

Content Soup – Comms PSR, CO and Energy Efficiency campaigns

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

Although NGN is in constant communication with customers via a range of different channels, we know some of our audience remain hard to reach, in particular those customers living in vulnerable situations.

NGN knows that more can be done to educate, proactively engage and support customers in vulnerable situations and help them to better access our services. Content Soup, an integrated communications agency specialising in PR and strategic campaigns, will be appointed to deliver this campaign and address this challenge. Content Soup have experience of working on campaigns to reach hard to reach groups. They are also a local supplier based in the region that we serve, which provides added value as they have experience of working in our target geographical areas.

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:

- To increase awareness and understanding about what a customer should do if they smell gas or suspect Carbon Monoxide
- Increase PSR awareness and referrals
- Creating a better understanding of where customers can access energy saving advice to reduce energy usage, save money and deliver health benefits with a focus on fuel poor households
- To increase engagement with traditionally hard to reach individuals and communities within the NGN region and identify the best methods of reaching these groups, in particular fuel poor customers

2.2 Scope

Proactive and reactive press office which responds to opportunities to hijack external news events to deliver objectives

- Planning and execution of smaller supporting campaigns throughout the period as required
- Paid and organic social media strategy and content planned ahead, which can be incorporated into the wider NGN weekly social media plan
- Regular monthly evaluation report of activity including media relations, social media work, events and any stakeholder engagement
- Summaries of outputs and outcomes produced at the request by the NGN Communications Team, as and when required

- End-of-campaign evaluation report, drawing together all activities, outputs, outcomes and key achievements

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 drive engagement and awareness of key safety-critical messages around Carbon Monoxide, the National Gas Emergency number and the PSR, targeting traditionally hard to reach sectors of the NGN customer audience.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- The project aligns with NGN's Vulnerability Strategy as the approach adopted within this project, focuses on communicating clearly and consistently and understanding customer needs, in particular, those living in vulnerable situations
- The campaign has the potential to reach customers who live with one or more of the following vulnerabilities, i.e., financial hardship, physical and mental disabilities, rural isolation, and temporary vulnerabilities. These are all themes under the NGN Vulnerability Strategy.
- 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 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 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

- Increase awareness of the PSR and drive sign ups.
- Educate audiences on what to do in a gas or carbon monoxide emergency.
- Increase awareness of how customers can access energy saving advice, reduce their energy usage and save money, whilst also keeping their homes warm and themselves healthy.
- Grow awareness of the dangers of Carbon Monoxide poisoning and the steps people need to take to stay safe.

5.2 Success criteria

- All vulnerable customers will have a greater understanding of Carbon Monoxide awareness and PSR
- All customers will have a better understanding of where they can access energy saving advice to reduce energy usage, save money and deliver health benefits with a focus on fuel poor households

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

This project will be delivered by the Lake District Foundation however, business supporters and supporting organisations such as Cumbria Tourism and local authorities, may be invited to support the project.

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 Northern Cumbria.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director