

Shildon Alive Centre for Warmth

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

1. Problem(s)

In Sildon town, over 25% of residents live in social housing, and similar numbers in private rented, many of these are extremely substandard, tenancies, issues such as damp, mould are common with absentee or inadequate landlords.

The North-East of England is the region worst affected by fuel poverty, as almost three-quarters of households, 71.3 % are expected to be fuel-poor by April 2024. This is a massive increase of one quarter (25%) on the estimations from the year prior when 58.6% of households were predicted to be fuel-poor by the start of 2023.

In 2014 the last major supermarket in the town closed, the last bank was closed and reopened as a betting shop, and a culture of decline increasingly embedded as austerity cuts impacted County and Town Council Provision.

Healthy life expectancy at birth for males is 58.8 and for females 59.9 in the area. This is significantly lower than the national average of 62.8 for males and 63.6 for females. We regularly feed adults who haven't eaten for a few days and hungry children.

The child poverty statistics within working families in the Northeast is frightening and life limiting.

A major new report published on 16th February 2024 by the Northeast Child Poverty Commission (NECPC) calls for regional leaders to take a 'public health approach' to tackling child poverty, based on the findings of wide-ranging research undertaken over the last year throughout the region.

More than one third of all babies, children and young people in the Northeast (35%) are living in poverty, with this region having experienced the steepest increases in child poverty over much of the last decade.

Solution

Over the last 4 years they have developed a centre for food and finance solidarity, part of this is a community kitchen, with 2 local staff, and a team of volunteers from the community, 2 of which are on the Autism spectrum, and several have complex mental health issues due to severe childhood neglect. They feed all children who are often hungry and under nourished for free and on a donation basis for adults. They utilise local gardeners produce as well as rescued food in these meals. They teach children and adults how to grow their own food with the help of local gardeners.

Their 12 volunteer drivers (these drivers are retired, in work or can't work due to health reasons) collected 102 tonnes of food surplus last year from businesses and supermarkets, some of this food goes on the shelves for all in their community shop where families and individuals of all ages, take a basket, fill it and leave a donation. The rescued food is also delivered to schools pop up rescue stalls.

The Centre for Warmth concept was developed to ensure a holistic approach to supporting fuel poor households within a community setting. Centre users will receive a combination of services such as:

- energy advice
- CO awareness and advice
- income maximisation through benefit entitlement checks and managing debt
- free or reduced cost food/clothing
- fuel top up vouchers
- connections to other NGN funded partner information/assistance
- Priority Service Register awareness and registrations

Plus training, information, advice and services bespoke to their individual neighbourhoods. All provided in a warm safe space designed to improve health and wellbeing, increase household income, and help communities better manage their energy.

2. Scope and Objectives

Shildon Alive Centre for Warmth project aims to using their existing centre, supporting their existing services and developing new services. The new services will incorporate advice around CO awareness and energy advice whilst offering immediate crisis support and low cost or free groceries and hot or cold food.

They will utilise the centre to 'get the word out' around CO awareness, PSR and energy advice, working with NEA, CAB and their existing partners to support households living in food and fuel poverty in a number of ways.

Offer extra services along with outreach work to reach hard to reach, seldom heard clients.

The objectives of this initiative are:

- To improve health and wellbeing of the centre users
- To reduce fuel poverty
- To increase income through benefit maximisation and debt management
- To provide CO awareness and advice
- To increase awareness and registrations of the PSR

2.1 Scope

- Train staff to deliver advice around CO awareness and energy advice.
- Deliver a drop in breakfast club, offer a hot drink, breakfast and advice around CO safety and advice and energy advice.
- Offer income maximisation information and then advice, such as supporting with applying for benefits, link with HSF and CAB to offer utility support.

- Raise awareness of the Priority Services Register (PSR) and sign households up through existing networks, (Community shop, meals on wheels, food support, schools, community garden)
- Offer a monthly Sunday meal as a takeaway or delivery to complement the existing service to reach new clients. Develop and deliver 'learn to bake with food and friendship' workshops. These workshops can incorporate advice and support to build relationships with the clients.
- 200 people assisted with benefit applications
- 100 people assisted with debt issues
- 200 people registered on the PSR
- 100 people advised on healthy/low-cost cooking
- 100 people helped out of loneliness and social isolation
- 30 people helped into work or volunteering
- 200 people with increased awareness of CO
- 30 young people educated on budget management
- 30 people assisted with housing applications

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as it will support a wide range of vulnerable customers who are living in financial hardship and fuel poverty across the Middlesbrough and wider Tees Valley locality, as well as raising awareness of CO and the PSR. As the project has mental wellbeing and financial hardship themes, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy too.

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
 - Accessibility, including language
 - Socio-demographic
 - Cultural
 - Mental Wellbeing themes
- 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

A high proportion of clients accessing their crisis services are in food and fuel poverty, many also have other complex issues around ill health and addiction.

Working families accessing the community shop do so to save money to spend on utilities and to save money due to rising food and fuel costs. With no supermarket, these households would need to spend funds on bus fares to access fresh fruit and vegetables. The older, vulnerable residents in the community could be targeted through their local community newspaper and word of mouth. This works through advertising digital drop ins and meals on wheels service through these channels which are extremely popular.

5.1 Outcomes

The main services provided will include:

- Training provided to staff to offer energy awareness advice sessions (level 2 NEA). Energy advice and CO awareness sessions delivered on a monthly basis.

- volunteers will be trained to be energy buddies through Energy Ambassadors' course.
- Support 100 clients in the breakfast drop ins, some if needed, with free CO alarms and advice/information.
- Support 100 clients with a hot drink and breakfast free of charge.
- 500 households will be supported with income maximisation information and then advice, such as support with applying for benefits, link with HSF and CAB to offer utility support.
- 200 households will be signed up to the Priority Services Register (PSR).
- 40 new households reached by their Sunday lunch offer, information given about available services and CO awareness.
- learn to bake with food and friendship workshops delivered reaching 36 new households.

5.2 Success criteria

Number of total beneficiaries = 1150 (broken down as)	1150	500	200	100	40	36	30
Support in a warm safe space with offer of all services	✓						
<i>Raising awareness of the PSR</i>	✓						
<i>PSR Registrations</i>			✓				
Energy efficiency awareness	✓						
Energy Efficiency advice				✓			
Raised CO awareness			✓				
Provide CO alarms			✓				
Hot drink and breakfast				✓			
Assist with benefit and debt issues		✓					
Budgeting sessions for young people							✓
Sunday lunch offer (New households)					✓		
Bake with food and friendship workshop (New households)						✓	

Advice on healthy low cost cooking				✓			
Tackling loneliness and isolation				✓			
Helping people into work or volunteering							✓
Assist in housing applications							✓

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

CAB, NEA, LIVIN, fuel bank foundation, Energy doctor, Local Authority, local schools, Home Group, Humankind, Wellbeing for life, stop smoking team, Digital Durham, CAP, Age UK, Housing solutions, Shelter. They have also worked with Shildon Town Council and their Young volunteers to create Hand Up bags for Durham County Council Rough sleeper team.

7. Potential for new learning

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

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

This project has a positive SROI return.

VCMA Project start and end date

September 2024-August2026

Geographic area

Shildon, Eldon, Dene Valley, Coronation, Coundon Grange, Bishop Auckland, Coundon.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
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