

### VCMA – Customer Team Administration Assistant

<b>Funding GDN(s)</b>	<b>Northern Gas Networks</b>
<b>For Collaborative VCMA Projects:</b>	Role of GDN(s) N/A
<b>Date of PEA submission:</b>	June 2022
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<b>Total cost (£k)</b>	*detailed separately
<b>Total VCMA funding required (£k)</b>	*detailed separately

## **1. Problem(s)**

*This should outline the problem(s) which is/are being addressed by the VCMA Project*

In the UK as many as one in six homes could be living with an unsafe gas appliance. This equates to around four million households at risk of being disconnected from supply should their appliance be checked by a gas engineer. Whilst many households can afford to repair or replace an appliance, vulnerable and low-income households may face financial or other barriers, which prevent them from doing this. As a result, these households are at an increased risk of not having critical heat/hot water or cooking facilities. They may also resort to potentially hazardous coping mechanisms, all of which can be detrimental to health and wellbeing. Whilst NGN engineers can identify these issues, there is currently no back-office support to advise and provide guidance for these scenarios. There is currently no support to directly communicate with these customers, post the engineers visit. Engineers are trained to identify vulnerability however, they do not have time to provide this additional support service. Nor do they have the skills or knowledge to support customers with complex needs.

### **1.1 The solution**

Making Every Contact Count (MECC) was a joint NIA funded research project between National Energy Action (NEA) and Northern Gas Networks (NGN) which sought to safeguard vulnerable domestic customers, who are impacted by the disconnection of their gas supply for safety reasons. This can be an issue for any customer but particularly those living in vulnerable circumstances. The solution to the above problem identified, is to fund a role which would serve as a single point of contact (SPOC) for any customers, requiring additional support or who have complex needs. Once vulnerability and additional needs are identified by the engineer, this is where a SPOC role would get involved. The role would involve making follow up calls with the customer and working through each case to achieve a resolution for the customer's need. Customers with complex needs can require a lot of time to be invested, which a role such as this, would be able to 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.*

The scope would cover any scenario where an NGN engineer isolates a gas appliance/gas supply to a customer. Regulations state that engineers are required to disconnect or isolate the supply of gas to an appliance or property in the event of a gas emergency, which poses a risk to life and property. However, this can leave vulnerable customers unable to cover the costs of repairing or replacing these appliances, exposing them to the dangers of living in a cold house, potentially with no heating, hot water or means of cooking. This would further compound any existing health conditions. The objective is to ensure NGN has a robust support network in place to assist those most in need and in doing so, support NGN's strategy for supporting vulnerable customers following disconnection. Some of the benefits are to minimise the amount of time a customer is potentially 'off gas' and also addressing other safety issues such as minimising risk to life due to CO leakage. The role would enable a customer to be supported from cradle to grave on any issues they are experiencing. For example, debt advice, energy efficiency advice, home safety visits from fire and rescue etc.

## 2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide support to vulnerable customers/their families
- Signpost these customers to the relevant organisation to ensure they understand next available steps/support available – such as providing the Gas Safe Register helpline telephone number
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of energy efficiency and provide details of the organisations that specialise in ways these customers can save money on their energy bills – such as Green Doctor
- Support the network with advice and referrals to parties such as adult social care, fire and rescue etc.
- Refer customers to debt advice services where needed
- Help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty to enable them to get their appliances checked and their gas supply restored
- Provide one to one support and advice, if required for customers with complex needs

## 2.2 Scope

- 1 x full time vulnerable customer advisor
- Any customer who has been affected by a gas supply interruption and has had an appliance disconnected
- Raise awareness of benefits of being on the PSR
- Case studies from beneficiaries (anonymised)
- Covers all of NGN network

## 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 for VCMA funding, under the relevant criteria, as it will support those vulnerable customers who need extra help when a gas appliance has been disconnected. The making every contact count process would ensure that customers are signposted for additional support at point of disconnection. This additional support would be provided by NGN partners including, local authority, fire and rescue and fuel banks. The role will also help tackle the issue of fuel poverty from a number of perspectives and also introduces issues relating to vulnerability, carbon monoxide, energy efficiency advice and other support services available.

