

Community Action Northumberland - Rural Food Kitchen

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	July 2021
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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. Of those people, 15,075 people report themselves as having a limiting long-term illness and 17,550 people are income deprived.

There is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel poverty, but rural isolation presents a significant barrier to reaching many of those most in need. Rurality and the associated isolation can make those living in fuel poverty even more vulnerable, especially when access to essential services can be a further challenge.

This Rural Kitchen Project seeks to overcome this barrier. Community Action Northumberland (CAN) has a long history of working with rural communities and has a strong network of links with community anchors, such as parish councils and village halls.

1.1 The solution

Built around volunteers from CAN's Warm Hubs and Northumberland's village halls, CAN will be supporting these groups through provision of essential equipment, training and direct links with food banks and strategic services. CAN currently deliver a 'slow cooking' project, which promotes low-cost healthy eating by providing equipment, recipes and ideas for meals, from delivered food parcels. This project has delivered 'Grow Your Own' packs to vulnerable and isolated people.

Due to the need identified by local communities, CAN wish to expand the 'Grow Your Own' initiative to more households and support all isolated people in eating healthily, through cooking themselves and delivery of prepared meals. This will include utilising surplus food from community gardens, allotments, private gardens and community orchards. The 'Rural Food Kitchens' will be based at 6 of CAN's existing Warm Hubs run by local volunteers, additionally, information will be provided on the PSR and raising awareness of CO poisoning. CAN will be working alongside Northumberland food banks, to deliver some aspects of this project.

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:

- Provide CO awareness sessions to vulnerable customers
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of rural isolation
- Improved local resilience from development of support networks

- Reduced energy usage from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from more balanced diet
- Address aspects of social isolation from networking

2.2 Scope

- 6 existing Warm Hubs
- 100 PSR referrals
- Information on CO awareness, including pre and post awareness surveys
- 600-1,000 participants
- 600 meals provided
- The geographical area of Northumberland
- 30 case studies

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 customers who are living in rural isolation and fuel poverty, as well as CO awareness, within Northumberland. Northumberland is home to 316,000 people and covers an area of 5,013km², 97% of its area is classed as rural. CAN has an extensive reach into both on and off grid customers, those in urban and rural isolation and those customers who are living in fuel poverty, therefore in desperate need of help.

People may want to shop locally and support the local economy, but limited affordability and choice, can undermine this desire. Local shops in many rural areas offer limited food choices, making it necessary to travel large distances to access supermarkets. Supermarket food deliveries can be very limited in some postcodes. Those on low incomes living in rural areas, also struggle to access support services, which tend to be located in urban centres. Poor, and at times non-existent, internet and mobile coverage further hinder access to support. For those who do not drive or are able to afford taxis, the cuts to public transport have further limited access to food and support services. This distance will affect residents' ability to access food retailers, as well as provisions of emergency food.

Many rural communities are living in fuel poverty and making choices in winter as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. Rural communities off the gas grid, means that heating has to be fuelled by oil, LPG or solid fuels, which also have the potential to cause CO poisoning.

CAN are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most impacted areas of our network and are the only organisation who could effectively provide the services that have been identified within this project. As the project has rurality and financial hardship themes, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy. Mental health will also be addressed, in light of the social isolation element.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project is around rurality, fuel poverty and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO₂, therefore aligns with the eligibility criteria
- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the rurality, 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
- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI for customers

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 2019 – 2020

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 (including digital engagement in light of CV-19). During 2019-2020 we held multiple workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject of customers in vulnerable situations.

During 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 an increase in fuel and food poverty and there is a greater need than ever, to support customers accessing fuel and food banks.

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 this was due to people spending more time at home, especially those less mobile, shielding and socially isolated due to rurality. However, a further challenge which compounded this problem, was not being able to contact energy suppliers to discuss these issues. Access to other essential services also significantly decreased.

At the same workshop, our stakeholders also identified that there was an increased risk of CO poisoning, due to the impact of the pandemic. Many people have been furloughed, are on lower incomes and suffered redundancy, which have created significant financial challenges. As a consequence, maintaining and repairing/replacing appliances is not a priority for these groups, therefore significantly increasing the risk of CO poisoning. Stakeholders said there needs to be more focus on CO awareness, so customers understand the risks posed by not having appliances repaired or serviced. For those customers living in rural isolation, potentially living in fuel poverty and off the gas grid, there is likely to be a significant gap in their knowledge around CO, in particular if they use other fossil fuels such as oil or coal.

In January 2021, we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop our stakeholders said fuel poverty is a huge issue in rural locations and there is less focus on geographically hard to reach areas. They also said that fuel, food and general poverty are all linked, and we need more streamlined ways of working together. Partners can help raise awareness of different funding and support available. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty and living in rural localities. It will enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their energy bills, tackle fuel poverty, PSR awareness and stay safe against the dangers of CO poisoning.

