

Community Action Northumberland – Foodbanks

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	July 2021
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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

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. The number of people who report themselves as having a limiting long-term illness is 15,075 and 17,550 people are income deprived.

There is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel and food poverty. However, rural isolation presents a significant barrier to reaching many of those most in need and who require access to services, such as shops and supermarkets. The added challenge of lack of public transport in some rural areas, further compounds this issue. The foodbanks project seeks to overcome this barrier. Community Action Northumberland (CAN) has a long history of working with rural communities and has a strong network of links, including existing foodbanks. People in fuel and food poverty not only can't afford the basics, but some do not understand that hearty, nutritious meals can be prepared, from some of the items in the foodbank parcel. Slow cookers are a more economical way of cooking the food which is contained within the pack. There is a general lack of awareness relating to this and the knowledge gap needs to be closed, so that people who are living in financial hardship, are aware of the benefits of efficient methods of cooking and preparing easy, nutritious, low-cost meals.

1.1 The solution

CAN are currently working with two food banks, providing slow cooker recipe cards along with the food needed to cook the recipe and the slow cooker. The pilot with the two foodbanks, has enabled CAN to establish good processes and practice. The recipe cards will also contain information on energy support and carbon monoxide safety. CAN would like to extend this support to four other food banks in rural Northumberland, as well as an unemployment hub, in order that they can better use supplied foods and cook at reduced costs, therefore saving money. The cost to run a slow cooker is between 11-28p per hour. Promotion of CO awareness and access to the PSR, will also be undertaken at each foodbank and unemployment hub.

CAN will be working alongside Northumberland food banks and local unemployment hubs to deliver this project.

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.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Provide CO awareness sessions to people attending foodbanks and unemployment hub
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register

- Raise awareness of energy efficiency and how to save money when cooking
- Raise awareness of how food parcels can be used to cook hearty, nutritious and cheap meals

2.2 Scope

- 4 foodbanks and an unemployment hub in Northumberland
- Reduced energy usage from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- Improved confidence from being able to better manage food costs
- Raise profile of CO via pre and post awareness questionnaires
- Raise knowledge of benefits of being on the PSR
- Case studies from beneficiaries

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 regularly access food banks and unemployment hubs and who are living in rural isolation and potential fuel poverty, within Northumberland. Social indicator research carried out by NGN identified that overall, the NGN area is significantly less densely populated than England average – it has 20% of England’s land area but only 12% of its population. Northumberland is home to 316,000 people and 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, those customers who are in both food and fuel poverty. This project has already been piloted with two foodbanks and the aim, is to widen the net to incorporate more foodbanks and an unemployment hub, therefore helping more people in need of support.

People may want to shop locally and support the local economy, but limited affordability and variable 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 without transport 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. Foodbanks and unemployment hubs provide the ideal opportunity, to be able to access this hard to reach group of people.

Many rural communities living in fuel poverty, are having to make choices, especially in winter, as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. The increased use of foodbanks due to affordability issues, suggests there is a real need for support in this area. A number of rural communities are also off the gas grid, meaning that heating has to be fuelled by oil, LPG or solid fuels, which also have the potential to cause CO poisoning. As the project has both financial hardship and rurality 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 is around food and fuel poverty and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO₂, therefore aligns with the eligibility criteria
- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial and rural vulnerability themes
- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI for customers

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 – 2020

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 2019-2020 we held multiple workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject of customers in vulnerable situations.

During our July 2020 workshop, our stakeholders identified food poverty as an increased risk, due to the pandemic. Even households with both parents working, have been forced to use foodbanks. New emerging issues due to CV-19 were also discussed, in terms of what the impact of the pandemic has on hidden vulnerability and how the current pandemic impacted demand for essential services, to support CIVS. Reduced services like public transport, has resulted in people in rural localities being unable to travel to shops and supermarkets to buy food. Support around finding work and help in preparing CV's was also impacted, as many staff at job centres were furloughed.

During our August 2020 CV-19 specific workshop, our stakeholders identified that there was also an increased risk of CO poisoning, due to the impact of the pandemic. Many people have been furloughed, are on lower incomes and suffered redundancy, which have created significant financial challenges. The choice between heating and eating has become more prevalent and therefore greater demand for the services provided by foodbanks. 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. For those customers living in rural isolation and potentially living in fuel poverty, there is likely to be a significant gap in their knowledge around CO.

