

Durham County Council – Building Research Establishment (BRE) Data Targeting Pilot

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

Durham County Council (DCC) is geographically the fifth largest Local Authority (LA) in England with a population of 645,862 and 36 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA's) ranked in the top 10% most deprived areas in England. These 36 LSOAs cover an area representing 10.2% of the county's population with 42.2% of the county's population living in areas in the top 30% most deprived nationally. There are approximately 36,400 fuel poor households in County Durham facing the challenge of heating their home. Some of these households rely on portable gas heaters and are not able service their gas appliances. Covid 19 related health and income issues, could cause this number to increase.

Fuel poverty occurs when a household cannot afford to heat their home sufficiently, to maintain a healthy indoor environment. It is very concerning, that some vulnerable households are reporting they cannot afford to maintain or replace their appliances or are self- disconnecting and instead relying on portable equipment. The consequence of which, may result in carbon monoxide (CO) related issues. DCC covers a large area of rurality, whereby many customers may be off the gas grid and living in fuel poverty, due to having to pay for more expensive fuel such as oil or coal. Fuel poverty is exacerbated, if a property is of a poor standard and therefore more expensive to heat. This also creates further issues if a householder is in ill health.

During Covid-19 shielding and lockdown, an increasing number of low income and vulnerable households are finding themselves at home for longer periods. These households are presenting to DCC, reporting concerns that their energy bills have increased substantially. The council are concerned that due to Covid-19, countywide levels of fuel poverty and cold related ill health and excess winter deaths, will increase considerably over the next few years.

There is generally a lack of knowledge and awareness of the specific condition of housing stock in the DCC area, in terms of energy efficiency levels, SAP ratings and also private rented accommodation. If this information were readily available, it would be easier to specifically target and liaise with those households experiencing these challenges. Historically, this has been very difficult, due to the lack of opportunities to directly target these households, for assistance around fuel poverty and associated CO risks.

1.1 The solution

The BRE Targeting Pilot will be a significant step forward in making direct contact with households at risk of ill health and CO poisoning, due living in poor quality housing stock. The pilot allows the council's Warm Homes Team to make direct contact with vulnerable customers, to raise awareness of fuel poverty and help reduce the risks of CO poisoning. A housing stock model will be developed, to identify poor housing stock and the data gathered, will be used to target local communities to be able to get assistance by way of grants and services. This will include promotion of the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme (FPNES), CO awareness and signing customers up to the Priority Services Register. This project has been designed jointly with key stakeholders and this joint working is shown in the Council's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and provides a platform for the proposed pilot.

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.

Durham CC covers a large geographical area with lots of different housing stock. This project will use housing stock condition data to target households with low Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) ratings and low energy efficiency.

DCC have engaged the BRE to develop a countywide Housing Stock Condition Model (HSCM). The stock condition model will provide detailed information on the locations of the following types of housing:

- Poor housing conditions
- Poor energy efficiency levels
- Low SAP Ratings
- Areas with high levels of fuel poverty
- Housing health and safety ratings
- Private rented properties

The above housing data will be used to target local communities with vulnerable and low-income households for assistance with grants and services, to be able to get their homes to a satisfactory standard. This will assist in reducing the number of households living in fuel poverty and potentially unsafe homes.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide CO awareness sessions to vulnerable customers
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of fuel poverty
- Make direct referrals to FPNES and other grants

2.2 Scope

- Hours spent in discussion with households – 150 households x 30mins = 75 hours
- Information leaflet on CO awareness, including pre and post awareness surveys and help line phone numbers
- One full time officer to administer the project
- Door to door leaflet drops
- 500 households contacted
- The geographical area of County Durham
- Work with other charitable organisations to further support the customers identified

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 poor housing stock. As a consequence of this, they may be living in fuel poverty and not be aware of the associated dangers of CO. The project will allow DCC to start assisting households, by way of signposting them for an assisted gas connection through FPNES, other grants and raising awareness around the risks of CO poisoning. It will also enable them to provide energy advice and fuel poverty information through their partners, in order that vulnerable customers can access funding streams, get help to be able to fuel switch and stay safe from the dangers of CO poisoning.

As the project is related to fuel poverty, some of which could be concentrated in rural localities, it aligns with the financial and rurality themes of NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy. Awareness of CO and the potential impact on the body, for those with existing health conditions, also aligns this project to the physical vulnerability theme within the strategy.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project is around fuel poverty, associated ill health 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, rural and physical 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 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 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. 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 poor housing stock and potentially living in fuel poverty, 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 it would be good for NGN to use partners to promote the FPNES. 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 available, which is what this project sets out to achieve. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty to enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their energy bills, tackle fuel poverty, and stay safe against the dangers of CO poisoning.

In our wider stakeholder engagement programme, we have also heard very strongly, how safety is at the forefront of stakeholders' minds. Stakeholders see a strong correlation between safety and our social obligations and have told us that it is essential that we continue to raise awareness of carbon monoxide, because doing so saves lives. Stakeholder engagement throughout 2020 also told us that fuel poverty (general poverty) and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. With this in mind, DCC has strong links into the health sector and social landlords and combined with the housing stock data that is being gathered, this will ensure the objectives of this project can be met.

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 energy inefficient housing / fuel poverty, as well as CO hotspots. The tool has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

There are approximately 36,400 fuel poor households in County Durham facing the challenge of heating their home and this LA has extensive reach into the customers living in those vulnerable situations. Durham is also the only area in our network that has a good demographic in terms of social indicators and urban/rural areas. Building research has not been undertaken by any other LA in the area.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research, indicated that the Wear area (where DCC 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 Wear area. The same research highlighted that only 37% of respondents in Wear, recognise that CO can kill you and 44% of respondents did not feel their awareness had increased over the past few years. 28% of the people who responded in Wear, did not have a CO alarm in their home and only 29% of respondents test their alarm annually. 9% did not know how often to test their alarm. From the same research, 55% of respondents in the Wear 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 County Durham area.

CV-19 research commissioned by NGN in June 2020, highlighted wider conclusions around the pandemic below. This provides further evidence to support DCC'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 physical, 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

- One full time officer employed to administer the project. Using the stock condition model data to target communities
- A rolling programme of mail outs to individual households in targeted communities to promote key initiatives, including FPNES
- Information / leaflet on CO awareness and pre and post CO questionnaire results
- Enquiries from households into DCC from other partners
- Signposting to appropriate help line phone numbers, as required
- Direct referrals to FPNES
- Referrals to the Fire and Rescue Service for home safety visits
- 20 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
- PSR referral sign ups
- Fuel poor connections

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

The other project partners involved are social housing providers, private landlords and owner occupiers, as well as other DCC services and interaction with GP Practices to some degree. Age UK and other charitable groups will also have some involvement.

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 understand and learn how best to increase awareness of CO and referrals to the PSR. In terms of the outcomes of the BRE data, any learning in this regard around housing stock and the benefits of targeting customers living in these properties, will be shared with NGN, for further cascade across their network to other Local Authorities.

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 July 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 County Durham, across 36 LSOA areas.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director