

### Community Action Northumberland (CAN) - Warm Hubs Coordinator

<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*

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.

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.

Warm hubs have been developed in Northumberland for 7 years, originally as a pilot funded by NGN for setting up 10 hubs, over the years this has been extended to 30. In order to protect the integrity of the scheme a warm hub toolkit has been developed which will give access to the scheme across the country. The role of warm hubs roll-out co-ordinator will see to the smooth running of the scheme whilst being delivered nationwide.

## Solution

The Warm Hub Toolkit is available to NGN and its stakeholders as well as GDN's across the country. In order to deliver this toolkit successfully this project will fund the new role of co-ordinator who will ensure all new Warm Hubs generated by the Toolkit Nationwide are delivered in line with the Northumberland Scheme.

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, social activity, Energy information and advice and the company of other people. Where volunteers are trained, and buildings are energy efficient and sustainable. The Warm Hub model has three guiding principles i.e., the aim of the model is to:

- Support community buildings
- Support volunteers
- 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.

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.

## 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.*

Working with applicants from the Warm Hubs Toolkit the coordinator will assist in the opening of new Warm Hubs across the country. The hubs need to have the following:

- The building to be utilised will become 'fit for purpose'
- Energy efficient building
- 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:

- Assist the opening of new Warm Hubs that are generated from the Warm Hub Toolkit
- Manage all aspects of the toolkit
- Keep the toolkit website up to date and running smoothly
- Check eligibility of potential Warm Hub schemes prior to delivery
- Travel to work with potential Warm Hub organisations across the country
- Lead on launch events
- Ensure all modules of the toolkit are met
- Carry out both online and face to face spot checks
- collate, disseminate and report on all aspects of the work

### 2.2 Scope

- Warm Hub must be to a consistent standard
- Governance and compliance checks are required
- Facilitated by local people / volunteers – scheme should always meet the needs of the community
- All areas within NGN are covered

### **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 allow CAN to assist in the opening of new Warm Hubs generated through the toolkit Nationwide.

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, 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 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

- Assist the opening of new Warm Hubs that are generated from the Warm Hub Toolkit
- Manage all aspects of the toolkit
- Toolkit website kept up to date and running smoothly
- Work with potential Warm Hub organisations across the country
- launch events for new Warm Hubs
- All modules of the toolkit are met
- Online and face to face spot checks carried out
- Collate, disseminate and report on all aspects of the work

### 5.2 Success criteria

- Increased number of Warm Hubs established across NGN's area / more customers supported
- 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

## **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 2024

### **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's geographical area

### **Approved by**

Eileen Brown  
Customer Experience Director