

**Middlesbrough Environment City - Warm Homes Healthy Children -
Redcar and Cleveland**

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

There is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel poverty. The project will support low-income families in Redcar and Cleveland.

The most recent government fuel poverty statistics released on 24th February 2022, show that 20% of households with children are in fuel poverty (1.27 million homes). For single parent households this figure rises to 26.5%. These figures are for 2020 so do not reflect the 54% increase in energy prices on 1st April, when the price cap rose to £1,971. From this point, it has been estimated that 2.2 million households with dependent children, are now in fuel poverty (one-third).

Additionally, the 'State of the Nation' report produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in January 2022, identified that more than half of families who receive Universal Credit, are in poverty. Further research suggested that low-income lone parents would be spending a quarter of their income on energy bills after, 1st April. This stated that "Rising energy prices will affect everyone, but an analysis carried out by Yorkshire Energy Doctor, indicates they have the potential to devastate the budgets of families on the lowest incomes". Worryingly, current predictions suggest that prices could go up even further on 1st October 2022, with annual costs rising to as much as £3,000.

Given that Yorkshire Energy Doctor already supports many low-income families who are struggling to pay bills or top-up prepayment meters, it is clear there will be significant future challenges around heating homes, particularly over winter 2022/23. This could have knock-on health impacts for children, as research has shown that cold homes:

- Double the likelihood of children having respiratory problems;
- Cause slower weight gain in babies and infants, higher hospital admission rates and an increase in asthmatic symptoms;
- Increase the likelihood that children will develop mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as well as experience physical health conditions. All of which can impact on learning, attendance at school and educational attainment

Fuel poverty and stretched household budgets may also have indirect impacts. For example, not having the money to get appliances serviced or chimneys swept, using a hob or cooker for warmth, or blocking vents, could all increase the risk of exposure to carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning.

Solution

Middlesbrough Environment City aims to work alongside Yorkshire Energy Doctor to embed knowledge and information around energy advice, the Priority Services Register (PSR), CO, and other sources of support, into the consciousness of all family support services and their communications. This is with the ultimate aim of helping families to better manage their bills and to be safe, warm and well.

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 overall aim of the project is to help families to be more able to afford to heat their homes and to be safe, warm and well.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

The topics covered through the project activities are:

- Energy price rises and managing energy bills
- Dealing with energy debts by supporting applications to energy trust funds and other hardship schemes
- Advice on ways to save energy and referrals for energy efficiency measures
- Maximising income by making referrals for benefits checks
- Signing up onto the PSR where eligible
- Raising awareness of the dangers of CO

2.2 Scope

- Training family support workers and related staff with the knowledge to be able to support and advise families around energy costs, support schemes and keeping safe and well in their homes
- Recruiting and training parent/carer Energy Ambassadors
- Engaging directly with families by attending groups and other events at children's centres and in community settings
- Giving 1-2-1 tailored support and advice through home visits, phone advice and Zoom appointments
- Engaging families via social media, newsletters and direct correspondence via children's centres

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 fuel poverty, specifically families who are in financial hardship. They are also likely to fall into one of categories below, which increases the potential to be in a vulnerable situation:

- Children under 5
- Parents or carers with a mental or physical health condition
- Families who live in a rural location / off the gas grid

As noted above, official figures and new projections show that millions of children across the country are living in fuel poverty. Next winter will be extremely challenging and we expect to see many families who just cannot afford to turn their heating on. Cold homes will then have knock-on impacts on the health, development and education of children. This project will enable Middlesbrough Environment City to give specific support around managing energy bills and energy debts, energy efficiency, and accessing grants, as well as to make referrals for income maximisation.

Raising awareness of the dangers of CO and making referrals to the PSR are also key elements of this project. Households with children under 5 are often less likely to be on the PSR than older residents. This project will promote the PSR to this target group via project partners and the project activities.

NGN CO and PSR Insight Report shows that CO awareness is lowest amongst younger age groups (particularly 25-34 year olds). Through parents and carers, this is likely to be one of the biggest demographics for this project. It is vital the project address this gap, particularly given that young children and babies are potentially more vulnerable to CO poisoning than other groups.

NGN research findings also showed that over 90% of younger age groups would like to see information on gas safety and the PSR via social media. The project will address this gap.

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 theme.
- 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 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 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.

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. This project fully addresses this issue as it is aimed at families who are living in financial hardship and have children under the age of 5.

In January and September 2021, we held a couple of fuel poverty workshop. During these workshops our stakeholders 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 financial hardship.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside, Sunderland, Kirklees, Middlesbrough – which is third placed for high claimant count, Hartlepool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Redcar and Cleveland – which emerges in three vulnerability lists, most notably on wages and Gateshead. Emerged 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 have a benefits adviser in place, especially in areas like Teeside as the research indicates that Middlesbrough has a high claimant count. 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.

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.

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.

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

- 150 families receive advice by attending groups and events in other community settings
- 75 families receive 1-2-1 advice through home visits, Zoom appointments or phone advice
- 500 families engaged via social media, newsletters and direct correspondence via children's centres
- 30 sign-ups to the PSR
- 50 CO awareness survey forms completed

5.2 Success criteria

- Increased confidence and ability of staff to support families with their energy costs
- Increased understanding of energy bills and the schemes available to help
- Financial benefits through savings on utility bills
- Reduced worry and anxiety about bills
- Improved safety of families (and therefore children) by being signed up onto the PSR
- Having improved awareness of the risks of carbon monoxide (CO)
- Individual case studies

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

The lead organisation will be Middlesbrough Environment City's Affordable Warmth Team who has a worker covering the Redcar and Cleveland area. They provide help with one-2-one energy advice, tariff check and switching, fuel debt repayment advice, understanding smart meters, damp and condensation advice, understanding energy bills and identifying other energy efficiency that may benefit local households. Middlesbrough Environment City also manages a fuel voucher scheme that assists fuel poor households in emergency situations. Other organisations involved will be:

- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Health Improvement Team
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Warm and Well Service
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Children's Services
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Communications
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Community Development
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council Transformational Change
- South Tees Affordable Warmth Partnership

Middlesbrough Environment City plan to develop a close working relationship with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council by specifically engaging with a range of children's services teams and services such as Early Help, children's Hubs, and locality teams, leaving care and Changing Futures. This approach has the potential to provide advice guidance and support to some of the most vulnerable individuals and families at time of crisis or ideally before crisis.

In addition, they also plan to align our support with that of the Health Improvement Team and Welfare Rights service who have planned a calendar of community engagement events between September, October, November, and December 2022 to support residents who are struggling with the rise in the cost of living.

They are also keen to explore the opportunity to engage with the DFE Holiday Activity Food Programme (HAF) providers that will be delivering activities during the October and December holidays. There is an expectation that HAF providers will engage with parents and carers, offering advice, guidance support and signposting on a range of topics. We see this as a great opportunity to engage with local residents and their families.

7. Potential for new learning

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

The project will cover Redcar and Cleveland and be run as a sub-project of Yorkshire Energy Doctor's 'Warm Homes Healthy Children'. They will use consistent branding and resources, but this new proposal will focus on direct interactions with families. Any learning will be shared with Yorkshire Energy Doctor.

Any learning will be shared with other GDNs and other 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.

September 2022 – August 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.

Redcar and Cleveland

Approved by

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