

Community Action Northumberland (CAN) – Slow cooker road show extension

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

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

There is a nationwide agenda to tackle the problems associated with fuel poverty, but rural isolation presents a significant barrier to reaching many of those most in need. This Rural Kitchen 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 with community anchors such as parish councils and village halls.

1.1 The solution

Building on CAN's slow cooker and warm hubs work this project will look into spending the 6 weeks of summer driving to rurally isolated settlements in Northumberland and deliver energy support, carbon monoxide information and expand on the diversity and efficiency of slow cooker as well as nutritional benefits. These events will be out of doors on village greens etc. in places that don't have a community hall/building.

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 vulnerable customers
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of rural isolation
- Reduced energy from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- Improved confidence from being able to better manage food costs
- Address aspects of social isolation from networking

2.2 Scope

- 10 volunteers involved
- 6 roadshows
- 100 PSR referrals
- Information on CO awareness, including pre and post awareness surveys x50

- 200 - 400 participants
- 150 slow cookers provided
- The geographical area of Northumberland
- 10 Case studies

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 rural isolation 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 covers an area of 5,013km², 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 fuel poverty and those in desperate need of help.

People may well 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. This project therefore addresses this issue as CAN are driving to customers in rural areas of Northumberland to deliver energy saving information and provide slow cookers to vulnerable customers as well as demonstrating how to use the slow cookers provided in order to help customers save energy.

CAN are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most impacted areas of our network and are the only organisation who could effectively provide the services that have been identified. If this project proves successful, CAN will look to scale up across the network, in other areas of rural isolation.

Many rural communities are also living in fuel poverty and making choices in winter as to whether to heat their homes or buy food. Many rural communities are 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 a rurality theme, 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 fuel poverty, associated ill health and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO, 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

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

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

- Extending benefits of Pop-up warm hubs
- Reduced energy from use of slow cookers
- Improved health from a more balanced diet
- Improved confidence from being able to better manage food costs
- 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 Carbon Monoxide, via an awareness survey x50
- 100 PSR referral sign ups
- 96 volunteering hours
- 150 slow cookers provided, valued at £25 per cooker

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

CAN will be working alongside Northumberland Food banks to deliver some aspects of this project, Parish Councils, Northumberland village hall consortiums.

7. Potential for new learning

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

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

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 2024 – 31st March 2026

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