

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	FISCUS – Centre for Warmth
Funding GDN(s) <i>The GDN(s) which register(s) the project</i>	Northern Gas Networks
New or updated <i>(indicate as appropriate by removing the option that does not apply)</i>	New
Collaborative VCMA Projects <i>Specific role(s) of GDN(s) participating in a collaborative VCMA Project:</i>	N/A
Date of PEA Submission	March 2025
VCMA Project contact <i>Name:</i> <i>Email:</i> <i>Number:</i>	Laura Ratcliffe lratcliffe@northerngas.co.uk 07928501779
Total cost (£k):	*detailed separately
Total VCMA funding required (£k):	*detailed separately

Problem(s)	<p>There is an identified need for targeted energy-saving advice, warm homes advice and support for households across Sunderland experiencing fuel poverty and who are struggling to afford to eat, heat or make ends meet.</p> <p>FISCUS has identified that the most vulnerable people and groups in (or at risk of) fuel poverty who are struggling with high energy costs, suffering hardship and the effects of poverty include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Foodbank Customers •People with ill health, terminal illness and respiratory diseases •Individuals and families living in older, colder rented homes on benefits and/or low incomes •Older people and pensioners especially those on low incomes lacking family/social support •Teenage mums and their babies and children •BAME households especially among older and pension age women •People experiencing mental health issues and financial hardship <p>Sunderland has very high levels of fuel poverty, food poverty, people living in older, cold and uninsulated hard-to-heat homes. Many of these vulnerable customers are not aware of energy support, food and crisis support, income maximisation advice available and are less likely to be aware of, or be included in, the Priority Services Register (PSR). The findings, published by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero for the year 2022, show that in England, 3.18million households (13.1%) are fuel poor and 43,000 households in the North East are living in fuel poverty. They identify average fuel poverty gap, the reduction in fuel costs needed for a household to not be in fuel poverty, is estimated to be £325. Using the government's low-income, low energy efficiency</p>
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indicator, 8,500 households in Sunderland Central (City Centre and Hendon) were in fuel poverty in 2023: 18.8%, higher than England's average level of 14.4%. Excluding the impact of Covid, there were 390 excess winter deaths over the last 5 years for which data is available, of which:

- 117 can be attributed to cold housing conditions
- 78 can be linked to the coldest 25% of homes in Sunderland Central
- 39 can be directly attributed to fuel poverty

FISCUS is based in Hendon ranking 1% Index of Multiple Deprivation; *Hendon has the highest levels of child poverty with 42% of children in Hendon living in low income families (more than double the national average of 18.7%) and higher than 30.8% of children living in low income (relative measure) families in Sunderland. *25.3% residents have a limiting illness/disability; *42.8% older people live alone. 46.7% older people live in deprivation; *50% of residents live in means-tested, benefit-dependent households; *17% are in fuel poverty; FISCUS has established community partner networks and statutory key referral partners, that have helped enable us to identify gaps, engage and reach people suffering cold homes, hunger, lack of money, fear and isolation. During COVID-19 we identified and supported highest-risk vulnerable groups whom emergency statutory support was not reaching fast enough or at all. Nationally, last year, around 2.5 million food parcels were distributed. FISCUS distributes around 150+ food parcels every month. There has also been a massive increase in crisis grants applications for individuals and families among FISCUS service users over the past 2 years. A huge change in the demographics of Sunderland is the increase in BAME population to 40,000 residents, many of whom are living in the most challenging circumstances suffering isolation, poverty, fuel poverty and a lack of awareness of support and advice especially due to cultural and language barriers.

The Solution:

FISCUS proposal for a multicultural Centre for Warmth (CFW) for Sunderland aims to address the above issues and far more, working alongside specialist trusted community partners to alleviate fuel poverty and ensure people living in vulnerable situations can improve their lives and be helped to live well and warm.

The new CFW will have a City-wide reach and will particularly focus on the most vulnerable groups living in the most deprived and disadvantaged areas. Utilising engagement methods and trusted partners who like FISCUS, have decades of successful track records of engaging the hardest to reach, most disadvantaged individuals and families.

FISCUS will establish a dedicated CFW team of experienced and qualified staff who will provide a range of support and advice on energy efficiency, keeping your home warm on a low income, income maximisation advice, Priority Services Register awareness and support to registration, dangers of CO and awareness of the benefits of CO monitors, home visits to engage the hardest to reach and those with mobility and mental health issues preventing them from leaving their homes and accessing services.

