

Energy Confident! Pilot expansion

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2023
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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

Disabled people and especially individuals with mental health issues are over-represented amongst foodbank users. This was the case pre-pandemic and prior to the rising energy prices, inflation and the wider cost of living crisis. The situation is linked to a cumulative background of successive welfare reforms that disproportionately adversely affect disabled people and individuals with ongoing health conditions. Austerity measures within health and social care have further negatively impacted them and things are unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future. As a consequence of the pandemic there is a gap in user-friendly peer support for individuals and households experiencing fuel poverty, health and personal safety risks. Other vulnerabilities linked to disability and long-term health conditions, create further problems for this group. There are barriers in their ability to access, understand or act on information / advice through mainstream channels. The Energy Confident project with DIAL Leeds will help address these issues.

1.1 The solution

DIAL Leeds are a Disabled People's User Led Organisation (DPULO) providing empowering peer support for disabled people in a safe and positive environment, both remotely and face to face. This project will enable DIAL to provide personally tailored customer support and casework, based on individual needs, to resolve any energy related problems and in particular, for those living in fuel poverty. This project will support people with physical and sensory impairments, learning disabilities and / or long-term conditions including mental health issues, to confidently work through their issues and concerns on a one to one basis. Due to the nature of the organisation, DIAL will be able to access those customers that are hard and often impossible to reach. This project will work in partnership with Leeds North and West Foodbank (part of the Trussell Trust Network) to provide timely income-based solutions to food insecurity/ poverty for vulnerable disabled people facing multiple health, social and economic barriers in their daily lives.

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.

Objectives - the project objectives are to increase confidence, self-esteem and resilience which in turn, will lead to increased physical and mental health and wellbeing. Overall, the aim is to empower people to prepare for emergency situations that could help to save lives.

In summary, DIAL's specific objectives are to provide support in achieving the following:

- PSR awareness raising and sign-up
- Warm Home Discount applications
- Benefits health checks and income maximisation
- Gas, electricity and fire safety including carbon monoxide (CO) awareness and what to do in the event of an emergency
- Assistance with monitoring energy usage and billing/budgeting issues including smart meter take-up and accessing best tariffs from current or other suppliers

- Energy debt advice and assistance
- Energy trust fund supported applications
- Accessing financial and practical support for energy efficiency measures
- Supporting food and fuel poverty initiatives including food and fuel voucher referrals.

2.1 Scope

- Assistance with monitoring energy usage and billing/budgeting issues including smart meter take-up and accessing best tariffs from current or other suppliers
- 70 individuals/ households - (based on 2 beneficiaries per week).
- Energy debt advice and assistance
- Energy trust fund supported applications
- Accessing financial and practical support for energy efficiency measures
- Referrals made through the food banks
- Access to the foodbanks
- Geographical area of Leeds

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 the VCMA funding, as it will support customers in vulnerable situations, in particular, customers living in fuel poverty and general financial hardship. This project specifically provides assistance to support customers with physical and sensory impairments, learning disabilities and long-term conditions such as mental health issues. DIAL is in direct daily contact with people living in poverty, as a result of complex and multiple barriers to health, economic and social wellbeing. These themes all align to NGN's Vulnerability Strategy. DIAL offers holistic support to empower vulnerable, disabled people, to change their lives for the better, in the short and longer terms. This DIAL project has been designed, developed and delivered by disabled people, who are representative of project beneficiaries.

This expansion project has been designed, developed and delivered by disabled people, who are representative of project beneficiaries (including foodbank users) in conjunction with the Trussell Trust's Leeds North and West Foodbank. Two of DIAL LEEDS current volunteers are former Leeds North and West Foodbank users who have been supported by DIAL to turn their lives around.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- This project has been calculated as having a positive SROI
- Energy Confident expansion will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the physical challenges and financial hardship themes. As well as addressing mental health challenges prevalent in the Leeds area, as highlighted through social indicator mapping
- 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.

DIAL is NGN's strategic social partner in Leeds and social indicator mapping shows that this area has a high prevalence of mental health issues, which this project will help address.

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. This included digital engagement in light of CV-19. During 2020 - 2022 we held multiple workshops with our stakeholders on the subject of CIVS. In our July 2020 workshop, stakeholders discussed new emerging issues due to Covid-19, what the impact of the pandemic has had on hidden vulnerability and how the pandemic impacted demand for essential services to support CIVS. Our stakeholders told us some of the main impacts had been associated with mental health issues and an increase in food/fuel poverty.

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.

