

Cumbria Action for Sustainability – Cold to Cosy Homes

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2024
Project contact name:	Laura Ratcliffe
Project contact number/email:	LRatcliffe@northerngas.co.uk
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

The energy crisis is putting a huge pressure on households across Cumbria. Whilst prices have peaked, inflation and interest rates mean that this winter many households are expected to be financially stressed. Cumbria already has some of the highest rates of fuel poverty (14-16% compared to national average of 13%) and with recent and upcoming changes in fuel costs this is likely to keep increasing.

There are many reasons for households in Cumbria being more susceptible to falling into fuel debt:

- Poor housing stock that is hard to heat
- Low average salaries
- Huge number of houses that are off grid
- Rural nature of much of the housing stock
- More extreme weather associated with Cumbria

To highlight the vulnerabilities of households in Cumbria studies also show that Cumbria has:

- Highest index of Excess Winter Deaths at 19.8 compared to 14.6 for the NGN area.
- An older population – highest in NGN region with 3.0% with household age 85+
- 1.73% of households with children with autism – highest in NGN region
- Eden area has the highest sparsity rating of all the districts in the NGN region and with average journey times to services the highest at 16.5mins

This indicates the overall vulnerability of the region in Cumbria and how people can struggle with household heating, affordability and cost of living issues and that households depend more on advice professionals helping with heating, fuel cost, dampness, ventilation, insulation and draughts issues.

More residents seek Cumbria Action for Sustainability (CAfS) support for reducing their energy consumption so that they can afford to keep their homes warm, dry and safe. The Cold to Cosy Homes service has seen a 125% increase in call volume (Mar '21 to Mar '22) from residents of Cumbria looking for support with reducing energy usage, getting better deals, handling energy debt. CAfS delivered more visits this spring and summer than any year previously and have over 100 clients waiting for visits.

There are also increasing numbers of people who are planning to heat their homes through alternative methods and the increase purchase of wood burners has been reported. With this increases risks of fire and carbon monoxide.

Failure to heat sufficiently leads to dampness, mould and health issues and advice about maintaining warmth levels and ventilation is essential.

1.1 The solution

This project is primarily for funding of staff roles that would ensure a match fund to CAfS' Local Energy Advice Partnership (LEAP) advice work in the Northern Gas Network region and enables CAfS

to add significant value to the advice services. CAfS would be actively promoting the service and providing additional support to that provided by the fee based LEAP contract.

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:

- 1) Enhance the Cold to Cosy Homes energy advice work project by supporting a separate project to deliver an addition target via LEAP, in the NGN region. Overall, this LEAP project is aiming for 450 home visits across Cumbria. The target area for this project will be NGN region with a target for 350 home visits.
- 2) To fully fund 3 new roles, plus part fund an existing role, plus additional management time of around 10%.
- 3) To provide office IT equipment for 3 new roles.

The project will provide:

- In-depth home visits undertaken by CAfS Home Energy Advisors, through employed staff or CAfS contractors.
- Additional light touch advice at events.
- Target vulnerable households struggling with energy costs and help them by embedding positive energy saving behaviours.
- Advice will help householders reduce energy usage, increase affordability and obtain warmer, safer homes.
- Visits provide:
 - An increase in number of energy saving measures in households across region.
 - Reduction in energy waste, supporting carbon reduction from the housing stock
 - More affordable warmer homes
 - Reductions in dampness and mould issues
 - Improvements to ventilation
 - Safer homes with reduction in Carbon Monoxide related illnesses
 - Reduced health related issues of householders
 - Support households to access fuel vouchers, grants and other support.
 - Referral of households for extra support. E.g. Debt advice, income maximisation.
 - Promotion and sign up to the Priority Services Register

2.2 Scope

LEAP Project

Eligibility for the free advice service is based on the LEAP project eligibility:

- Receipt of benefits

- Low Income - total annual household income less than £31,000

Though there may be occasions where the application of the more broad Cold to Cosy Homes eligibility applies. <https://cafs.org.uk/cold-to-cosy-homes-cumbria/>

Service includes free energy saving measures to help reduce energy use.

NGN Additionality

Additionally with this NGN funding would be:

- 3000 people reached with marketing activities.
- 10 Engagement events.
- 100 people advised (light-touch advice) at Engagement events.
- 350 referrals generated through events and marketing activities.
- 60 Casework interventions households provided with additional advice following in-depth advice, eg helping resolve issues with energy supplier.
- 45 Priority Services Register sign-ups.
- 20 Locking Gas valve referrals.
- 45 Carbon Monoxide alarms (where provided by NGN).
- 90 visits funded with additional rural travel costs (LEAP fee does not cover higher costs of providing rural service).
- 5 advisors provided with City and Guilds Level 3 training (fees and training time).

Experience

CAfS have provided advice services with LEAP since 2018 and these services have formed part of the Cold to Cosy Homes advice, which is now established throughout Cumbria as the principal affordable warmth advice service for vulnerable customers. During 2022 CAfS delivered approximately 584 in-depth home advice visits and 830 household were advised by telephone.

Cold to Cosy Homes has 2 significant funded grant that commenced in April and July 2023 and funding to March 2025. One being Energy Redress funding for the core Cold to Cosy Homes advice and the other being Local Energy Advice Demonstrator and this to provide more detailed advice about retrofit options and grants.