The new CFW will provide a wide range of targeted energy efficiency advice and tailored hardship support to 1500+ people and their families who are identified as being in fuel poverty, food poverty, suffering hardship and a range of complex issues, barriers and characteristics that make them the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups and

	<p>individuals. The new FISCUS CFW will provide the following main services to these most vulnerable people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warmer Homes Awareness & Support • Energy Efficiency Advice • Energy & Money MOT's • Benefits, Debt & Income Maximisation Advice • Priority Services Register Awareness Raising and support to register on the PSR • Carbon Monoxide Awareness • Advice, Crisis, Emergency and Hardship Support <p>FISCUS is Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) registered to provide debt advice and counselling. All CFW staff will be Level 2 NEA Fuel Debt in the Community qualified as a minimum, some will be also be qualified Welfare Benefit & Debt Advisors, some will be multi-lingual and all will be experienced in working with hard to reach groups suffering poverty, hardship, fuel and food poverty and other multiple barriers that exclude them from everyday services and opportunities to live happier lives in a warm, safe, healthy home. They will also identify and ask staff to attend other relevant training and qualifications ensuring that they are supported in their roles to assist vulnerable people in fuel poverty and suffering other barriers to live in warmer, safer, healthier homes.</p>
Scope and Objectives	<p>The Scope</p> <p>The new FISCUS Centre for Warmth will reach 1500+ of the most vulnerable people in Sunderland from target groups outlined below. FISCUS CFW will establish an experienced and qualified team of energy advisors, benefit advisors and the staff will be experienced in working with vulnerable individuals and families from the targeted group reach.</p> <p>The CFW initiative will be delivered from the Co-op Centre which is FISCUS community base in the heart of Hendon. There are 14 charities and not-for-profit organisations based at the Coop Centre and FISCUS is landlord but also community partner to all of these organisations. Working together for the benefit of those most disadvantaged individuals and families in the communities of Sunderland, to improve engagement, reach and outcomes, and to reduce overlap and duplication and to make resources go further to help those most in need.</p> <p>FISCUS has in place a robust Safeguarding Policy & Procedure and all staff, volunteers and board members attend annual Safeguarding training.</p> <p>The objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a new sustainable, accessible FISCUS Centre for Warmth • Employ a high-quality team of qualified Energy Advisors, Benefits Advisors and Specialist Community Engagement Workers to deliver a range of fuel poverty and energy efficiency support • Raise awareness of energy and fuel poverty advice available and deliver fuel poverty advice and energy support to 1500+ of the most vulnerable people and groups living in Sunderland • Raise awareness of CO safety in the home

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver Energy Support & Awareness Workshops at community events, one to one advice sessions and via home visits to widen the reach and engagement across the whole City • Maximise income via welfare benefits and debt advice and energy saving support • Arrange and deliver face to face Energy & Money 'MOT's' via one to one appointments, group workshops and home visits • Distribute Warmth Items and Warmth Packs to individuals and families living in fuel poverty in cold, energy inefficient homes • Provide vulnerable households with crisis support and low-cost energy saving awareness, support and interventions • Increase awareness of the Priority Service Register and increase registrations of vulnerable customers
Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA	<p>This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as it will support a wide range of vulnerable customers who are living in financial hardship and fuel poverty 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.</p> <p>NGN's Centre for Warmth approach affords an opportunity for partners to pay, retain and upskill centre staff and volunteers to expand on their current service provision. The aim of which is to empower them to provide the above range of services. Therefore, being able to help their communities with immediate crisis support, to deal with the significant impacts of food and fuel poverty, as well as other financial hardship.</p> <p>There will be no collaboration from other GDN's nor other funded sources.</p> <p>Eligibility criteria This project has a positive SROI</p> <p>This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the Financial hardship theme and the wider vulnerability categories of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial hardship • Accessibility, including language • Socio-demographic • Cultural • Mental Wellbeing themes • Has defined outcomes as required • Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
Evidence of stakeholder or customer support	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>

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.

The topics of the workshops are listed below:

- Spending allowances well - Health focus, Energy affordability – 12th September 2023
- Energy affordability – staying warm and healthy at home – 21st November 2023
- Meeting demand – capacity and resilience – 6th February 2024
- Annual Strategic Workshop – April 24

Stakeholder engagement throughout 2023 and 2024 told us that financial hardship, fuel poverty and health were the key areas of focus. In particular directing people towards good quality energy efficiency and fuel poverty advice. With regards to the concern about health this was specifically the link between living in a cold, damp home and the impact on health. 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 that additional capacity to support households who may be at risk, through a well-established and trusted advice service. This project will also ensure a holistic structured approach, tackling an immediate need to support fuel poor households and 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.

