

Highfield CO-OP - Community Energy Cafe

Funding GDN(s)	Northern Gas Networks
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	Role of GDN(s) N/A
Date of PEA submission:	March 2024
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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

There are a lot of long term unemployed and low skilled people living in the Keighley area of Bradford. As well as this challenge, these customers are also experiencing fuel poverty. This project is being supported as our social indicator mapping research has highlighted that there are 9,646 people unemployed in the Bradford area and 13,455 claiming benefits. This research suggests the NGN area has a higher proportion of both unemployment and benefit claimants than nationally - approx. 146,000 are unemployed and 139,000 are on claimant count benefits. Places with pronounced concentrations on both measures include Bradford.

1.1 The solution

Highfield Co-op aims to create a pop-up energy café, where members of the community can attend and which will provide an opportunity to raise awareness of fuel poverty, provide energy advice and raise awareness of CO to vulnerable people, who are unemployed and claiming benefits within the Keighley area. The project has direct benefits for the targeted audience groups in terms of financial savings and awareness of key safety messages. It involves specifically working with vulnerable groups such as people on low income, those experiencing long term unemployment (and associated mental health problems), people with low skills and marginalised communities experiencing fuel poverty. The project idea was created via consultations with the local community in the central ward area of Keighley. This was done through meetings online and questionnaires.

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 information on energy saving advice, government grants, schemes on energy saving, and CO awareness
- Set up the pop-up café in areas identified as socially deprived

2.2 Scope

- 290 visitors to the café per annum
- 400 meals provided in 12 months per annum
- 30 CO alarms provided to vulnerable customers per annum
- 200 CO pre and post surveys per annum
- 85 PSR registrations per annum
- The geographical area of Keighley, Bradford

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 the VCMA funding, as it will support customers in vulnerable situations, in particular, customers in fuel poverty and suffering financial hardship through unemployment and low skilled /low paid jobs. It aligns to NGN's Vulnerability Strategy theme around financial vulnerability. CO sessions will also be delivered, and CO alarms provided to vulnerable customers, as part of the project outputs.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI for customers
- This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the financial vulnerability theme
- Has defined outcomes as required (see outcomes section)
- 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

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. A pop-up café will provide an environment where support can be found in relation to energy and other advice, in the absence of being able to contact an energy supplier, as well as providing vulnerable customers with a hot meal.

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
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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 The Independent Stakeholder Group (ISG)

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 CIVS, which meets the needs of our stakeholders. The introduction of a dedicated role to support VCMA projects has been welcomed by the ISG.

4.3 Social Indicator Mapping & Covid 19 Research/Vulnerability Mapping Tool (VMT)

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 vulnerability mapping tool 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 unemployed people living in low energy efficient housing and in fuel poverty. This has also been updated to reflect more emerging issues.

Feedback from our social indicator mapping research indicated that are 9,646 people unemployed in the Bradford area and 13,455 claiming benefits in this area. This research also indicated that over 365,000 (12.8%) people experience fuel poverty in the NGN area, 31,706 of which are from the Bradford area. Bradford also had a high number of CO jobs attended by NGN.

In our wider stakeholder engagement programme, we have heard very strongly how safety is at the forefront of stakeholders' minds. Stakeholders see a strong correlation between safety and our social obligations and have told us that it is essential that we continue to raise awareness of carbon monoxide, because doing so saves lives.

Specifically, in relation to this project Highfield Co-op are bespoke to the region of Bradford/Keighley. This group has extensive reach into those customers living in fuel poverty and on low incomes ie in desperate need of support. This area also has a high prevalence of communities whereby English is not their first language, which further compounds existing problems. Stakeholder engagement through 2020 told us that access to many services is becoming increasingly difficult and has been compounded by the pandemic. Highfield Co-op are a specialist organisation, operating within one of the most deprived areas of our network and no other organisation exists within Bradford/Keighley which can provide this varying degree of support, in particular within communities, including BAME, on low incomes and living in fuel poverty. From recent CO research commissioned by NGN, in the Bradford area, only 32% recognise that CO can kill you and 34% of respondents did not feel their awareness had increased over the past few years. 33% of the people who responded in Bradford did not have a CO alarm in their home.

4.4 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 financial vulnerability and also mental health (indirectly) as part of this 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

- 160 hours volunteering per annum
- 290 visitors to the café per annum
- 400 meals provided in 12 months per annum
- 30 CO alarms provided to vulnerable customers per annum
- 200 CO pre and post surveys per annum
- 85 PSR registrations per annum

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 via the pre/post awareness survey
- The project will be monitored using individual interviews, group interviews and questionnaires
- Record how many people take part in fuel poverty workshops
- Record people's learning through progress sheets

6. Project partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

This project will have several stakeholders involved, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB), Keighley Dementia champions, Keighley Voluntary Services and the Good Shepherd Centre.

7. Potential for new learning

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

The learning which will arise from this project will be identifying barriers that marginalised communities experience and sharing that learning with other similar communities. This could be across the whole of NGN's area. Creating solutions for problems and encouraging communities to participate in fuel poverty workshops, will also provide invaluable learning, especially in relation to BAME communities.

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 2023 – 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 Keighley, Braford.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director