

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	Supporting people in farming and rural communities to improve energy resilience and awareness of carbon monoxide
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>People in farming and rural communities can face unique challenges and vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities in farming and rural communities can include isolation, loneliness, poor physical and mental health, low access to services such as GPs, lower access to broadband or mobile reception. There can be vulnerable adults and vulnerable children living and working on farms.</p> <p>Farming people and those living and working on farms are often geographically isolated, with limited access to amenities. This isolation can also make it more logistically challenging for services to be restored, and farmers may be more reliant on gas and electricity than other consumers. FCN published research with the University of Exeter's Centre for Rural Policy Research that explored in depth the impacts loneliness and isolation can have on farmers' health and wellbeing. This paper was published in the journal <i>Sociologia Ruralis</i> and is available here: 'It's a lonely old world': Developing a multidimensional understanding of loneliness in farming - Wheeler - 2023 - Sociologia Ruralis - Wiley Online Library</p> <p>Animal disease such as bovine tuberculosis (bTB) continues to impact farmers, farming families and farming businesses and can create additional negative impacts on already vulnerable individuals, including to their health, wellbeing and financial security. In January 2025 FCN published research into the devastating human impacts of bTB: bTB-report-2025-final-Addressing-the-human-cost-of-bTB.pdf – which can compound existing stresses. In more recent times, Blue Tongue has become a very real problem particularly in the North East of England with additional movement restrictions and legislation in place.</p>
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The very nature of the working farming community is typically older than other sectors. The average age of a farmer is 60 with 40% over 65 years of age. Many farmers will not retire, or will only stop farming when they physically cannot any more. Quite often, farmhouses will be occupied by a multigenerational families, this could be due to lack of savings resulting in the inability to make retirement plans in another property therefore farmhouse dwellers can live in properties that do not meet their needs particularly well. It is well documented that farmers are “asset rich but very cash poor” which creates increased vulnerability incurred by debt and limited savings. Typically, farm income is significantly lower than the national average which is exacerbated by the topography of the land in the North of England being typically of lower productivity and limited options with regards to land use.

As we know, with age there may be associated health risks that require electricity to administer treatment and the absolute necessity for a warm home for example arthritis and respiratory conditions including asthma and COPD. Typical “farmwork” means that people are often exposed to lung irritants, cold conditions and allergens meaning a warm environment in the home is essential as part of preventing serious illness. We know that farmers will often neglect their own health due to time constraints so it is essential that the burden of reconnecting energy supply is as simple and swift as possible. Examples of this include oxygen treatment therapy, dialysis treatment etc.

Farmhouses are typically more susceptible to carbon monoxide poisoning for a number of reasons:

- **Fuel-burning appliances:** Poorly installed or maintained boilers, water heaters, furnaces, stoves, and ovens. Many farm houses are several hundred years old and maintenance of appliances may not be up to standard. Coupled with the average household income being well below the national average, this may mean regular servicing and/or replacement is overlooked as other bills appear more pressing. Many farmhouses use solid fuel as a source of heat which is of course, more prone to carbon monoxide emissions
- **Low income households:** This may reduce the frequency of maintenance e.g. boiler servicing, chimney sweeping etc. which could make the household more susceptible to carbon monoxide poisoning.
- **Blocked vents:** Blocked chimneys, flues, or ventilation points.
- **Improper use:** Using gas ovens for heating.
- **Smoke from fires:** Smoke from house fires.
- **Exhaust from vehicles:** Exhaust from cars, trucks, or portable generators used indoors

Solution

The Farming Community Network (FCN) is well-placed to provide solutions to this problem. FCN’s network of 400 volunteers are embedded in farming

communities in the North of England, with bespoke County Groups in Yorkshire, Northumberland, County Durham, Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire. They attend upwards of 150 farming shows, conferences and events each year. They have strong links with abattoirs, machinery dealerships, agronomists, farm advisors, land agents, contractors, Young Farmers' Clubs, Agricultural Colleges and many others. They have grassroots knowledge of how to bring farmers together, and how to communicate messages to farming people in a way that is relevant to them.

FCN has a strong and active presence in the North of England with staff based across the region who would help drive this initiative amongst well-established links with the farming community. Alongside their 100 volunteers in the North of England, the message would be disseminated to farmers and farmhouse dwellers through our extensive networks and trusted associates throughout the industry and beyond. FCN are fortunate to have an enormous wealth of experience across the whole team with staff and volunteers who have expertise in farming, banking, veterinary practice, mentoring, family mediation, health and safety, education and debt support. Those they help are typically experiencing challenging times which increases their vulnerability in many ways and by being able to provide practical solutions or signpost with confidence, FCN provide a valuable service to the entire farming community past, present and future. They are a trusted, empathetic and proactive charity that seeks to support all. They understand the complexities of delivering this project to an industry that has seasonal demands which will impact engagement eg February – April many working farmers are incredibly busy with lambing season, harvest in the summer months etc. FCN will therefore plan accordingly to maximise output and make sure that we target people at the right time which comes with extensive knowledge and understanding of our community.

FCN's FarmWell website is accessed over 10,000 times each year and contains a wealth of information to support farming people around a wide variety of topics. FarmWell would be an ideal platform for hosting information around carbon monoxide, including risks and mitigations. Through our social media channels we have a significant reach, including over 14,000 followers on LinkedIn from individuals working across the agricultural sector.

