Community Action Northumberland (CAN) - Warm Hub Toolkit

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	July 2022
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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 is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel poverty, but rural isolation presents a significant barrier to reaching many of those most in need. Rurality and the associated isolation can make those living in fuel poverty even more vulnerable, especially when access to essential services can be a further challenge. Currently there is no provision particularly in rural localities, to support those customers who feel socially isolated and can't afford a hot meal nor drink.

Solution

A Warm Hub Toolkit will be created, which can be used by any organisation, including a Gas Distribution Network (GDN) or Distribution Network Operator (DNO), to ensure that a consistent model, with appropriate rules and governance (to ensure compliance to the model), can be adopted for any locality. The toolkit will ensure that the key principles and building blocks of a Warm Hub are adhered to, in terms of compliance to standards, policies and procedures. The Warm Hub model has three guiding principles i.e. the aim of the model is to:

- ➢ Support community buildings
- ➢ Support volunteers and
- ➢ Support hard to reach customers and / or those who may be living in vulnerable situations

A Warm Hub can also be utilised by anyone who needs general support and social interaction therefore, this is not limited to rural locations, but could also be adopted in urban areas. Providing the model is adhered to and the principles followed, anyone can open a Warm Hub, anywhere.

A Warm Hub is a place within the local community (church hall, village hall, community centre), where customers in vulnerable situations can attend. The objective is to ensure that members of the community will be welcomed into a warm, safe and friendly environment, where they can enjoy a healthy, good value, hot meal and a warm drink. In addition, they will have the company of other people, as well as access to services. A very much 'back to basics' and pragmatic approach.

The Warm Hub model has an energy theme running through all aspects of the initiative. This includes but is not limited to, energy and CO training for volunteers, an aim for low carbon community buildings and energy support and advice, including registration to the Priority Services Register (PSR), for those who attend.

Northumberland Warm Hub scheme has been running for 5 years, with 30 hubs having been established to date. Pre CV-19 pandemic, the hubs had a consumer attendance of over 19,000 per year. During the pandemic, face to face attendance was not possible however, the Warm Hub model was re-purposed. With the infrastructure and processes already in place, enabled the delivery of 1,000's of food parcels, hot meals, grow your own plants, jigsaws, games, energy advice and support, to thousands of homes.

The Warm Hub model provided a lifeline support to rural communities during storm Arwen, which proves the Warm Hub is flexible and can be used during a supply interruption emergency and / or a sever weather event as an emergency centre.

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 Warm Hub Toolkit will be in the form of an interactive, online toolkit. This will involve undertaking a series of modules, whereby the first module must be completed, dated and actioned, before the second module becomes available and so on.

Those registering for the scheme will receive support, to reach a minimum standard for the building and volunteers. Once these elements have been achieved, the Warm Hub can open its door to the community. The registration and qualification process will be via an online interactive toolkit, which allows access to an approved organisation, via a log in code. A list of online support will be available (detailed below), which is part of the Warm Hub process. Organisations can join the scheme, prior to the outline below being achieved.

- **The building to be utilised will become 'fit for purpose'.** A small grant can be made available to carry out simple upgrades, this can include providing kitchen aids for those members of the community who need extra help with eating and drinking. For example, double handed cups for those with arthritis, anti-shaking cutlery, and plate guards for those with Parkinson's disease, to name but a few. The grant can also be used as match funding, to support and access funding for more extensive work
- **Energy efficient building.** Renewable heating, PV and solar panels, energy saving bulbs, insulation, smart meters are installed where possible, via grant funding. The aim is to reduce the building's carbon footprint, energy bills and ensure its sustainability. This building will also show case renewables to members of the community
- **Risk assessments will be undertaken**
- **Energy audits, accessibility, and Dementia friendly checks**, are part of the support offered
- **Governance and policies** will be put in place, as and when required
- **Appropriate insurances and licences** will be put in place
- **Suitable volunteer recruitment events** will be held, if required
- **DBS checks and volunteer contracts and policies** will be put in place
- **A volunteer will be designated as a community energy agent** and will receive appropriate training including PSR and CO awareness
- **Volunteers receive FREE ongoing support and training** in Dementia Awareness, Food Safety, Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding, CO awareness and First Aid…to name but a few. Any course to help the Warm Hub deliver the service they want to provide and address a local need, will be considered

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- To have an interactive online toolkit in place that anyone can use to establish a Warm Hub
- Completion of interactive modules using a staged approach, to ensure all the criteria is met in each module, prior to progressing
- To ensure the integrity of the scheme is maintained
- Provide online Warm Hub information and support for the first year
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register (PSR)
- Provide CO awareness briefings / sessions
- Raise awareness of energy efficiency
- Sustainability of the Warm Hub – this will be achieved via the online toolkit, after initial set up costs, there will be very little maintenance required

2.2 Scope

- Warm Hub must be to a consistent standard, as per Toolkit modules
- Warm Hub Toolkit will ensure the integrity of the model is maintained
- Governance and compliance checks are required
- Facilitated by local people / volunteers – scheme should always meet the needs of the community
- Covers all of NGN area and wider - if organisations outside of NGN's area choose to register for the Toolkit
- Rural and urban areas covered
- Training for new volunteers
- Compliance audits undertaken – as and when required

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 fuel poverty, as well as raising awareness of CO. The Warm Hub Model aims to support people who have become lonely, increasingly isolated and at risk of fuel poverty. Warm Hubs are places within the local community where people can be assured of finding a safe, warm and friendly environment in which to enjoy refreshments, energy advice, carbon monoxide information, access to services and the company of other people. This project will provide organisations with a toolkit to establish and operate a Warm Hub on their own, which aligns to the Warm Hub brand.

