

### Community Action Northumberland (CAN) – Heat AND Eat

<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>	March 2023
<b>Project contact name:</b>	Jill Walker
<b>Project contact number/email:</b>	<a href="mailto:JWalker@northerngas.co.uk">JWalker@northerngas.co.uk</a>
<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*

Northumberland is one of the most sparsely populated counties in England with just 63 people per square kilometre. 40.7% of Northumberland's population – 151,885 people, live in rural areas (defined as small towns & fringes, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings). Of these, more than 20% are over the age of 65. Of those people, 15,075 people report themselves as having a limiting long-term illness and 17,550 people are income deprived.

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.

## Solution

This winter there will be problems with heating and eating due to the currently energy and cost of living crisis. Through this project Community Action Northumberland (CAN) will deliver training sessions on how best to heat your home using energy saving measures and eating on a budget. This will be done by using the versatility, healthy low cost benefits of a slow cooker. CAN will deliver 12 Heat AND Eat sessions across the county to statutory and third sector organisations, to volunteers and paid staff. They will be highlighting the benefits of the additional support available via PSR and the dangers of CO poisoning linked to keeping warm and trying to save money by not having appliances serviced or chimneys swept.

CAN will not be giving out slow cookers only delivering training on using them

## 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.*

CAN aim to train 350 professionals via the Heat AND Eat project from the statutory and voluntary sector

Each of these trainees will then cascade this information to the people they support. CAN expect 1,000's of households each year to be impacted by this training. This project has been driven by demand and need, CAN are continuously being asked to deliver slow cooker training to cascade to other trainers, health professions, statutory and voluntary agencies etc. across the county.

### 2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- CAN have estimated that one household could save an estimated £468 per year on cooking energy at the current price of energy

- CAN will be giving basic energy saving tips that will have an impact on heating homes as well as the benefits of PSR and CO awareness
- Provide CO awareness sessions to vulnerable customers
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Reduced energy usage from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from more balanced diet

## 2.2 Scope

- CAN will train 350 professionals via the Heat AND Eat project from the statutory and voluntary sector
- CO awareness sessions delivered to around 350 people
- 50 direct PSR referrals
- The geographical area of Northumberland

## 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 CO awareness, within Northumberland. Northumberland is home to 316,000 people and covers an area of 5,013km<sup>2</sup>, 97% of its area is classed as rural. CAN has an extensive reach into both on and off grid customers, those in urban and rural isolation and those customers who are living in fuel poverty, therefore in desperate need of help.

People may want to shop locally and support the local economy, but limited affordability and choice, can undermine this desire. Local shops in many rural areas offer limited food choices, making it necessary to travel large distances to access supermarkets. Supermarket food deliveries can be very limited in some postcodes. Those on low incomes living in rural areas, also struggle to access support services, which tend to be located in urban centres. Poor, and at times non-existent, internet and mobile coverage further hinder access to support. For those who do not drive or are able to afford taxis, the cuts to public transport have further limited access to food and support services. This distance will affect residents' ability to access food retailers, as well as provisions of emergency food.

Many rural communities are living in fuel poverty and making choices in winter as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. Rural communities off the gas grid, means that heating has to be fuelled by oil, LPG or solid fuels, which also have the potential to cause CO poisoning. CAN are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most impacted areas of our network and are the only organisation who could effectively provide the services that have been identified within this project. As the project has rurality and financial hardship themes, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy.

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

### 3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project has a positive SROI
- This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial hardship and rurality 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 – 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 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 had on hidden vulnerability. Our stakeholders told us some of the main impacts were associated with an increase in fuel and food poverty and there is a greater need more than ever, due to the cost of living and energy crisis, to support customers accessing fuel and food banks. Quite often a dilemma between heating and eating.

In January and September 2021, we held a couple of fuel poverty workshops. 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.

#### **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

- Energy saving for vulnerable customers
- CO awareness sessions to vulnerable customers
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Reduced energy usage from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from more balanced diet

### 5.2 Success criteria

- 350 professionals trained via the Heat AND Eat project from the statutory and voluntary sector
- CO awareness sessions delivered to around 350 people
- 50 direct PSR referrals

## 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.*

Any learning will be shared with 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.

November 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> 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.*

Geographical area of Northumberland

**Approved by**

Eileen Brown  
Customer Experience Director