

Centre for Warmth – Chestnut Centre

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)

The town of Huddersfield is located within Kirklees and has several wards and neighbourhoods that experience high levels of deprivation and poverty. Local Services 2 You Ltd (LS2Y) work with individuals in the areas of Huddersfield that are in the worst 10% nationally on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and have high levels of poverty, including child poverty and fuel poverty. LS2Y's Chestnut Centre is actually located in an area which is in the worst 2% in the country for income deprivation and being able to afford essentials such as food and fuel is a huge issue for many residents there.

Those experiencing financial crisis or living in poverty are more likely to be experiencing fuel poverty and less likely to maintain gas appliances or be able to afford safety devices and so are more at risk of harm from Carbon Monoxide. The Chestnut Centre come into contact with a wide range of individuals and households where there is a very low level of awareness of the dangers of Carbon Monoxide or support and services available such as the Priority Service Register.

The solution

LS2Y's Chestnut Centre has applied for VCMA funding to become a Centre for Warmth. It is a thriving independent community centre dedicated to fostering inclusivity and empowering individuals and organisations within the Kirklees community and wider area, regardless of background or ability.

The Centre for Warmth concept was developed to ensure a holistic approach to supporting fuel poor households within a community setting. Centre users will receive a combination of services such as:

- energy advice
- CO awareness and advice
- income maximisation through benefit entitlement checks and managing debt
- free or reduced cost food/clothing
- fuel top up vouchers
- connections to other NGN funded partner information/assistance

Plus training, information, advice and services bespoke to their individual neighbourhoods. All provided in a warm safe space designed to improve health and wellbeing, increase household income, and help communities better manage their energy.

The Chestnut Centre aims to work with people who need support at their own pace with an emphasis on supporting them to make positive changes to become more resilient.

Our awareness raising activity will be done in the Centre itself but also via our connections and activity in other neighbourhoods, including:

- Talking to people in the other community centres we manage
- On home visits for children that are starting or attending our nurseries
- By having staff and volunteers visit groups and networks, e.g. stay and play groups, parent groups
- Our Community Champions mentioned above work on a range of health-related initiatives and are currently funded to deliver initiatives linked to the Core 20 Plus5 health priorities.
- Through significant community events such as the Deighton Carnival – we run this event each year which attracts up to 7000 people and we will have a presence at this event to reach a large audience
- Through our social media presence – we have active Facebook and Instagram accounts for our nurseries and our community activity. We are also active on local neighbourhood Facebook sites with a reach into many communities. These are very proactive as we often don't need to produce paper flyers yet events are full

2. Scope and Objectives

The Chestnut Centre for Warmth project aims to serve 4000 direct beneficiaries over the two year period in the Huddersfield locality of Kirklees, by employing 3 additional members of staff as Community Connectors. People often require support to resolve their situation after their immediate crisis needs have been met and this support is not always available. This project seeks to address this gap in support whilst raising awareness of important safety issues and providing energy efficiency advice to reduce fuel poverty.

It is expected through the support received, centre users will have their capacity and skills increased so they are empowered to be able to help themselves more. These roles will also allow the time for the specific work to be done with individuals and families introducing more ownership of energy efficiency, CO awareness and healthier living.

Chestnut Baby Boutique provides free clothes and equipment for families with young children. The Chestnut Centre provides emergency food supplies and toiletries, runs a nursery working closely with parents to support them and their children and deliver holiday clubs throughout the year for the 'Health Activity and Food' programme for children eligible for Free School Meals. Support people who are digitally excluded by providing access to free data and ICT equipment.

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- To improve health and wellbeing of the centre users
- To reduce fuel poverty
- To increase income through benefit maximisation and debt management
- To provide CO awareness and advice
- To increase awareness and registrations of the PSR

2.2 Scope

- To employ three 'Community Connectors' to support individuals in crisis or facing significant challenges providing a range of services including money management, benefits advice and to help navigate and maximise the numerous specialist support services available
- To train at least a further 10 staff and volunteers working across our services to provide advice to individuals to raise awareness of Carbon Monoxide, energy efficiency and the Priority Service Register.
- Provide support groups and events to provide opportunities for individuals to attend groups to reduce their isolation and increase their peer support and friendship networks and support from the Community Connectors.
- Attend a wide range of events to raise awareness of CO and the PSR – for example family information events and fun days, school events, health information events. We run many of these events ourselves and support other organisations to access funding for these as part of our anchor role.
- Work with other services and organisations to get advice and messages out, for example Midwives, Health Visitors, schools, etc. Some of which are already based within the Chestnut Centre.

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 financial hardship and fuel poverty across the Kirklees locality, as well as raising awareness of CO and the PSR. As the project has mental wellbeing and financial hardship themes, it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy too.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- *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

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 (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 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

The Chestnut Centre will employ 3 Community Connectors. The 'Community Connector' roles will provide money management advice and support, including help with applying for benefits. The Connectors will receive relevant training from bodies such as National Energy Action Fuel Debt Advice in the Community and Energy Awareness, Child Poverty Action Group (basic training 'Benefits for non-Benefit Advisors') and others where appropriate to support them in their role.

The Connectors will help people understand their finances and identify where they can make positive changes. They will also help people access specialist advice where appropriate such as Citizens Advice and the Council Local Welfare Provision service. There is currently a solicitor that can provide free legal advice within the Chestnut Centre once a fortnight. The Connectors will support individuals to access services, whether that is health, wellbeing, housing or others and encourage them to attend groups to help them feel more connected to other people around them.

Other staff and volunteers will be trained which includes:

- Reception staff at the Chestnut Centre who deal with approximately 50 people a day accessing a range of services including a library
- Nursery staff who work with the parents of over 200 children
- Community Champions who are active in their communities

5.1 Outcomes

Through this work we would expect to achieve the following over the two years:

- Raise awareness of energy efficiency measures to help reduce fuel poverty

- Raise awareness of Carbon Monoxide and provide CO alarms
- Advise and register households on the PSR
- Provide people with support around money management, income maximisation, benefits and access to services
- Provide advice about how to cook nutritious meals more efficiently, saving fuel and money provide those most in need with a slow cooker/air fryer
- Reduce isolation
- Raise awareness of Carbon Monoxide, PSR and energy efficiency through social media
- 800 customers signed up to the PSR
- 800 customers provided with CO awareness survey

5.2 Success criteria

Number of total direct beneficiaries = 4,000 (broken down as)	4,000	800	500	200	100	80		10,000
Energy efficiency advice	✓							
Awareness of Carbon Monoxide	✓							
Provide CO Alarms					✓			
Advise households about PSR	✓							
Sign up to PSR		✓						
Support around money and access to services		✓						
Advice on nutritious meals				✓				
Receive slow cooker/air fryer						✓		
Reduce Isolation			✓					
Social Media awareness raising								✓

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

The Chestnut Centre provide a range of services and activities for people that are in crisis or in need of some form of support. This includes working with others such as:

- The Bread and Butter Thing for affordable food
- A fortnightly free solicitor on site specialising in family law
- Midwives and Health Visitors based on site
- Huddersfield Stay and Play group network involving around 20 groups
- Work with a wide range of community groups, activists and individuals through their Community Anchor work
- Hardship Funds administered on behalf of Ashbrow and Greenhead Ward Councillors, supporting people to buy essential equipment such as beds, appliances and carpets
- Referrals from Local Authority and NHS

7. Potential for new learning

Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

This project has a positive SROI return.

VCMA Project start and end date

01/04/2024-31/03/2026

Geographic area

Kirklees

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director