The role is vital to support the continuity of making every contact count when NGN personnel interact with a customer. This service is required when a First Call Operative (engineer) / FCO from NGN, disconnects an appliance / isolates a gas supply to a customer's home when they have been identified as living in vulnerable circumstances. The FCO will signpost the customer to the relevant third party for additional support / appliance repair / replace. A follow up process will then be invoked whereby the admin assistant will contact the customer to close the loop. This follow up call will be made to ensure the customers understands / has the relevant information to hand about next steps required and whether they require any additional support after their discussion with the

engineer and to identify they fully understand any further action that may be required. The admin assistant will also make an attempt to contact family members if the customer does not understand or the customers support worker where relevant. The role will also involve liaising with fuel banks, local authority services (not limited to these). MI collated over the duration of the one-year pilot, indicated that a resource was required to manage the follow up call process from cradle to grave. Customers and stakeholders engaged with NGN after completion of the trial over the 2 patches and over 80% of these customers confirmed they felt the MECC process is vital and should be part of a BAU process across all 9 patches within the NGN network.

Since this trial, further vulnerabilities have been identified across the whole of the network, where complex needs have been identified and multiple agencies do need to become involved. For example, once case study was completed after an FCO had reported his concerns about a customer he had visited who was a hoarder. This customer was an elderly gentleman who had no support in terms of family and friends and had confirmed he wasn't known to Adult Social Services. His home and the garden area outside of his home (where the gas service pipe was located) was a fire and health risk. This customer had a gas cooker and used this to stockpile rubbish and clothing on top of and the cooker and his outside service pipe was leaking gas. The NGN FCO's main focus was to ensure the customers gas supply was safe, he required some back-office support to take over the remaining vulnerability issues he had identified for this customer, on his behalf. The FCO identified there was a fire risk/customer had no support network/there were language barriers/health risks as he did need to isolate this customer's gas supply for safety reasons. Therefore, a full-time customer advisor is required for this type of scenario. The FCO rang Customer Care who captured the customers details and took over to allow the engineer to complete his tasks. The Customer care advisor rang the local fire service who at the time were only taking online referrals for home fire safety visits. They also rang Adult Social Care direct to make them aware of the risks to the customers health. They also made the NGN Emergency Officer in that area aware of this customer and the issues his FCO had raised as a decision was made not to provide alternative heating and cooking due to fire risks. In total it took the Customer Care advisor around 2 hours to ensure the relevant organisations had this customer on their radar to ensure he received follow up support from them. As emergency response engineers do not have time under our licence condition work to undertake all of this additional support and admin processes this back office support was vital for this particular customer and there were 2 such customers identified living in similar circumstances in the space of 4 days. There is also a requirement to have an advisor for additional support around PSR and a direct route via a hotline into NGN.

As the project (role responsibilities) potentially covers all of NGN's vulnerability strategy themes around financial hardship, temporary vulnerabilities, rurality, physical disabilities, and mental health, it aligns with the VCMA criteria.

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

### 3.1 Eligibility criteria

- Customers who have an appliance disconnected, could potentially fall under one or more vulnerabilities identified under NGN's vulnerability strategy.
- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms

#### 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 food and fuel poverty as an increased risk, due to the pandemic. Even households with both parents working, have been forced to use foodbanks. New emerging issues due to CV-19 were also discussed, in terms of what the impact of the pandemic has on hidden vulnerability and how the current pandemic impacted demand for essential services, to support CIVS. Having an appliance condemned or gas supply disconnected can be devastating, particularly for those who are already struggling to afford heating costs and other essentials. Those with complex needs are even more disadvantaged and support services for these customers are being significantly reduced, as a result of the pandemic.

During our August 2020 CV-19 specific workshop, our stakeholders identified that there was also 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. The choice between heating and eating has become more prevalent. As a further consequence of being on low incomes or in fuel poverty, the maintenance and replacement of 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.

In January 2021, we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop our stakeholders said we should have a network of referrals/meeting to promote partnerships and partners can help raise awareness of different support funding available, which is what this project sets out to achieve by contacting the customer after the gas has been disconnected and helping them to get support by

using other agencies and services. This project (role) fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty and financial hardship amongst other things.