In January 2021 we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop our stakeholders said that fuel, food and general poverty are all linked and we need more streamlined ways of working together. Feedback told us that partners can help raise awareness of different funding available and in relation to this project, the linking up of organisations by way of a steering group will address that point. This project fully aligns with the need to help people in fuel poverty and those on low incomes, to enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to manage their energy bills and stay safe, in order to prevent fuel poverty and health issues in the future. It also demonstrates linking up organisations to help customers in vulnerable situations across the Leeds region.

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. Since November 2021 and currently, we're in both an energy and cost of living crisis, which is further impacting vulnerable customers and increases all of these risks. People are continuing to have to make choices between heating, eating and looking after their health. The servicing of appliances will continue to fall further down the list of customers priorities as a result of these two crises.

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 rising cost of living and energy and the subsequent impact these will have on other bills.

In November 2022 we held a workshop on the PSR and data sharing. Our stakeholders said that while the customer journey has good comms in the early touchpoints, people's situations can change quite quickly (increasingly so now adays). Many people, let alone vulnerable customers, may not be organised enough to keep letters and contact numbers etc. It's important that at every single stage, customers are given a reminder about the PSR and an opportunity to access support and help if needed. They also said all of the partners need to support NGN in promoting the PSR through their communications on a regular basis, not just a one of article or update as it will continue to be a need for customers as their situations change This project will address this need as the project is focused on peer led interactions with disabled users and provides a single point of contact for customers.

4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)

This group provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support 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.

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 fuel poverty and physical disability as part of this project, 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

- The service will deliver welfare advice to 308 households that promotes energy safeguarding by ensuring that vulnerable customers are better able to pay their energy bills and are less likely to self-disconnect, incur fuel debts, or struggle to pay their energy bills
156 hours of dedicated project worker input for a full year (3 hours per week)
- The formal outcomes measurement tool to be used for this project is MYCAW (Measure Yourself Concerns and Wellbeing) developed by the University of Bristol. It is particularly well suited to measuring a diverse range of issues as it involves no element of pre-determination. It is also simple, accessible, and user-friendly making it ideal for self-assessment of project benefits and successes amongst vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalised individuals/households.

5.2 Success criteria

- Customer feedback, worker observations and information from the client case records to produce anonymised case studies
- Use of NGN's VMT to help identify vulnerable customers

A split between the different areas of support is anticipated as follows, although the precise balance will vary from individual to individual:

- PSR awareness / sign ups (30%)
- WHD applications (5%)
- Benefits health checks / income maximisation (20%)
- Monitoring usage /billing /budgeting /tariffs and smart meters (15%)
- Energy debt(s) (5%)
- Trust funds supported applications (5%)
- Energy efficiency measures (5%)
- Gas, electrical and fire safety including CO and what to do in emergencies (15%)

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

This project will work in partnership with Leeds North and West Foodbank (part of the Trussell Trust Network) to provide timely income-based solutions to food insecurity/ poverty for vulnerable disabled people facing multiple health, social and economic barriers in their daily lives.

Karen Burgon, Chief Executive Officer Leeds North and West Foodbank, has indicated that The Trussell Trust 2020-2025 strategy and vision is for a UK without the need for food banks. The work that DIAL LEEDS does will contribute to this vision. The project will receive referrals from foodbank volunteers across the North and West Foodbank network as well as a wide range of statutory and community and voluntary sector organisations as part of a multi-agency support, working to jointly meet the needs of disabled people and individuals with long-term health conditions. In terms of VCMA outcomes and success criteria, DIAL we will be involving Green Doctors, Care and Repair

(Home Improvement Agency), Fire and Rescue (for Safe and Well visits), Adult Social Care, Health and Housing and Stay Well This Winter funded project partners. These are amongst a whole host of local sources of support for meeting the wider needs of the project beneficiaries.

7. Potential for new learning

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

The project will enable DIAL LEEDS staff and volunteers (who are local disabled people) to further develop their knowledge, skills, and expertise for successfully supporting vulnerable individuals/households with any energy related problems and concerns. There will be enhanced awareness and understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic impacts on disabled people which will assist with the development of recovery strategies with individuals going forward.

DIAL LEEDS will also be learning how best to support vulnerable disabled people and individuals with ongoing health conditions including mental health issues through the extremely challenging times ahead, with the rising energy prices, inflation and the wider cost of living crisis. If successful, this project could be rolled out in foodbank sessions across Leeds and other areas within the NGN region.

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 specific project covers Leeds and the immediate surrounding areas. The Social Return on Investment in terms of the benefits to vulnerable customers (both financial and non-financial) are factors such as gains relating to physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, and wider social welfare factors in a person's life. These should significantly outweigh the monies invested in the project. This project has been calculated as having 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 September 2022 - 31st 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.

Leeds and immediate surrounding area

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director