

Community Action Northumberland (CAN) - Slow cooker road show

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, amounting to around 152,000 people, live in rural areas, which are defined as small towns & fringes, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings. More than 20% of people in these households are over the age of 65. The number of people reporting themselves as having a limiting long-term illness is 15,075 and 17,550 people are income deprived ie due to unemployment and low-income jobs.

Despite the fact that there is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with food and fuel poverty, rural isolation presents a significant barrier to reaching many of those hard to reach. Because of the locations of some of these communities ie on the extremities of NGN's network, there are barriers such as reduced services from public transport links, to shops to purchase food. Living off the gas grid makes cooking and heating more expensive because oil, electricity or solid fuel are generally the alternatives. As a knock-on effect, larger fuel bills mean people have less disposable income, to purchase essentials such as food and also can't afford to have appliances repaired. This is not a priority for this vulnerable group because they lack knowledge around gas safety and also energy efficiency. The slow cooker road show project seeks to help address some of these issues.

1.1 The solution

Building on CAN's slow cooker and Warm Hubs work, this project will involve spending the 6 weeks of summer 2021 (end July and August), attending rurally isolated settlements in Northumberland, to demonstrate the benefits of using a slow cooker. This is in terms of saving money and the nutritional benefits of cooking healthy meals. Associated messaging at the events will be around energy support (energy efficiency hints and tips), carbon monoxide (CO) awareness and an expansion on the diversity and efficiency of the use of slow cookers. These events will be held outdoors on village greens and other open spaces, where the communities do not have access to a community hall nor building. During the 6 weeks holidays is a prime time to target people who may be off work and attend outdoor events. Furthermore, as a result of increased staycations, many tourists are likely to visit Northumberland during the summer. This project will attempt to maximise these opportunities and reach a large number of people as a consequence. Due to having a long history of strong network links with parish councils and village halls, CAN will work with them to identify key strategic locations for the roadshows, as well as reaching out to the communities requiring support. Specifically targeting rurally isolated areas, where there may also be an increase in tourists over the summer holidays, will also assist in conveying key energy and gas safety messages. CAN have successfully run similar events providing energy information and support.

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
- Customers will undertake a pre and post CO awareness survey
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of rural isolation
- Reduced energy from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- Improved confidence from being able to better manage food costs
- Address aspects of social isolation from networking

2.2 Scope

- 10 volunteers involved
- 6 roadshows
- 40 – 60 PSR referrals
- Information on CO awareness
- 120 participants
- 150 slow cookers provided
- The geographical area of Northumberland
- 14 case studies from beneficiaries

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 potentially food and fuel poverty, within Northumberland. Social indicator research carried out by NGN identified that overall, the NGN area is significantly less densely populated than England average. Northumberland, where CAN are based, is home to 316,000 people and 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, those customers who are in fuel poverty and therefore in need of support around energy and poverty.

Many rural communities living in fuel poverty, are regularly making choices particularly in winter, as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. Rural communities living off the gas grid, have to heat their properties and cook with electricity, oil or solid fuels. The use of solid fuels has the potential to cause CO poisoning. These are expensive fuels, compared to gas and the fact that many of these communities are income deprived, having appliances serviced may not be a priority for them, especially when the choice could be between heating or eating. Any support in being able to reduce fuel costs and having an awareness of CO poisoning and its causes, will be beneficial and potentially save lives.

CAN are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most impacted areas of our network and are the only organisation who can effectively provide the service that has been identified. This

project seeks to take advantage of a unique opportunity, to provide important and potentially life-saving information, to vulnerable customers within rural Northumberland, as well as tourists visiting the area.

As the project has rurality 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 is around energy efficiency / fuel poverty (financial hardship), rural isolation and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO, therefore aligns with the eligibility criteria
- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial and rural vulnerability 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

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, our stakeholders identified both fuel and food poverty, as an increased risk due to the pandemic and the choices between heating and eating, has become more prevalent. Stakeholders discussed new emerging issues due to Covid-19, what the impact of the

pandemic has on hidden vulnerability, such as living in rural communities and how the current pandemic, has impacted demand for essential services to support CIVS.

In our August 2020 CV-19 specific workshop, our stakeholders 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. This is an even bigger issue for people using solid fuels and living in fuel poverty. 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 and potentially living in fuel poverty and off the gas grid, there is likely to be a significant gap in their knowledge around CO.

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. During this workshop, our stakeholders said it would be good for NGN to use partners to promote the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES), especially raising awareness for those off the gas grid and paying large amounts for fuel.

This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel and food poverty. It will enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their energy bills, adopt cheaper methods of cooking, become more energy efficient and stay safe against the dangers of CO poisoning.

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 a high number of people living in fuel poverty, as well as CO hotspots. The tool has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research, indicated that the North Tyne area (where CAN are based), had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN. A further challenge that was also highlighted from the research was unemployment. 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 and people claiming benefits. Therefore, often having to choose between heating and eating.

More recently, 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, CO and PSR in the Northumberland area.

Feedback from the CV-19 research in July 2020, indicated that rural areas with high dependency on tourism, have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. This has resulted in job losses and increased financial hardship, therefore a greater demand for support around fuel poverty and ways to save money, in particular on energy bills.

Through CAN's previous Warms Hubs project, they have been able to address fuel poverty and social isolation and acknowledge an alternative route of support, when faced with limited resources. This project demonstrates different ways of reaching a greater number of people requiring support.

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 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

- Builds upon knowledge gained from Covid 19 experiences
- Improved health from a more balanced diet / awareness of energy efficiency
- CO awareness sessions and pre and post CO questionnaire results
- 14 Case studies from beneficiaries
- 6 roadshows
- 10 volunteers

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
- 20 - 40 PSR referral sign ups
- 96 volunteering hours
- 100+ slow cookers provided

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

CAN will be working alongside parish Councils and Northumberland village hall consortiums to deliver some aspects of this project.

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 share any learning around delivering larger events in rural localities, across the whole of NGN's network. Any learning around raising awareness around energy efficiency and CO with tourists to the area, will also be shared.

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