

Highfield Co-op (Bradford district) - Visually Impairment Energy Project

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

There are approximately a million visually impaired people in the UK. Academic social initiator mapping research commissioned by NGN, indicates that there are approximately 38,000 people in the NGN area, who are registered as blind or visually impaired. Bradford is one of the highest areas with this physical impairment at 3,380. Preliminary research suggests that their energy advice needs have been entirely overlooked. While some energy resources could be requested in accessible formats (such as large print), these options were not produced as standard and only related to a proportion of the full range of material. As a result, a significant subsection of the population may have been missing out on energy efficiency opportunities, especially those living in fuel poverty. This project is aimed at supporting visually impaired people within the Craven and Keighley district, who face fuel poverty, lack of information on the Priority Service Register (PSR) and carbon monoxide (CO) awareness.

1.1 The solution

Highfield Co-op aim to work closely with vulnerable communities to raise awareness of fuel poverty and CO poisoning, specifically with visually impaired customers. They will work closely with Sight Airedale, who have access to and support around 500 local people with visual impairments, to deliver this project. Highfield Co-op will provide audio and braille leaflets to customers containing energy and important safety information. Highfield Co-op work at grass roots level and therefore have access to these groups. They are very much a trusted intermediary within the community, who can reach those who could potentially fall through the gaps. They will be able to provide reassurance and alleviate fears and concerns around energy and gas safety. Their established role within these communities enables them to be able to access ambassadors and key contacts within these diverse and hard to reach groups.

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

This project aims to deliver clear and effective messaging to blind and visually impaired people around fuel poverty and energy saving information, CO awareness and information on the PSR. Working with Sight Airedale and NGN to ensure that blind and visually impaired people are more informed about how to be more energy efficient, save money and feel safe.

2.2 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide carbon monoxide (CO) awareness sessions to vulnerable customers with visual impairments, including pre and post awareness questionnaire
- Provide advice around energy saving
- Provide advice and encourage community members to sign up to the PSR

- Work closely with Sight Airedale to start conversations around fuel poverty and to find solutions on how to deal with fuel poverty, for people visual impairments

2.3 Scope

- 85 audio and braille leaflets delivered
- 10 Volunteers
- 285 people reached / 120 hours spent with them
- The geographical area of Craven and Keighley district in Bradford

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 have a visual impairment, that may not be aware of the dangers of CO and are experiencing fuel poverty. Recent CO research undertaken by NGN found that increasing awareness of the dangers of CO was a priority in Bradford. CO awareness sessions will be delivered as part of the project outputs. This project seeks to take advantage of a unique opportunity, to provide important and potentially life-saving information, to vulnerable customers who are difficult to reach and may not be aware of CO and how to save energy and money on fuel bills, due to their vulnerability. As the project has a physical vulnerability theme it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy, as does the energy saving element, which will ultimately result in financial savings and address the theme of financial vulnerability.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- As this project is around CO awareness and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO, as well as addressing fuel poverty for the blind and visually impaired, it aligns with the eligibility criteria
- 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.

At a CV-19 specific workshop held in August 2020, our stakeholders identified that there was an increased risk of CO poisoning due to the impact of the pandemic. This is further compounded when there are visual impairment disabilities to contend with. This group may not have any knowledge about CO and especially the visual signs that are evident, when appliances are not being maintained correctly, due to financial challenges and lack of awareness. Many people have also been furloughed, are on lower incomes and suffered redundancy, which have created significant financial challenges. Maintaining and repairing/replacing appliances may not be a consideration nor a priority for these groups, thus 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 appliances falling into disrepair. This project has been designed in partnership with Sight Airedale and vulnerable groups which Highfield Co-op already work with, have been involved in the planning process. Highfield Co-op have found that the visual impaired community within Bradford, have a lack of support and information access and they have no knowledge on the dangers of CO.

Another key opportunity is accessing environments with key customer touchpoints, for customers with physical impairments. 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 Highfield Co-op to also consider that route to access those hard to reach, who may attend health appointments.

In January 2021 we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop our stakeholders said that fuel, food and general poverty are all linked, and we need more streamlined ways of working together ie partners can help raise awareness of different funding available such as Warm Home Discount. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty but with the increased challenge of a physical disability. The partnership with Sight Airedale will significantly help to deliver this project, as they already have established relationships with people most in need.

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. This could be for example, those living in fuel poverty with physical disabilities. All data can be mixed and matched to answer complicated questions. This has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues. 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.

Specifically, in relation to this project, Highfield Co-op are bespoke to the region of Bradford/Keighley. This community group has extensive reach into those customers living in fuel poverty and therefore in desperate need of support. This is further compounded by cultural differences and English not being the first language, as well as groups living with physical disabilities. Stakeholder engagement through 2020 told us that access to many support services is becoming increasingly difficult and has been compounded by the pandemic. Highfield Co-op are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most deprived areas of our network, at grass roots level and are the only organisation, who could effectively provide the services that have been identified, in partnership with a visual impairment charity.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research, indicated that Bradford had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN. More recently, NGN commissioned some PSR and CO research which highlighted that only 32% of respondents in Bradford recognise that CO can kill you and 20% of respondents rate their awareness of CO as 5 out of 10 or lower. 34% of respondents did not feel their awareness had increased over the past few years. 33% of the people who responded in Bradford did not have a CO alarm in their home and only 29% of respondents test their alarm annually. From the same research, the number of respondents who have a disc which changes colour when CO is present is highest in Bradford. The concern here is that a disc is no longer a recommended option. In terms of PSR research, 64% of respondents in Bradford are not aware of the PSR. Over 65% of the respondents across all areas, feel there is nothing preventing them being on the register if they were eligible. It is therefore evident that any awareness raising in this regard will have a positive effect on this community.

Wider conclusions around CV-19 research were as follows, hence another reason why this project is being supported.

- The most severely impacted include those with multiple risk factors and vulnerabilities
- Those with severe health risks who are shielding face multiple difficulties – the health conditions that put them at risk, plus isolation and challenges in accessing services
- 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

- 285 people reached / 120 hours spent with them on safety and energy issues
- 10 Volunteers
- 85 audio and braille leaflets delivered
- 40 accessible Smart Meters ordered
- 40 accessible heating control systems ordered

5.2 Success criteria

- All vulnerable customers referred will have a greater understanding of the importance of gas safety and the dangers associated with CO
- PSR referrals
- Provide information in different format such as braille and to work to support their anxieties around fuel poverty and CO awareness

- Measure the success of the project by working closely with the participants/questionnaires
- Customers will also have an awareness of how to save energy and stay safe

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

Highfield Co-op will work with Sight Airedale to deliver this project.

7. Potential for new learning

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

The learning which will arise from this project will be understanding how the visually impaired community accesses and uses energy information for raising awareness around CO and fuel poverty. Learning will also be around what methods and format to use, when reaching out to visually impaired communities and share within the wider NGN geographical 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 July 2021 – 28th February 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 the Keighley, Airedale and the Craven areas of Bradford.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director