As part of FCN's new three-year strategy (2025-27) They have committed to working to help to reduce inequalities in farming and rural communities, and to help to develop farmers' personal and business resilience. This includes contingency planning, such as in the event of a power outage that could impact a business; therefore, encouraging more people to sign up to the Priority Services Register would be aligned to helping farmers to be proactive in taking measures to safeguard their operations, business, and personal health and wellbeing.

With their on-the-ground links to farmers and their significant knowledge of the unique pressures and challenges farming communities can face, FCN is ideally placed for communicating them, sharing messages, and importantly capturing relevant information – including disseminating surveys.

	<p>We welcome the opportunity to Pilot this project to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of people in our farming community – with an aspiration for a wider national rollout in the future.</p>
Scope and Objectives	<p>Scope</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farming people in the North of England • FCN volunteers and Trustees • FCN staff members • Engaging with stakeholders across the agricultural sector <p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve farmers' understanding of the risks of carbon monoxide, energy efficiency, advice on tariffs and debt issues – including entitlement to benefits where applicable • To encourage more farmers to sign up to the Priority Services Register • To distribute carbon monoxide detectors to members of the farming community • To create / publish content on the FCN FarmWell website • To inform The Northern Gas Network about the individuality of the farming community and farmhouse dwellers, creating a greater understanding of the industry/lifestyles and its challenges
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>This project aims to support our Centres for Warmth in assisting their communities with immediate crisis support, to deal with the significant impacts of 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</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This project has a positive SROI • This project will support NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the Financial hardship theme and the wider vulnerability categories of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial hardship • Accessibility, including language • Socio-demographic • Cultural

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Wellbeing themes • Has defined outcomes as required <p>Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms</p>
Evidence of stakeholder or customer support	<p>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.</p> <p>Stakeholder engagement throughout 2022, 2023 and 2024, 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. This was based on a combination of the following vulnerability factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuel poverty • Benefit claims • No qualifications • Long term health problem / disability <p>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.</p> <p>Through research carried out in 2023, the findings show that the 5 original NGN vulnerability categories have now evolved to 10 categories. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

Feedback from our Spending allowances well - health focus (September '23) workshop, indicated that one of the biggest concerns was health, specifically the link between living in a cold, damp home and the impact on health. Health projects are a priority for NGN this regulatory year and the need for winter warmer packs and heat the person items are growing as the cold weather sets in.

Through extensive engagement with stakeholders, we are seeing a number of key themes coming through consistently in terms of the impact of health and increased risks associated with cold, damp homes. Some notable observations and key areas are:

- We're seeing evidence of more expensive fuel costs for those with disabilities and those living with specific health conditions
- We're seeing a rise in mental health issues within our network – and acknowledging this as a barrier to engagement in longer term support
- We're acknowledging increases in the risk of CO poisoning – and looking at ways to identify and address this

Feedback from our annual VCMA Showcase Event (July 2024) included questions around how GDN's can help people who are not traditionally eligible for support, so many are in private rented or mortgage properties and do work. This project will help vulnerable customers regardless of their property tenure. Stakeholders also mentioned enhanced health risks that cancer sufferers face. This project will help keep customers living with cancer warm and well in their own homes.

Feedback from our Supporting Communities Together Event (October 2024) told us that the support is needed now more than ever to help customers stay warm and well in their own homes. Stakeholders also mentioned that If bills can't be lowered by price per kWh, then support advice initiatives re: other ways to stay warm should be available to customers. Stakeholders also mentioned that NGN should support customers this winter by providing practical support in the form of winter warm packs, vouchers etc.

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)

	<p>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.</p> <p>The six key priority areas identified by our stakeholders are summarised below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 • Priority Area 5 – Continued support for those in financial hardship • Priority Area 6 - Scaling up existing projects
Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria	<p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater awareness of the risks of carbon monoxide and mitigations that can be taken • More farmers signed up to the Priority Services Register • Farmers having more stable businesses in the face of increasingly volatile weather • Farm house dwellers wherever possible have uninterrupted power supply that could be essential for personal health reasons and/or business. • Farmhouse dwellers are committed to regularly servicing or replacing stoves, boilers, flue linings, solid fuel burning stoves etc. • Improving health and financial situation • More energy efficient homes • Reduced carbon footprint • Income maximisation through unclaimed benefits, debt reduction and tariff changes etc. <p>Success Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of people in the farming community, including those living and working on farms, signed up to the Priority Services Register • Number of webinars / information sessions delivered • Number of people accessing resources on our FarmWell website • Testimonials about what has been learned and the benefits
Project Partners and third parties involved	<p>FCN will link in with other NGN partners to signpost customers to any relevant support. They will also provide the link for NGN partners to the farming community, which they advised they have struggled to engage with.</p>
Potential for new learning	<p>Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies.</p>

Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations, including NPV	This project has a positive SROI return. SROI: £10.17 NPV: £3,974,266.33
VCMA Project start and end date	March 2025-March 2026
Geographical area	North East of England, Cumbria and Yorkshire.
Internal governance and project management evidence	VCMA Governance Group Meeting: 25 th February 2025 Outcome of meeting: Approved
Approved by: Job Title:	Eileen Brown Customer Experience Director
Signature:	