In January 2021, we held a specific fuel poverty workshop. During this workshop 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 support funding available, which is what this project sets out to achieve with foodbanks and an unemployment hub. By working at these locations, it enables key energy efficiency and CO safety messages to be delivered. This project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in food and fuel poverty. It will enable them to gain the knowledge and understanding of how to use their energy efficiently by using cheaper and more energy efficient cooking methods and stay safe against the dangers of CO poisoning.

4.2 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.

4.3 Social Indicator Mapping, Covid 19 Research, Vulnerability Mapping Tool (VMT) and Social Mobility Pledge (SMP)

Academic research social indicator mapping took place in 2019 and further research around CV-19 impact was undertaken in July 2020. This was shared as part of our stakeholder engagement. A new VMT has been demonstrated to stakeholders to highlight any vulnerability gaps we have on our network. The system allows you to add multiple factors of vulnerability together to create a heat map for where factors combine to create areas of highest need. All data can be mixed and matched to answer complicated questions, e.g. see where there are a high number of people living on low incomes in rural communities, using food banks. The VMT can also show CO hotspots in these same areas and it has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research, indicated that the North Tyne area (where CAN are based), had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN. A further challenge that was also highlighted from the research was unemployment. Approximately 12% of households within NGN's area, do not have anybody in work and in at least five areas of NGN's network, more than a fifth of

workers earn below £10,000. One of these areas is Northumberland and supports the evidence that the county has a lot of income deprivation and people claiming benefits.

Recent CO/PSR research commissioned by NGN, found that increasing awareness of the dangers of CO was a priority in the North Tyne area. The same research highlighted that only 37% of respondents in North Tyne, recognise that CO can kill you and 36% of respondents did not feel their awareness had increased over the past few years. 25% of the people who responded in North Tyne, did not have a CO alarm in their home and only 23% of respondents test their alarm annually. 22% did not know how often to test their alarm. From the same research, 54% of respondents in the North Tyne area, had no understanding of the services available to those on the PSR.

Feedback from the CV-19 research in July 2020, indicated that rural areas with high dependency on tourism, have been significantly impacted by the pandemic. This has resulted in job losses and increased financial hardship, therefore a greater demand for services such as foodbanks and access to unemployment hubs.

4.4 Social Mobility Pledge / Opportunity Action Plan (OAP)

NGN has partnered with the Right Honourable Justine Greening to develop an Opportunity Action Plan as part of the Social Mobility Pledge. The challenges in many communities around deprivation have become deeper and more pronounced due to Covid-19. Boosting social mobility is not only about creating opportunities for people from all backgrounds, it removes barriers too. Our Opportunity Action Plan will enable us to go further in increasing opportunities and support in local communities. In particular, those communities that face challenges around social mobility, known as 'cold spots.' These areas were determined by use of a number of data sets across four life stages from early years, school years, youth and adulthood. They were then organised by constituency and Wansbeck in Northumberland, was prioritised as an area for support. It was proposed that these become increased areas of focus within NGN's wider Vulnerability Strategy.

The link into the unemployment hub with this project, identifies a unique route in, whereby opportunities around social mobility can be pursued.

4.5 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 rural and financial vulnerability within the 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

- Reduced energy and financial savings from the use of slow cookers
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- Improved confidence from being able to better manage food costs
- CO awareness sessions and pre and post CO questionnaire results
- Case studies from beneficiaries
- Opportunity to raise profile of CO
- Opportunity to raise knowledge re PSR

5.2 Success criteria

- All vulnerable customers referred will have a greater understanding of the importance of gas safety and the dangers associated with CO, as well as the energy efficiency of using a slow cooker
- 35 PSR referral sign ups
- 100 participants involved
- 120 hours spent with participants
- 10 case studies
- Recipe cards provided to participants

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

CAN will be working alongside Northumberland foodbanks and an unemployment hub, 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.

Some learning has already been gathered from the initial pilot with two foodbanks. There is an opportunity to extend this support to other food banks, as well as unemployment hubs, in order that they can better use supplied foods in food parcels and cook healthy meals at reduced costs. The whole of NGN's geographical footprint would be considered for any learning to be shared from this project. In particular, with other foodbanks and unemployment hubs across NGN's area.

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 2021 – 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.

This project will take place in Northumberland.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director