

VCMA – CO Alarm Distribution

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

In the UK, many people that use carbon / fossil fuelled appliances are not aware of the dangers of Carbon Monoxide (CO) and do not have a working audible CO alarm. NGN commissioned research around CO and PSR in January 2021. Of 1,826 people surveyed in 2020, only around a fifth across the majority of Northern Gas Networks (NGN) area, were aware that CO was odourless and poisonous, ranging from 19% (Leeds) to 26% (Cumbria). 4% of respondents in Leeds were not sure what CO was. CO alarm ownership across NGN's network remains relatively low, with over 20% of customers surveyed across the NGN network still not having an audible CO alarm installed in their properties.

Many of our customers that are living in vulnerable situations are unable to afford to purchase CO alarms and are often struggling to pay for the basics i.e. food and affordable warmth, for themselves and their families. This is further impacted due to the current energy and cost of living crises. As a result, these households may also resort to potentially hazardous coping mechanisms, all of which can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.

1.1 The solution

Using VCMA funding, we can purchase a large number of CO alarms, which we will distribute to customers who would otherwise not be able to afford to purchase and install one in their homes. We will send a CO alarm, free of charge, to vulnerable customers who do not have a CO alarm and will also provide our community and charity partners with CO alarms to distribute to their vulnerable customers. These grass root organisations, are the trusted intermediaries who engage with hard-to-reach communities on a daily basis.

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 funding will see alarms being purchased over the 5-year period of RIIO-2. NGN will continue to issue alarms to customers in vulnerable situations as per the OFGEM VCMA guidance on vulnerable customers. We will continue to use our strategic, community and charity partners, to target communities in the highest areas of deprivation, whilst providing CO awareness surveys and measuring customer's knowledge both pre and post awareness survey.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide support to customers living in vulnerable situations / their families
- Provide a free CO alarm to customers that are on the Priority Services Register (PSR)
- Referrals to the PSR for customers who contact NGN for a free CO alarm, who may be eligible although are not on the register
- Help customers in vulnerable situations to have peace of mind that if their appliances are at risk of CO leakage, they will be able to rectify this, as they will have an audible working CO alarm

2.2 Scope

- Provide a CO alarm to any customer on the PSR that has requested a free CO alarm
- Raise awareness of benefits of being on the PSR and undertake surveys
- Provide CO alarms to our partners to issue to their vulnerable and hard-to-reach customers
- 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 customers living in vulnerable situations who require a CO alarm. This additional support will also provide NGN partners with alarms to distribute to their communities, some of which NGN may never have any interaction with.

As the project has the potential to cover all of NGN's Customers In Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) Strategy, 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 are on the PSR and require a CO alarm, could potentially fall under one or more vulnerabilities identified under NGN's CIVS 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 2020 – 2022

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 2020-2022 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. This is further compounded when there are cultural differences to also consider, due to alternative ways of heating and cooking. Many people had been furloughed, were on lower incomes and suffered redundancy, which created significant financial challenges. The choice between heating and eating has become more prevalent and further compounded by the energy and cost of living crises. 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

During our November 2021 Energy Crisis / Partnership Working workshop our stakeholders said the energy crisis will result in people not getting their appliances serviced every year, which increases the risks of CO poisoning. Having been in an energy crisis since November 2021, this continues to impact customers in vulnerable situations and therefore increases these risks.

A CO awareness workshop was held in February 2022. During this workshop our stakeholders identified that gas servicing organisations need to communicate more effectively with customers. They suggested they could collect information whilst attending a property and leave useful information with customers whilst on site. They also commented that they are supportive of NGN's CO approach but felt we could be doing more to raise awareness. This included highlighting specific groups of people with whom we should engage and taking a more person-centred approach in communications and any campaigns. This project will tackle this issue by providing CO alarms free of charge to the most vulnerable within our communities. Stakeholders also mentioned that as a consequence of living costs rising and an increase in those in or at risk of fuel poverty, there would be an impact on CO safety, with more people taking measures to save costs, such as not getting appliances serviced regularly. NGN recognise this is an increasing challenge and risk for our customers and will use this to inform our approach over the GD2 period.

NGN have also recently undertaken a large doorstep survey with customers to understand levels of CO awareness. The survey helped to identify areas across the region where we need to target more specific CO awareness information, free CO alarms were provided to vulnerable customer during the doorstep surveys.

Each year we also 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, indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly than anything else, 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 having to prioritise how they spend their money. This project will help alleviate the cost of CO alarms for our customers in vulnerable situations across the NGN network.

4.2 CO and PSR Research - January 2021

NGN commissioned research around CO and PSR in January 2021. Some, if not all of the top actions from that research, will be addressed by supporting this project:

- Target increasing awareness of the dangers of CO
- Increase understanding of what CO actually is
- Encourage people to get a CO alarm
- Encourage people to test their alarms
- Increase awareness of the PSR – over half of respondents were not aware of the PSR

At an overall level, respondents understanding of what CO saw the majority (36%) state that it can kill you or is a silent killer and an additional 7% described symptoms such as dangerous to lungs and breathing issues. 22% stated that it's a gas which is invisible, colourless, odourless and not detectable and 21% stated it's a gas which is dangerous, deadly, poisonous and toxic. 8% referred to the gas coming from faulty fuel equipment.

Only 23% of respondents recalled specific CO campaigns while 63% did not.

57% of respondents had no understanding of the Priority Services Register. While 10% identified it as a service for vulnerable, elderly, those with kids or on low incomes. 15% of respondents were on the Priority Services Register. 39% of the respondents heard about it from their energy provider and 71% said there was nothing stopping them if they were eligible or recommending to others.

To promote awareness of the Priority Services Register, 40% said to advertise or that it should be communicated followed by 18% saying it should be on TV, and 14% with leaflets or flyers. Respondents believe the information should be promoted on social media, in supermarkets and GP surgeries. The preferred method of interaction was adverts with 46% followed by email with 29% and letter with 21%.

4.3 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. The CEG work with NGN, to create the content of the Customers In Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) workshops, previously detailed in the document.

4.4 Vulnerability Strategy - AAA Framework

Within our Customers In Vulnerable Situations Strategy, which we developed with the help of our stakeholders, there is a 'AAA' framework. This helps us support our customers in vulnerable situations. Awareness, Accessibility and Action are the key principles and by adopting this principles-based approach, we will ensure that all customers are treated fairly and consistently. Some or all of the vulnerability themes within NGN's CIVS Strategy will be addressed, 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 identified through the distribution of the alarms to customers most at risk of harm caused by CO. This risk will be measured through a number of factors including a customer's ability to purchase an alarm, being on the PSR, means to afford gas appliance servicing and existing knowledge on the signs, symptoms and dangers of CO.

- Provide support to customers in vulnerable situations /their families
- Provide a free CO alarm to customers that are on the Priority Services Register (PSR)
- Number of customers supported through the project
- Increased PSR referrals
- Increased number of partner referral routes

5.2 Success criteria

- Increased knowledge and awareness of CO
- PSR referral sign ups across the NGN network
- CO alarms provided to customers in vulnerable situations across the NGN network
- Increase in CO alarms provided by our partners to their communities, within the NGN network

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

NGN have partnerships with various groups and organisations across the NGN network. They will help deliver both CO education (pre and post awareness surveys) and provide CO alarms through their visits and engagements.

7. Potential for new learning

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

Increase in knowledge of CO including signs and symptoms. 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.

1st April 2022 – 31st 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