

## Highfield Co-op – Visually Impairment Energy Project Extension

<b>Funding GDN(s)</b>	<b>Northern Gas Networks</b>
<b>For Collaborative VCMA Projects:</b>	Role of GDN(s) N/A
<b>Date of PEA submission:</b>	March 2024
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<b>Total cost (£k)</b>	*detailed separately
<b>Total VCMA funding required (£k)</b>	*detailed separately

## **1. Problem(s)**

*This should outline the problem(s) which is/are being addressed by the VCMA Project*

There are approximately a million visually impaired people in the UK. Academic social initiator mapping research commissioned by NGN, indicates that there are approximately 38,000 people in the NGN area, who are registered as blind or visually impaired. Bradford is one of the highest areas with this physical impairment at 3,380. Preliminary research suggests that their energy advice needs have been entirely overlooked. While some energy resources could be requested in accessible formats (such as large print), these options were not produced as standard and only related to a proportion of the full range of material. As a result, a significant subsection of the population may have been missing out on energy efficiency opportunities, especially those living in fuel poverty. This project is aimed at supporting visually impaired people within the Craven and Keighley district, who face fuel poverty, lack of information on the Priority Service Register (PSR) and carbon monoxide (CO) awareness.

### **1.1 The solution**

Highfield Co-op aim to work closely with vulnerable communities to raise awareness of fuel poverty and CO poisoning, specifically with visually impaired customers. They will work closely with Sight Airedale, who have access to and support around 500 local people with visual impairments, to deliver this project. Highfield Co-op will provide audio and braille leaflets to customers containing energy and important safety information. Highfield Co-op work at grass roots level and therefore have access to these groups. They are very much a trusted intermediary within the community, who can reach those who could potentially fall through the gaps. They will be able to provide reassurance and alleviate fears and concerns around energy and gas safety. Their established role within these communities enables them to be able to access ambassadors and key contacts within these diverse and hard to reach groups.

## **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 carbon monoxide (CO) awareness sessions to vulnerable customers with visual impairments, including pre and post awareness questionnaire
- Provide advice around energy saving
- Provide advice and encourage community members to sign up to the PSR
- Work closely with Sight Airedale to start conversations around fuel poverty and to find solutions on how to deal with fuel poverty, for people visual impairments

## 2.2 Scope

- 85 audio and braille leaflets delivered
- 10 Volunteers
- 285 people reached / 120 hours spent with them
- The geographical area of Craven and Keighley district in 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 VCMA funding, as it will support vulnerable customers who have a visual impairment, that may not be aware of the dangers of CO and are experiencing fuel poverty. Recent CO research undertaken by NGN found that increasing awareness of the dangers of CO was a priority in Bradford. CO awareness sessions will be delivered as part of the project outputs. This project seeks to take advantage of a unique opportunity, to provide important and potentially life-saving information, to vulnerable customers who are difficult to reach and may not be aware of CO and how to save energy and money on fuel bills, due to their vulnerability. As the project has a physical vulnerability theme it aligns with NGN'S Vulnerability Strategy, as does the energy saving element, which will ultimately result in financial savings and address the theme of financial vulnerability.

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

### 3.1 Eligibility criteria

- As this project is around CO awareness and reducing the risk of harm caused by CO, it aligns with the eligibility criteria. The project also supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the temporary and financial vulnerability themes
- The challenges around language barriers and communication in the Bradford area, also aligns with the physical vulnerability theme
- 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 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**

- 285 people reached / 120 hours spent with them on safety and energy issues
- 10 Volunteers
- 85 audio and braille leaflets delivered
- 40 accessible Smart Meters ordered
- 40 accessible heating control systems ordered
- 150 CO awareness sessions
- 65 PSR referrals

### **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
- PSR referrals
- Provide information in different format such as braille and to work to support their anxieties around fuel poverty and CO awareness
- Measure the success of the project by working closely with the participants/questionnaires
- Customers will also have an awareness of how to save energy and stay safe

## **6. Project Partners and third parties involved**

*Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement*

Highfield Co-op will work with Sight Airedale to deliver this 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.*

1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 – 31<sup>st</sup> 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 the Keighley, Airedale and the Craven areas of Bradford.

### **Approved by**

Eileen Brown  
Customer Experience Director