

Groundwork - Noah's Ark

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2024
Project contact name:	Laura Ratcliffe
Project contact number/email:	LRatcliffe@northerngas.co.uk
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

At the point when young people start living independently, no teaching nor education is given around how to use energy efficiently and safely in the home, the actions that can be taken to reduce costs, nor how the world of energy suppliers works – everyone is expected to just get on with it. As such, many young people are likely to be paying more than they need to for their bills, not realising the financial impact the cost of energy can have on their income, putting themselves at risk of accruing debt and putting up with cold homes, due to limited awareness of ways and schemes that can help make homes warmer. This all puts people at risk of fuel poverty.

The issues being addressed by this proposal include:

- Fuel Poverty
- Financial hardship/debt
- Mental Health
- Unemployment
- Food poverty
- Geographical gap coverage (Calderdale)

1.1 The solution

This project will form a partnership between Groundwork Yorkshire's Green Doctor service & Noah's Ark. This collaboration will bring together fuel poverty support, income maximisation, mental health support & training.

The scope of this project is to deliver 200 Green Doctor fuel poverty interventions & for Noah's Ark to provide their services for 200 clients.

This service will be available to residents across the Calderdale region.

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 Shared Purpose

The overall aim of this project is to engage with customers within the Calderdale region to help tackle the issue of fuel poverty and mental health. Subjects such as understanding of energy use, energy bills, income maximisation and CO safety will also be addressed through this project.

2.2 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Improve confidence in managing household budgets
- Reduce worry and anxiety about utility bills

- Improve financial stability and reduce vulnerability to fuel debts
- Generate financial savings on energy bills
- Ensure they are safe, warm and well in their homes
- 200 Green Doctor fuel poverty interventions
- Noah's Ark to provide their services to 200 clients
- Make referrals to the PSR
- Provide CO awareness to customers

2.3 Scope

- 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.
- Noah's Ark services take a very person-centred approach to each client: working holistically to address the barriers and issues affecting them. A typical client may receive:
 - Counselling or psychotherapy
 - Money advice
 - Financial capability training (Budget like a Boss)
 - Employment support
 - Food support
 - Onward referral to a 3rd party organisation if there are additional needs.

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 the VCMA funding, as it will support customers within the Calderdale region to help tackle the issue of fuel poverty and mental health. Subjects such as understanding of energy use, energy bills, income maximisation and CO safety will also be addressed through this project and customers will be referred onto the PSR where eligible.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project will have a positive SROI
- This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial hardship and mental health themes

- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms

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.

From previous & current Green Doctor involvement in Calderdale Groundwork have worked with the main social housing provider – Together Housing, who they still receive referrals from, but they hope to develop this partnership further. They have also worked with The Halifax Opportunities Trust via their 'Hopeful Families' programme & have had discussions with the local council & Citizens Advice on how to best to support their programmes.

Noah's Ark are one of the main referral partners for Calderdale council for debt support/advice & financial budgeting. They receive around 30% from the council tax team alone & have partners across the region.

4.1 Customers in Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) Workshops 2020 -2022

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. This includes digital engagement in light of CV-19. During 2020 - 2022 we held multiple workshops with our stakeholders on the subject of CIVS. In our July 2020 workshop, stakeholders discussed new emerging issues due to Covid-19, what the impact of the pandemic has on hidden vulnerability and how the current pandemic impacted demand for essential services to support CIVS. Our stakeholders told us some of the main impacts have been associated with mental health issues and an increase in food/fuel poverty.

In the CV-19 specific workshop held in August 2020, our stakeholders also identified that larger energy bills was an issue due to the pandemic. They stated that larger energy bills were due to spending more time at home due to lockdown, especially during winter. Demand for energy advice dropped but more general enquiries were evident in relation to redundancy and benefits advice. They also mentioned that mental health had been significantly impacted by the pandemic and in particular, for young people, students, and disabled people, who felt more socially isolated due to the lockdown.

In January 2021 we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop our stakeholders said it would be good for NGN to us partners to promote the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES). They also said that fuel, food and general poverty are all linked and we need more streamlined ways of working together. Feedback told us that partners can help raise awareness of different funding available and in relation to this project, the linking up of organisations by way of a steering group will address that point. This project fully aligns with the need to help people in fuel poverty and those on low incomes, to enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their energy bills and stay safe, in order to prevent fuel poverty and health issues in the future. It also demonstrates linking up organisations to help customers in vulnerable situations across the Calderdale region.

During our November 2021 Energy Crisis / Partnership Working Workshop our stakeholders said the energy crisis will result in people not getting their appliances serviced every year, which increases the risks of CO poisoning. Since November 2021 and currently, we're in both an energy and cost of living crisis, which is further impacting vulnerable customers and increases all of these risks. People are continuing to have to make choices between heating, eating and looking after their health. The servicing of appliances will continue to fall further down the list of customers priorities as a result of these two crises.

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 (February 2022), indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly, than providing a safe and reliable supply of gas, for the first time. This is a clear indication, as to how concerned customers are about the rising cost of living and energy and the subsequent impact these will have on other bills.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Kirklees, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Redcar and Cleveland – which emerges in three vulnerability lists, most notably on wages and Gateshead. Emerged 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

Due to the financial challenges, currently experienced in these areas, makes it even more important to have a benefits adviser in place. These localities need to be key areas for consideration, both in terms of ensuring service delivery is aware of challenges people may face, and in relation to targeting potential support.

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support 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 CIVS 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 rurality, financial hardship and mental health as part of this project, align to NGN's 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

- 400 direct beneficiaries
- 200 indirect beneficiaries
- 200 PSR referrals
- 200 CO awareness surveys
- 200 x Green Doctor home visits / telephone advice calls
- 200 x Noah's Ark interventions

Success criteria

- All vulnerable customers referred will have a greater understanding of the importance of gas safety and the dangers associated with carbon monoxide via the CO awareness survey
- Success is measured by the number of referrals, type of support given & progress made in new delivery areas

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

The project partners involved are Groundwork Yorkshire and Noah's Ark

7. Potential for new learning

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

This partnership brings together the issues impacting people from being in fuel poverty & the associated effects on Mental Health. This partnership will provide Groundwork with new learning/insights with which they could build upon to highlight this serious issue.

This learning can then be shared in other geographical areas.

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 January 2024 – 31st December 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.

The project will take place in the geographical area of Calderdale

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director