

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	The Annexe – 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>In a life of perma-crisis identifying one problem is extraordinarily difficult. Problems overlap, they range from individual (people are dying younger than they were 5 years ago and this trend started before Covid) to international issues which caused the cost-of-living crisis.</p> <p>But all of these problems impact those with the least agency and resilience the most.</p> <p>The Wharton Trust at The Annexe are confident that they can identify those who need the most support in Dyke House as they have an ongoing and long understanding of their place; but want to do more, to use being a Centre for Warmth and hopefully a Centre for Future Warmth to build a stronger Hartlepool with intelligence and data led decision making to focus on those people and those streets which need the most intervention.</p> <p>Broadly speaking there are a number of overlapping problems which combine to make things difficult for people.</p> <p>A low-income town</p> <p>Hartlepool has an average disposable income 24% lower than the England average. <i>“30% of working age people were “inactive” – and of that percentage, more than 85% did not want a job. Again, just shy of 30% of households are workless.”</i></p> <p><i>But here’s a striking stat: in the early 2000s, around 15,000 people (20% of Hartlepool’s population) were claiming one of the key social security benefits....</i></p>
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Roll forward to 2019, and there are still 15,000 Hartlepudlians claiming a key benefit. This isn't a sign of failure - the current 15,000 will not be the same people as before. That we know because the life expectancy in the town is so far adrift from national standards that demographics will have ensured it is the case (Low Pay Commission [<https://minimumwage.blog.gov.uk/2019/06/17/in-hartlepool-there-are-problems-the-minimum-wage-cant-fix/>])

There are fewer than 6 jobs for every 10 people of working age in Hartlepool. This job density problem means people have a hard time finding work. Those who do find work are often in low-pay highly stress jobs such as caring. It means that money is tight for thousands of people and they are one economic shock away from real hardship.

Those who aren't working, are on benefits. These benefits have been reduced over time, so again, whilst just about being able to survive, the informal lending network is used to cover every day expenditure.

And then there is a small, but resource intensive cohort of people, who are living in absolute destitution, often as a result of a drug or alcohol dependency; where choices around what to do is compromised by their overwhelming desire to have their next fix. This results in horrific life circumstances and often a revolving door to prison and/or homelessness.

A sick town

The Director of Public Health's report in 2023 [www.hartlepool.gov.uk/downloads/file/9126/Hartlepool_director_of_public_health_report_2023]

Mental health conditions are the biggest cause of lost working days in the UK. In Hartlepool it is estimated that almost 1 in 4 adults has depression or anxiety. For severe mental health disorders, Hartlepool's Employment Support Allowance claimants citing mental health disorders is higher than the England average by almost a quarter.

Hartlepool has one of the highest rates of long-term musculoskeletal conditions (back pain, neck pain, arthritis, etc.) in England. 1 in 4 adults in Hartlepool has a long-term musculoskeletal condition, and 1 in 5 adults in Hartlepool has at least one other long-term condition on top of their musculoskeletal issues.

Smoking, drinking and obesity all have health impacts on the adult population in Hartlepool. Smoking prevalence in adults is at a 12 year low, but the long-term health consequences are still evident, with lung cancer registrations in Hartlepool almost 50% higher than England.

Similarly, hospital admissions for alcohol-related conditions in Hartlepool is almost 50% higher than England. Adult obesity in Hartlepool is at a 7 year high, with three quarters of adults in Hartlepool classified as obese.

Hartlepool has some of the highest rates of deaths from respiratory diseases, including preventable respiratory conditions. Hospital admissions for Chronic Constructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) are also particularly high in Hartlepool.