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 (Spring 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:

- Physical challenges, inclusive of communication issues, physical space
- Mental wellbeing
- Financial hardship
- Temporary vulnerability – including post hospital recovery and pregnancy / maternity
- Socio Demographic
- Household composition
- Rural Vulnerability
- Accessibility Including language
- Medical Dependant on Energy
- Cultural

Independent Stakeholder Group (ISG)

This group previously known as the Customer Engagement Group, provides an independent oversight into the actions we take to support our customers in vulnerable situations. 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. The ISG work with NGN, to create the content of the Customers In Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) workshops, previously detailed in the document.

Vulnerability Strategy (Updated Spring 2024)

NGN's dedicated Customers in Vulnerable Situations Strategy is continually reviewed to reflect changes in need. The most recent update was in June 24, reflecting the increase in the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance from c£7m to £20m. This ongoing strategy review continues to be informed by Stakeholder feedback. The six strategic principles, detailed below, form the basis of the strategy. Different support mechanisms and approaches have been mapped against each of the six principles, reflecting priority areas from stakeholder feedback.

The six key priority areas identified by our stakeholders are summarised below:

- Priority Area 1: Increased focus on health
- Priority Area 2: Collaboration and linking up partners and funding
- Priority Area 3: Increasing capacity for support within partner organisations
- Priority Area 4: Connecting and responding to different aspects and complexities of vulnerability

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority Area 5 – Continued support for those in financial hardship • Priority Area 6 - Scaling up existing projects
Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria	<p>3.1 Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased provision and awareness of accessible, locally, free, impartial energy advice • Increased numbers of vulnerable people take up free energy saving advice and support • Changed behaviours towards financial and environmental benefits of energy saving • Improved access to the internet and access to switching to energy best deals • Improved warmth and warm homes for vulnerable adults, families and children • Decreased heat loss and reduced energy usage in cold households by supporting small, practical interventions resulting in significant positive changes • Improved well-being and mental health • Healthier indoor living environments • Vulnerable people have increased awareness and more control of their energy bills • Increased disposable income via: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Energy saving measures ➢ Referrals to our Advice Team (Benefits/Debt/Income Maximisation) ➢ Reduced energy debt/personal debt • Increased awareness within their team and organisation of issues/barriers faced by vulnerable people affected by high energy costs/fuel poverty/cost of living and how to address these issues • Increased signposting to other specialist energy saving, fuel poverty and other support • Increased awareness of the importance and benefits of, supporting energy saving measures among vulnerable households across the organisation • Increased PSR registrations amongst at least one third of all people accessing the project • Improved levels of safety through customers having an improved understanding on the signs, symptoms, and dangers of carbon monoxide • Customers will feel in more control of their home's energy usage through an improved awareness on energy efficiency techniques <p>Success criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of vulnerable people from the target groups accessing and benefitting from the Centre for Warmth project services and activities • Number of PSR registrations • Number of Energy & Money MOT's delivered • Number of advice and awareness sessions undertaken during one-to-one sessions and home visits • Number of people who have received warm items and warmth packs • Number of people who self-identify that they have benefitted from increased disposable income

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of benefits, grants or other income that is identified as being missed out on or unclaimed • Number of CO Monitors distributed to people experiencing fuel poverty and hardship and living in older, colder homes • Number of people identifying that they have reduced money worries and increased disposable income. • Number of people reporting they are more energy efficiency aware following support from the project • Number of people who report that they have taken measures to help them be warmer in their homes
Project Partners and third parties involved	Cooperative Housing in Partnership, New Horizons, Shiney Row Advice and Resource Project, National Energy Foundation, Sunderland Council, NHS Social Prescribers, Together for Children, Adult Social Services Community Advice Partners, other BAME partners FODI and ICOS, NHS, Family Nurses, Young Mothers Units that FISCUS works with (Bump to Baby, Lewis Crescent, Hope Springs, Changing Lives Mother & Baby Refuge), WWIN, 9 Sunderland Community Foodbanks: Bethany Church FB, Farrington FB, Trinity Church FB, FISCUS FB, Pennywell FB, Bethel (Thorney Close) FB, Roker FB, Downhill FB, Elim Church FB, Sunderland Foodbank, our partners who make up the Advice & Food Providers Network and the Sunderland Child Poverty Group.
Potential for new learning	Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies.
Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations, including NPV	<p>This project has a positive SROI return.</p> <p>SROI: £11.40 NPV: £ 1,155,769.91</p>
VCMA Project start and end date	April 2025-March 2026
Geographical area	Sunderland, Washington, Coalfields
Internal governance and project management evidence	VCMA Governance Group Meeting: N/A Outcome of meeting: Our Centre For Warmth Strategy was approved at Governance in July 2024. A Centre for Warmth Co-ordinator has been appointed to manage these projects.
Approved by: Job Title:	Eileen Brown Customer Experience Director
Signature:	