Further stakeholder engagement throughout 2020, told us that fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. Using food from allotments will save people money and delivering meals will support those vulnerable people who can't leave their homes, due to mobility issues. CAN has strong links through its volunteer networks and onward referral capacity to local authorities which will further help to achieve the project aims.

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support our customers in vulnerable situations. 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 Social Indicator Mapping, Covid 19 Research and Vulnerability Mapping Tool (VMT)

Academic research social indicator mapping took place in 2019 and further research around CV-19 impact was undertaken in July 2020. This was shared as part of our stakeholder engagement. A new VMT has been demonstrated to stakeholders to highlight any vulnerability gaps we have on our network. The system allows you to add multiple factors of vulnerability together to create a heat map for where factors combine to create areas of highest need. All data can be mixed and matched to answer complicated questions, e.g. see where there are high areas of rurality associated with people living in fuel poverty, as well as CO hotspots. The tool has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

Social indicator research carried out by NGN in 2019, identified that overall, the NGN area is significantly less densely populated than England average – it has 20% of England’s land area but only 12% of its population, therefore significant areas of rurality, Northumberland being a large part of this area. Approximately 12% of NGN area households do not have anybody in work and in at least five areas of NGN’s network, more than a fifth of workers earn below £10,000. One of these areas is Northumberland and supports the evidence that the county has a lot of income deprivation.

The North Tyne area of NGN’s geographical area, where CAN are based, had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN. Recent CO/PSR research commissioned by NGN, found that increasing awareness of the dangers of CO was a priority in the North Tyne area. The same research highlighted that only 37% of respondents in North Tyne, recognise that CO can kill you and 36% of respondents did not feel their awareness had increased over the past few years. 25% of the people who responded in North Tyne, did not have a CO alarm in their home and only 23% of respondents test their alarm annually. 22% did not know how often to test their alarm. From the same research, 54% of respondents in the North Tyne patch, had no understanding of the services available to those on the PSR. From this evidence, it is clear that this project should have a positive effect on raising awareness around fuel poverty and PSR in the Northumberland area. However, from a gas safety perspective, it’s even more important that awareness of the dangers of CO is raised, especially for those using oil and coal to heat and cook.

The top actions that were highlighted in the CO/PSR research, for the whole network were:

- Target increasing awareness of the dangers of CO
- Increase understanding of what CO actually is
- Encourage people to get a CO alarm
- Encourage people to test their alarms
- Increase awareness of the PSR – over half of respondents were not aware of the PSR

NGN also commissioned some CV-19 specific research in June 2020. Feedback from this indicated that rural areas with high dependency on tourism, have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, resulting in job losses and increased financial hardship as a result.

The main access-related impacts of the pandemic, are in relation to difficulties faced by those with poor digital access, often in rural and disadvantaged areas. The research also highlighted that older people, especially in their 70s and above or with underlying health conditions, have greatly increased physical vulnerability. Many will also face increased social and economic vulnerabilities, and they should be a very high priority group in terms of response. The vulnerability of this group is amplified by other factors, such as lower digital access and awareness and higher dependency on public transport – which many in this group will be seeking to avoid using. Other impacts affecting older people are likely to include isolation and loneliness, bereavement and limited access to services.

The CV-19 research highlighted wider conclusions, as detailed below. This provides further evidence to support CAN’s project.

- The most severely impacted include those with multiple risk factors and vulnerabilities
- Those with severe health risks who were shielding faced multiple difficulties
- Different vulnerability factors tend to be concentrated in the same local areas
- Covid-19 impacts extend beyond vulnerable people to the organisations who support them

- Potential responses to Covid-19 impacts on vulnerable groups are wide ranging and likely to involve operational practices, communication to customers, action on fuel poverty, and help for vulnerable customers and the groups who support them.

4.4 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, mental and financial vulnerability within this 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

- Build upon knowledge gained from Covid 19
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- CO awareness sessions and pre and post CO questionnaire results
- 30 case studies from beneficiaries
- 60 volunteers
- PSR signups

5.2 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 an awareness survey
- 100 PSR referral sign ups
- 520 volunteering hours
- 600 meals provided

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

CAN will be working alongside Northumberland food banks to deliver some aspects of this project, as well as Parish Councils and Northumberland village hall consortiums.

7. Potential for new learning

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

There is an opportunity to extend this support to more households in need and support all isolated households in eating healthily, through cooking themselves and delivery of prepared meals. Any learning will be shared with NGN, to investigate whether this project can be scaled up and replicated across the whole area.

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 April 2021 – 31st March 2023

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