

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	Supporting Communities to Achieve Affordable Warmth and Safety-extension
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>	Updated-extension
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>The energy price cap rise in October 2022 significantly increased the cost of energy for customers and continues to do so. This has caused many more people to fall into fuel poverty. Lower income households are more likely to respond to higher energy prices by cutting energy usage. In some instances, some households will find themselves in a situation where energy will become unaffordable and as a consequence, they will self-disconnect and / or have increased debt (in general, not just energy).</p> <p>Additionally, residents who experience fuel poverty are more likely to be exposed to the dangers of Carbon Monoxide (CO). Due to financial hardship and affordability issues, they may be unable to safely maintain their gas appliances, resulting in a lack of regular servicing. CO alarms may not be installed in every household therefore, customers in vulnerable situations may be at an increased risk of CO poisoning.</p> <p>Insight from Citizens Advice, National Energy Action and the Fuel Bank Foundation has highlighted that there is a gap in understanding on what support is available. They have also reported that many trusted advice services are seeing record numbers of customers in energy crisis and becoming reliant on support for household essentials including food and energy. The increase in demand for these services is putting third sector partners under increased pressure. Grassroot, community groups can help to reach people at a very local level who may fall through the gaps. However, they often lack resource and are struggling to cope under pressure. They may not have the capacity, skills nor access to appropriate referral pathways and find it difficult to tap into possible funding streams, namely the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA). The</p>
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	<p>cost-of-living and energy crises are causing more households to seek advice and support, with the situation becoming ever more challenging. More people are presenting with complex needs which are taking longer to resolve. As a further consequence, advisors are required to have knowledge and training on a much wider range of issues.</p> <p>Solution</p> <p>The extension to the original project delivers the same real benefits and incorporates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of currently funded organisations to encourage diversity of applications from geographic/demographic areas not represented in round one of the funding. • Review and update of application pack and scoring criteria for new applicants. • Creation of application pack and scoring criteria for groups already in receipt of funding. • Update to marketing list and targeted promotion and publicity of the programme. • One applicant's webinar for those interested in applying, and handling other email enquiries about the fund. • Updates to programme resources (welcome pack, reporting guidelines and resource pack). • Assessment of applications. • Onboarding of 10-15 organisations. • Ongoing 1:1 support to organisations. • Monthly online newsletter. • Programme of networking and training events for capacity building and peer-to-peer support. • Monthly reporting to NGN of delivery numbers and quarterly reporting of qualitative data. • Administration of payments to groups. • Audit of a sample of organisations' client data. • Evaluation report at project close including feedback. • Attendance at NGN hosted event.
Scope and Objectives	<p>Working in partnership with Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE), NGN will create a larger network of partners that brings together grassroots, community organisations. This will enable them to work together at a local / granular level to provide support around energy and gas safety.</p> <p>Through this scheme, grassroots, community groups will be armed with the skills, knowledge and funding required to help customers in vulnerable situations, in particular, those living in fuel poverty and experiencing financial hardship. Support will be provided to understand what help is available. This will be linked to energy and financial advice, Priority Services Register (PSR), crisis support and information on gas safety (Carbon Monoxide – CO).</p> <p>This will be achieved by providing useful and clear information that helps existing, local support teams already embedded in communities, so that they can support those in or at risk of fuel poverty. CSE has been selected</p>

	<p>to be able to identify grass roots organisations who are already established in areas of high need. Those areas of high need have been identified by NGN's research data around social indicator mapping, bespoke mapping and associated vulnerability themes. These groups are trusted intermediaries and have experience in working with under-served and seldom heard groups.</p> <p>Through the Supporting Communities to Achieve Affordable Warmth and Safety (SCAAWS) project, the aim is to provide support to a minimum of 2,500 vulnerable households through 10 - 15 grassroots community groups. This is with the aim of providing tailored advice and support provisions to improve the health, wellbeing, and financial outcomes for those households finding it difficult to keep safe and warm.</p> <p>The appointed partners will as a minimum, support customers by providing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy advice, how to use energy efficiently and safely and information on relevant energy schemes • Help to access and register customers onto the Priority Services Register (PSR) • CO alarms and advice on CO safety • Onward support for customers in food or fuel crisis • Help to access benefits assessments and debt support • Access to information for those that are carers of parents (Carers Room) • Provide support help relevant organisations access the scheme, with additional training and start up support building on learning from the first year of delivery. <p>The extension will deliver all of the above with 10-15 organisations being supported. It will incorporate some changes after reviewing the current project and identifying areas for improvement.</p> <p>i) during the existing round of funding NGN and CSE have jointly managed allocation of resources to community organisations (CO alarms, CO leaflets and thermocards). CSE will now manage resource allocation to streamline the process. NGN will deliver all agreed resources to CSE's office at the start of the programme. CSE will coordinate onward delivery to organisations.</p> <p>ii) CSE will attend an NGN run event to promote the scheme and engage with grant recipients.</p>
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</p>

	<p>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 • Mental Wellbeing themes • Has defined outcomes as required <p>Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms</p>
<p>Evidence of stakeholder or customer support</p>	<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</p>

capacity to support households who may be at risk, through a well-established and trusted advice service.

Through research carried out in 2023, 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

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.

	<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</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
<p>Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A thriving network of organisations actively engaged with the scheme and receiving funds to support their work • Local organisations better able to access up to date advice resources and provide energy saving advice and energy safeguarding support to their service users • Households better able to access support should they need help to maintain a safe and warm home • Households supported with critical primary needs, energy and food poverty and debt support • Households signed up (and/or understand how to sign up) to the Priority Services Register • Households at lower risk from Carbon Monoxide

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals have improved health and wellbeing after receiving help with energy related issues
Project Partners and third parties involved	NGN will work with Centre for Sustainable Energy and community partners to deliver this project
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: £2.33</p> <p>NPV: £575,514.31</p>
VCMA Project start and end date	June 2025-March 2026
Geographical area	This project will take place within NGN geographical area
Internal governance and project management evidence	<p>VCMA Governance Group Meeting: 25th February 2025</p> <p>Outcome of meeting: Approved</p>
Approved by:	Eileen Brown
Job Title:	Customer Experience Director
Signature:	