who are struggling to pay bills or top-up prepayment meters. Fuel poverty and stretched household budgets also have indirect impacts for example, not having the money to get appliances serviced or chimneys swept, using a hob or cooker for warmth, or blocking vents, could all increase the exposure risk to carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning.

Solution

This project aims to reduce energy costs, increase energy-efficiency and improve health & wellbeing. They also complete PSR referrals and raise awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning & the need to have both regular appliance safety checks & CO monitors installed.

2. Scope and Objectives

By bringing the management of the local programmes into the local delivery teams (rather than centralised) they can reduce costs across the visits, enabling maximisation of other funding. They will focus funding on either those areas/ beneficiaries not eligible for the service through other funding, or follow up support required which is not funded elsewhere.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

The topics covered through the project activities are:

- Energy price rises and managing energy bills
- Dealing with energy debts by supporting applications to energy trust funds and other hardship schemes
- Advice on ways to save energy and referrals for energy efficiency measures
- Ways to reducing outgoings from other household bills such as by applying for social tariffs offered by Yorkshire Water
- Maximising income by making referrals for benefits checks
- Signing up onto the PSR where eligible

2.2 Scope

The project will provide the following additional resources:

- Training family support workers and related staff with the knowledge to be able to support and advise families around energy costs, support schemes and keeping safe and well in their homes
- Recruiting and training parent/carer Energy Ambassadors
- Engaging directly with families by attending groups and other events at children's centres and in community settings
- Giving 1-2-1 tailored support and advice through home visits, phone advice and Zoom appointments
- Engaging families via social media, newsletters and direct correspondence via children's centres

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as it will support vulnerable customers across Yorkshire, addressing fuel poverty as well as raising awareness of CO and the PSR. As the project has mental wellbeing, cultural, temporary vulnerability and financial hardship themes, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project has a positive SROI
- This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the Financial hardship theme and the wider vulnerability categories of:
 - Financial hardship
 - Socio-demographic
 - Cultural
 - Rural Vulnerability
 - Temporary vulnerability
 - Mental Wellbeing themes
 - Medically Dependent on Energy
- Has defined outcomes as required
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms

4. Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

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:

- Physical challenges, inclusive of communication issues, physical space
- Mental wellbeing
- Financial hardship
- Temporary vulnerability – including post hospital recovery and pregnancy / maternity
- Socio Demographic
- Household composition
- Rural Vulnerability
- Accessibility Including language
- Medical Dependant on Energy

- 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

5.1 Outcomes

- **Income Saving and advice**
 - Billing and metering issues, where possible switching to a more appropriate payment method;
 - Energy Complaints and assisting them through to resolution;
 - Identifying other assistance entitlement and referring to other support
 - Applying to Priority Service registers
 - A water bill health check;
 - Applications for social water tariffs;
 - Applications for water meters;
 - Resolving issues with water debt;
 - Installation of water saving devices
- **Energy Use**
 - Correct usage and setting up of heating controls;
 - Switching energy providers for a cheaper deal;
 - Energy usage/ reducing energy bills through behavioural change, including appliance costs;
 - Water saving and meter fitting for appropriate households;
 - Liaise with energy companies to set up payment plans for debt and priority service registers;

- Install a range of small scale energy efficiency measures including: draught proofing, reflective radiator panels, energy saving lightbulbs, water and power saving devices and pipe lagging;
- Carbon Monoxide awareness raising
- **Health**
 - Preventing condensation, damp and consequent mould growth;
 - Referrals to other local support agencies and their services;
 - Seasonal health and wellbeing advice;
 - Basic needs assessment identifying other service needs, such as Fire Service, Neighbourhood Networks etc.

In addition the Green Doctors provide follow up advocacy and support through:

- Referrals to other services such as Fire Service, Adult Social Care, Food Banks, Health care professionals, Housing support teams, Debt support charities
- Liaising and negotiating with energy suppliers to switch tariffs, remove or reduce existing fuel debt
- Access to grants for debt relief to tackle ongoing fuel debt issues
- Access to grants for white goods and other home appliances for the most vulnerable households
- Liaising with Local Authorities for tenants in poor quality private sector housing where the landlords are unwilling to make improvements to the property.

5.2 Success criteria

The project will provide:

- Delivery in Yorkshire
- 1000 visits over 2 years
- 300 PSR registrations
- 300 CO awareness sessions

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

- Local Authorities
- Energy suppliers
- Referrals to other services such as Fire Service, Adult Social Care, Food Banks, Health care professionals, Housing support teams, Debt support charities, Neighbourhood Network

Potential for new learning

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

7. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

This project has a positive SROI return.

VCMA Project start and end date

June 2024-March 2026

Geographic area

The project will take place across Yorkshire.

Approved by

Eileen Brown

Customer Experience Director