Very poor housing conditions

	<p>Hartlepool's housing market is defined as a self-contained housing market, as communities and local government guidelines suggest that anything over 70% internal migration is a self-contained housing market. In Hartlepool internal migration levels are 80.2% using census 2011 migration data.</p> <p>The three biggest reasons for households moving within Hartlepool were wanting a larger home, 16.7%, being forced to move, 11.3% and wanting own home/live independently, 10.5%. Overall, the vast majority (74.1%) of properties are houses, 12.1% are bungalows, 13.6% are flats/apartments and maisonettes and 0.9% are other types of property including park homes/caravans. Of all occupied properties, 11.3% have one bedroom, 29.2% have two bedrooms, 43.6% have three bedrooms and 15.9% have four or more bedrooms.</p> <p>The last Housing Strategy stated that overall 10% of residents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their housing. This level of dissatisfaction varies by place; the highest three being Burn Valley at 20.1%, Manor House 14.5 and Victoria 14.4%.</p> <p>It is estimated that there are 2000 empty properties in Hartlepool.</p> <p>The Solution:</p> <p>A targeted approach to the most vulnerable areas, with initial conversations followed up by more specialist support if necessary, could well bring in additional money to local residents.</p> <p>The Annexe Centre for Warmth and a smaller space at LilyAnne's Wellbeing Café (LAWC) as an outreach space. They will both have permanent information available; however, only The Annexe will be staffed on a full-time basis. LAWC will be an outreach space on a twice weekly basis.</p> <p>This will be supplemented by using the LilyAnne's Wellbeing Van; to deliver street outreach at various locations to take the assistance to people's doors; offering a decent cup of coffee and a warm welcoming space.</p> <p>Trusted partners will deliver extra elements of their work; using their skills and their networks to deepen the impact.</p>
Scope and Objectives	<p>To run a number of activities which are outlined below which will address the identified problems.</p> <p>Fundamentals</p> <p>Firstly, all of their brand assets; social media, leaflets, information sharing will recognise that 1 in 3 adults in Hartlepool are functionally illiterate. They are the ones mostly likely to be in need of the service, so this will be done carefully and respectfully. Recognising that this has the potential to be a barrier to accessing the full suite of resources available.</p> <p>The Annexe will deliver the Centre for Warmth services by utilising their existing centre activities and expanding offerings to directly support local communities facing the impact of low income, poor health, food and fuel poverty and illiteracy.</p>

	<p>In-house Services at The Annexe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast Clubs: The centre will host a men's and women's drop-in breakfast club where individuals can enjoy a hot breakfast and drink while receiving advice on carbon monoxide (CO) safety, energy efficiency, and other support services. • Income Maximisation and Benefits Advice: After basic Information Advice and guidance and benefits advice type training, they will assist with benefit applications and debt management, helping people increase their income and access available support. They will partner with opportunities such as the Household Support Fund (HSF) and Advice@Hart for additional assistance. • PSR Registration: To focus on raising awareness about the Priority Services Register (PSR), a program designed to provide extra support to vulnerable households. Helping clients sign up and offer continued guidance on energy and utility services. • 'Cheap as Chips, cooking on a budget workshops': These workshops will build on their Family Club and will be offered to help individuals build cooking skills and foster relationships by helping people cook meals which are cheap. Additionally, they will provide guidance on using low-cost ingredients and preparing energy-efficient meals. Consistent attendance will be rewarded with a slow cooker or air fryer. • The Big Switch – a quarterly campaign to get people to go online in the IT suite to use a price comparison website such as U-Switch to see if they can get a better tariff for their utility. <p>Outreach Providing outreach services through a wellbeing café and van to assist those places in Hartlepool that lack a community anchor organisation.</p>
<p>Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA</p>	<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

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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> <p>Customers in Vulnerable Situations (CIVS) Workshops</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>The topics of the workshops are listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <p>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.</p> <p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

	<p>Vulnerability Strategy (Updated Spring 2024)</p> <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
<p>Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria</p>	<p>Outcomes</p> <p>Increase in number of households receiving the service by campaigning and raising awareness of the provisions of the CFW across the town.</p> <p>Increased income of some residents based on personal circumstances and use of advice sessions.</p> <p>People are safer from the potential impact of carbon monoxide leaks; this is especially important in the low quality housing stock in Hartlepool.</p> <p>Increase in awareness of partner agencies of the service and over time the service being an integral part of the incoming referral procedure for services such as our own and Hartlepool carers, Schools etc</p> <p>Increase knowledge of PSR, CO awareness, income maximisation, energy efficiency.</p> <p>Success criteria</p> <p>To measure success by:</p> <p>The number of people engaged</p> <p>The number of people becoming more aware and being registered on the PSR.</p> <p>The number of people who get additional benefits and how much they are worth</p> <p>The number of people becoming aware of the dangers of carbon monoxide and the number detectors shared and/or installed</p> <p>The number of people with reduced debts.</p> <p>Energy savings by switching tariffs, and improving energy efficiency knowledge.</p> <p>The social media engagement around the CFW campaigns.</p>
<p>Project Partners and third parties involved</p>	<p>The Annexe will collaborate with organisations such as the National Energy Action (NEA), Miles for Men, Hartlepool Carer's local schools, and other existing partners to ensure a comprehensive support system. These partnerships will enable them to offer advice on CO safety, energy efficiency, fuel poverty, and income maximization.</p>

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	This project has a positive SROI return. SROI: £7.39 NPV: £1,670,315.49
VCMA Project start and end date	April 2025-March 2026
Geographical area	Hartlepool
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:	