#### 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 MECC pilot 2018/2019 (background information)

The MECC protocol was piloted over 12 months in two pilot patches within the NGN network: Bradford and North Tyne. When an NGN first call operative (FCO) from the trial patches had disconnected one of our customer's gas supply during a gas emergency job, the engineer would then identify whether their customer was living in a vulnerable situation. If the customer was vulnerable the FCO would then complete the warning notice document and tick that the section indicating their customer was vulnerable. The warning notices were then sent through to the customer care team and customer care reception. This would trigger a 'priority' follow-up call the following day. Referrals were also sent via the Customer Interface App (CIC) within NGN (this is the route by which engineers made referrals and highlighted additional support needs).

The MECC protocol represented a new way of working for NGN, more so its FCOs and frontline operational staff, who do often come into contact with customers that are living in vulnerable situations. These customers had not previously been identified as being a vulnerable customer (not on PSR). A robust process was required to offer further support from the point of disconnection of their gas supply. Gas supply disconnection can in itself create a vulnerable situation for customers who may already have vulnerability risk factors present, or the gas isolation can in itself create vulnerability.

NEA surveyed staff from NGN Customer Care team (CCT). All respondents at survey point 1 (mid-way through the pilot) and survey point 2 (at the end of the pilot) expressed that they understood how to support a vulnerable customer through MECC and were confident in doing so. In turn, the staff on CCT felt confident in putting their understanding into practice and agreed that they felt able to support vulnerable customers through MECC and knew which agencies to refer a customer to, 50% strongly agreed with this statement.

Data provided indicated that all referrals for follow-up support came via the CIC App. Across both patches, 78 additional vulnerable customers were identified and received follow-up support that would not have otherwise been offered this support. Calculated across the NGN network, this resulted in potentially 229 vulnerable customers that would not have been identified as vulnerable therefore not offered this additional support. These figures represent the counterfactual impact of the pilot. That is, support offered, or that could be offered that would not have otherwise occurred (i.e. had the pilot not been implemented). 95 onward referrals were made for those customers that were identified as vulnerable during the pilot.

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The pilot also suggested an emergency telephone helpline for FCOs and other operational staff to access immediate support for those customers in crisis. This would be a single-point-of-contact support line which immediate support could be accessed for vulnerable customers who are in crisis and relieve the responsibility for FCOs who often feel unprepared, inadequately trained or frustrated at not being able to help as morally they wanted to help their customer. Therefore, this role would support this finding as there would be one dedicated full-time member of staff on the customer care team, making the MECC calls to customers. This role would also ensure a SPOC was on hand to provide back-office support to liaise and assist FCO's and operational staff network wide.

This role will involve trying to call the customer 3 times, sending a letter if unable to reach a customer via telephone asking them to contact NGN and logging an enquiry onto the system to keep this customer on our records. The duration of these call-backs/time spent helping a customer will vary dependant on the customers' needs/circumstances. For example, the case study mentioned above, this 1 customers situation and the series of calls required took a total of 2 hours. Another example is language barriers and communicating with the customer via the language line. This would therefore increase the time spent making the MECC calls and the need for 1 FTE within the customer care team to be able to provide this service/additional support for vulnerable customers.

#### **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. Some or all of the vulnerability themes within NGN's vulnerability strategy will be incorporated depending on what support is identified.

#### **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**

Part of the success criteria will be that as a result of this role, a single point of contact (SPOC) with knowledge and experience of energy vulnerability and assisting vulnerable customers will be established. Office-based, visible and approachable they would provide additional support and guidance to NGN staff on vulnerability and the MECC protocol either by email, phone or in person.

Staff would be able to receive regular updates on the outcomes which have been achieved for customers as a result of MECC. This could act to increase referrals and maintain engagement.

- Number of customers supported through the process and the number of appliances repaired and replaced.
- Number of different referral routes identified
- Anonymised case studies
- Knowledge gained around CO
- Increased PSR referrals

- Increased number of partner referral routes

## 5.2 Success criteria

- PSR referral sign ups across the NGN network
- Number of referrals by each category where customers who have been disconnected have been helped
- SPOC for FCO's and NGN staff

## 6. Project Partners and third parties involved

*Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement*

NGN will not be working with any third party or partners to deliver this role

## 7. Potential for new learning

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

Some learning has already been gathered from the initial MECC pilot with the two patches. Any other learning will be shared with GDN's and other partners as well as internally and with social stakeholders.

## 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.*

1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026

## 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 within NGN geographical area

## Approved by

Eileen Brown  
Customer Experience Director