

Durham County Council - GP Partnering 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 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, with some relying on portable gas heaters and not being able to service their gas boiler. This number could increase due to Covid19 related health and income issues.

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 service their gas boiler or are self-disconnecting and instead relying on portable gas heaters, with the consequential concern that this may result in carbon monoxide related issues. Much of Durham CC's area also covers rural areas, people living in those localities may be at greater risk of fuel poverty, due to being off the gas grid and using other fossil fuels such as oil and coal. Other fossil fuels also bring an increased risk of CO poisoning.

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 us reporting concerns that their energy bills have increased substantially. DCC 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.

Contacting households that are at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning and cold related ill health has historically been very difficult, due to the lack of opportunities to directly target these households for assistance.

1.1 The solution

The GP Partnering Pilot will be a significant step forward in making direct contact with households at risk of cold related ill health and carbon monoxide poisoning. The joint working with Clinical Commissioning Group GP Practices, allows the council's Warm Homes Team to make direct contact with vulnerable patients, to raise awareness and help reduce the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning as well as provide advice around fuel poverty and associated issues. It has been designed in partnership with Public Health, a Clinical Commissioning Group and GP Practice Managers. 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.

Due to the very large geographical size of County Durham the project will target GP patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or asthma. As County Durham has lots of ex-mining communities there is a prevalence of respiratory problems associated with this. Living in a cold home can significantly compound these existing health issues. The targeting of the patients will be done by working with Clinical Commissioning Group partners and targeted mail-outs to patients.

The GP Partnering pilot will also target local communities with vulnerable and low-income households, for assistance for grants and services to help support those who may be in fuel poverty. This will include raising awareness of the dangers and health risks of CO and increasing applications to the Priority Services Register (PSR).

The overall aim of the project is to reduce the number of individuals with a long-term health condition who are living in fuel poverty in County Durham. By working with health professionals and accessing environments with key customer touchpoints, it will ensure that vulnerable households are safe, warm and have a sense of well-being.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide carbon monoxide (CO) awareness sessions to vulnerable customers – including pre and post awareness surveys
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Saving money by changing to a lower cost energy tariff and supplier
- Warm Homes Discount applications
- Clearing energy debts with energy companies
- Advice on saving energy in the home

2.2 Scope

- Working with 30 GP practices
- Referrals to ECO boiler and insulation grants
- Referrals to Fire and Rescue Service for fire safety checks
- Installation of a carbon monoxide (CO) alarm (if required)
- One full time officer to administer the project
- Door to door leaflet drops
- DCC County News Promotions
- The geographical area of County Durham

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 may not be aware of the dangers of CO and who may be living in fuel poverty, with underlying health problems. It will allow Durham County Council to start assisting households at risk of CO

poisoning. Recent CO research undertaken by NGN, found that increasing awareness of the dangers of CO was a priority in the Wear area of the gas network, which Durham CC covers. It will also allow them to impart energy advice to vulnerable customers, so they can access funding streams and assist with fuel switching to save money. This project seeks to take advantage of a unique opportunity, to provide important and potentially life-saving information, to vulnerable customers within County Durham. Working with trusted health partners, to access those vulnerable customers most in need and hard to reach. As the project has a physical vulnerability theme, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy, as does the energy saving and grant elements, which will ultimately result in financial savings for those living in fuel poverty.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- As this project is around CO awareness, reducing the risk of harm caused by CO and energy saving advice, it aligns with the eligibility criteria. The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial vulnerability theme
- As the project is aimed at customers with COPD and asthma, it also aligns with the physical vulnerability theme of NGN's strategy
- 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.

Stakeholder engagement through 2020 told us that fuel poverty (general poverty) and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. DCC has strong links into the health sector and social landlords, which will ensure these issues are addressed and the objectives of this project are achieved.

In our February 2020 annual strategic workshop, cold related ill health and fuel poverty awareness was discussed as an emerging issue. ~~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.

A CV-19 specific workshop was held in August 2020 and our stakeholders told us some of the main impacts have been associated with an increase in mental health issues due to social isolation and job losses, food and fuel poverty. They also identified that larger energy bills was an issue due to the pandemic, due to spending more time at home, especially during winter. They identified that there was an increased risk of CO due to not being able to get appliances repaired or maintained due to financial hardship. 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. They 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. Stakeholders also raised the point that the mental health of people living with physical disabilities had been significantly impacted due to lockdown. Another impact of the pandemic has been access to essential services for those living in vulnerable situations. This only serves to exacerbate existing issues because of the rural nature of some of County Durham. In some of these areas, a GP may be the only person providing support to priority groups.

A workshop around Customer Touchpoints was held in October 2020. Stakeholders told us that to tackle fuel poverty, we need to maximise opportunities at every-day touchpoints and daily interactions, such as GP surgeries, clinics and hospitals. This project will enable DCC to take a strategic and comprehensive approach to engaging with these health professionals, which will help to identify and reach a significant number of individuals, vulnerable due to living in cold homes with underlying health problems.

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), especially raising awareness for those off the gas grid and paying large amounts of money on fuel bills. 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 and this is the aim of this project – to work with trusted partners to access those groups who require the appropriate support. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty by engaging with health professionals and maximising opportunities through customer touchpoints.

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 physically disabled people living in low energy efficient housing and in fuel poverty. The tool has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

Specifically, in relation to this project, DCC covers the region of Durham and the outlying areas. This LA has extensive reach into those customers living with cold related ill health, poor housing stock, fuel poverty and energy inefficient properties. Within NGN's region, Durham CC is the one LA that has access to lots of health data and they are a trusted intermediary in this region. The proposals submitted are endorsed by communities and stakeholders. The links Durham CC has into these different customer groups, enables them to provide practical assistance and support. Durham CC have a close relationship with GP surgeries and CCG's as a result of previous research projects that they have undertaken. Durham is also the only area in our network that has a good demographic in terms of social indicators and urban/rural areas. This project tackles fuel poverty, which is compounded by living in cold/inefficient housing stock, resulting in health impacts and therefore clearly aligns with NGN's vulnerability strategy.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research, indicated that the Wear area had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN. More recently, NGN commissioned some CO research which highlighted that only 37% of respondents in the Wear area (covered by DCC), 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 and 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 CO and PSR in the County Durham area.

CV-19 research commissioned by NGN in June 2020, highlighted wider conclusions 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 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

- Mail out letter to circa 24,000 households in targeted areas with GP Practices
- Promotional Flyer
- Door to door leaflet drops in street by street are based on promotions
- DCC County News Promotions
- Uptake of ECO Flex Grants
- Referrals to the Fire and Rescue Service
- 40 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 a survey
- PSR referral sign ups
- Customers will also have an awareness of how to save energy
- Fuel poor connections

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

This project will work with Durham County Council, County Durham Clinical Commissioning Group, GP Practices across County Durham, Managing Money Better service, Durham Fire and Rescue Service and Energy Company Obligation Contractors.

7. Potential for new learning

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

There is a further opportunity to understand how best to increase awareness of CO and referrals to the PSR, via GP practices and other health touchpoints. Further potential could be to extend the project across the NGN footprint, to include other GP practices. This issue is unlikely to be prevalent in DCC's area alone.

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.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director