This NGN funded work is for similar advice work but as a separate project and is in conjunction with the LEAP project. Services as whole will be marketed as Cold to Cosy Homes Cumbria.

Clients who receive the LEAP project advice may be referred onwards to for Local Energy Advice Demonstrator funded retrofit advice.

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

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the 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

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

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. Since 2019 we've held regular workshops with our stakeholders, on the subject of Customers In Vulnerable Situations (CIVS). This ensures that we are well informed to address the needs of customers across our network and through collaborative projects.

Stakeholder engagement throughout 2022, told us that fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is becoming more prevalent. The energy and cost of living crises have further compounded this issue. This project provides a solution to helping those customers who are

financially struggling and need extra help to address energy affordability. The project fully aligns with the need to help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty.

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

Our most recent stakeholder engagement during 2023 has informed us that financial hardship is still a key area of focus, alongside the health impacts associated with, or exacerbated by, living in cold and damp homes. Stakeholders also told us that increasing capacity for support within services would be key to addressing the immediate and longer term impacts of fuel poverty and energy affordability. This project addresses this need and ensures additional capacity to support households who may be at risk, through a well-established and trusted advice service.

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 (March 2023), indicated that keeping bills as low as possible ranked more highly, than providing a safe and reliable supply of gas. 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. Customers were also asked to prioritise the list of vulnerabilities listed below:

- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability
- Physical challenges
- Financial Hardship

This was the order of priority from the customers surveyed:

- Financial Hardship
- Physical challenges
- Mental wellbeing
- Rurality
- Temporary vulnerability

Financial hardship continued to be the dimension of vulnerability that most customers prioritised, with more customers in the most recent survey selecting this as their top priority. Physical challenges were second, closely followed by Mental well-being third. Rurality and Temporary vulnerability were ranked fourth and fifth.

Very recent (Autumn 2023) Bespoke Vulnerability Stakeholder Mapping research identified categories of stakeholders that are hard to reach, this included:

- People living with a disability
- Senior citizens with long term conditions
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Mental health

Health conditions which are prevalent in the NGN region are:

- Cancer and chronic kidney disease
- Musculoskeletal conditions
- Respiratory
- Mental health

Through the research carried out, the findings show that the 5 original NGN vulnerability categories have now evolved to 10 categories. These are:

1. Physical challenges, inclusive of communication issues, physical space
2. Mental wellbeing
3. Financial hardship
4. Temporary vulnerability – including post hospital recovery and pregnancy / maternity
5. Socio Demographic
6. Household composition
7. Rural Vulnerability
8. Accessibility Including language
9. Medical Dependant on Energy
10. Cultural

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 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

- 10 Engagement events.
- 100 people advised (light-touch advice) at Engagement events.

- 350 referrals generated through events and marketing activities.
- 60 Casework interventions households provided with additional advice following in-depth advice, eg helping resolve issues with energy supplier.
- 45 Priority Services Register sign-ups.
- 20 Locking Gas valve referrals.
- 45 Carbon Monoxide alarms (where provided by NGN).
- 90 visits funded with additional rural travel costs (LEAP fee does not cover higher costs of providing rural service).
- 350 Home visits supported - through LEAP funded visits.

5.2 Success criteria

Criteria	Metric	How recorded
Number of households receiving in-depth advice	350	CRM records
Number of people receiving light touch advice	100	Event and CRM records
Satisfied with advice service provided	95%	Post advice surveys
Feeling empowered to act effectively on advice	80%	Post advice surveys

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

Local Energy Advice Partnership - funding of the home visit advice interventions on a fixed fee basis. Also provide small proportion of referrals directly.

Citizens Advice, Allerdale and Copeland - providing referrals.

Cumberland Council – strategic partners for the affordable warmth advice services and referrals

Westmorland and Furness Council - strategic partners for the affordable warmth advice services and referrals.

Cold to Cosy Homes Energy Champions – network of over 200 front line workers and volunteers who engage with their clients and community groups to promote service.

7. Potential for new learning

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

All CAfS projects are subject to ongoing monitoring with evaluation. These processes could help others replicated advice services elsewhere. CAfS have many groups contact us about setting up similar schemes and provide information and presentations on this. CAfS would particularly like to

support development of a scheme in neighbouring Lancashire, where CAfShave received requests from organisations wanting to establish a similar service.

CAfS could:

- Support other organisations that seek to provide vulnerable customer advice by sharing learning and best practice to support their delivery and goals.
- Build case studies that inform on how service is formed, skills and training required, challenges, systems used.
- Capture comprehensive data so that statistics from the project can be incorporated into case studies so helping others build an advice service. Including such things as eligibility, issues, advice outcomes, enquiry types, customer satisfaction, budget information.
- Share findings through NGN to help other energy advice providers.
- Record and report on effectiveness of energy saving measures provided and monitor customer satisfaction.
- Report quarterly to NGN– providing measurement of progress towards outputs and outcomes, number of households advised in visits, number advised elsewhere, number of energy-saving and safety improvements fitted, number of vulnerable individuals assisted, calculations of anticipated energy and carbon savings, estimates of bill savings by tariff switching, and feedback from customers and attendees of events.
- Final report - output and outcome data, plus case studies will form a final evaluation report for sharing with NGN and partners.

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.

April 2024 – March 2025

There is not previous VCMA funded CAfS project.

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.

Northern Gas Network area in Cumbria. Post code detail provided by NGN.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director