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

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3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project has a positive SROI
- This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial hardship, rurality and mental health themes
- Has defined outcomes as required
- 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 – 2021

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 2019-2021 we held multiple workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject of 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. Our stakeholders told us some of the main impacts have been associated with an increase in fuel and food poverty and there is a greater need than ever, to support customers accessing fuel and food banks. Quite often a dilemma between heating and eating.

In the CV-19 specific workshop held in August 2020, our stakeholders also identified that larger energy bills was an issue due to the pandemic. They stated that this was due to people spending more time at home, especially those less mobile, shielding and socially isolated due to rurality. However, a further challenge which compounded this problem, was not being able to contact energy suppliers to discuss these issues. Access to other essential services also significantly decreased, making it increasingly difficult for those in rural localities.

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At the same workshop, our stakeholders also 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 rural isolation, potentially living in fuel poverty and off the gas grid, there is likely to be a significant gap in their knowledge around CO in particular, if they use other fossil fuels such as oil or coal.

In January and September 2021, we held a couple of fuel poverty workshop. During these workshops 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. Partners can help raise awareness of different funding and support available. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty and living in rural localities.

Further stakeholder engagement throughout 2020, told us that fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. The current energy crisis is further compounding this already serious issue. A Warm Hub can provide a solution to those customers who are unable to stay in their own home, due to their inability to afford warmth. The original Warm Hub project won multiple awards including the Utility Week Award in 2017, for Community Initiative of the Year. The Warm Hub model therefore has a proven track record.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside and Sunderland were the top five places, to emerge as having the greatest concentration of vulnerabilities within NGN's network. This was based on a combination of the following vulnerability factors:

- ➢ Fuel poverty
- ➢ Benefit claims
- ➢ No qualifications
- ➢ Long term health problem / disability

Due to the financial challenges, currently experienced in these areas, makes it even more important to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of CO. These localities need to be key areas for consideration, both in terms of ensuring service delivery is aware of challenges people may face, and in relation to targeting potential support. Northumberland is one of the more rural districts that are close to fitting the bill, in relation to the vulnerability factors above. Raising awareness of CO needs to be a priority in this area, due to the fact that many communities will be off the gas grid and using other fossil fuels such as, oil, coal and wood burning stoves.

Each year we use our annual Customer Perceptions Research to understand the priorities of our customers. Amongst a set of general tracker questions i.e., same questions that are asked year on year, the evidence in the most recent research (February 2022), indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly, than providing a safe and reliable supply of gas, for the first time. This is a clear indication, as to how concerned customers are about the cost of energy and the subsequent impact this will have on other bills.

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Having been approached by a number of organisations asking the question around how to set up a Warm Hub, CAN suggested a toolkit would assist in this request. It will ensure compliance to the brand and above all else, ensure consistency wherever the Warm Hub model is adopted.

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support customers in vulnerable situations (CIVS). 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 CIVS, which meets the needs of our stakeholders. This group is fully aware of the success of Warm Hubs.

4.3 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 financial hardship, rurality and mental health which are addressed with the Warm Hub model, 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

- Warm Hub Toolkit produced and rolled out
- Increased PSR referrals (due to increased attendance at Warm Hubs)
- Increased CO awareness sessions and pre and post CO questionnaire results (due to increased attendance at Warm Hubs)
- Increased energy efficiency awareness (due to increased attendance at Warm Hubs)
- Additional funding - secured due to volunteers being trained in funding applications
- Increased skills and knowledge through training courses (e.g. food hygiene, First Aid etc.)

5.2 Success criteria

- Increased number of Warm Hubs established across NGN's area and beyond / more customers supported
- Recognised regional / national brand
- Increased awareness of Warm Hubs and how to manage one

- All Warm Hub attendees will have a greater understanding of the importance of gas safety (including CO), energy and PSR
- More volunteers recruited
- Scaling up an already tried and tested model
- Creation of a sustainable support model for local communities

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 project

7. **Potential for new learning**

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

The Warm Hub model is already well established in Northumberland and therefore a lot of learning has already been achieved. In order to maintain the integrity of the brand, the Warm Hubs Toolkit will ensure that wherever a Warm Hub is established, the same standards and guiding principles are adhered to. Any learning will be achieved once the Toolkit starts to be utilised by organisations other than CAN. The learning will be shared with all stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies

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.

July 2022 – June 2025

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.

All of NGN area

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director