

Community Action Northumberland – Holistic Buildings Project Extension

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

1. Problem(s)

Northumberland is one of the most sparsely populated counties in England with just 63 people per square kilometre. 40.7% of Northumberland's population – 151,885 people live in rural areas (defined as small towns & fringes, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings). Of these more than 20% are over the age of 65, 15,075 people report themselves as having a limiting long-term illness and 17,550 people are income deprived.

The community building stock in Northumberland has high utility bills and high carbon emissions, limited insulation, off-gas heating systems, lack of renewable alternatives, limited financial resources. They do however provide support for isolated communities across the county.

1.1 The solution

This project is an extension to the current project, a holistic approach to provide more energy efficient and sustainable community buildings/village halls by not only providing an energy audit but by supporting funding applications to install renewable technologies. By providing training for volunteers and trustees to ensure a good understanding of energy related issues as well as funding opportunities once the project is complete.

2. Scope and Objectives

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

- Carry out a series of energy audits across rurally isolated community buildings and village halls, producing a report highlighting recommended and achievable energy efficient improvements
- Carry out training for Trustees of each of the halls of benefit, this training will include energy efficiency, identifying potential funding for building improvements, how to complete a funding application form and an introduction to renewable technology
- Work with each community building/village hall to write and implement an environmental policy for the building and its contents.
- Hold a community event at each hall/centre to showcase the renewable changes/improvements

2.2 Scope

- Train 28-38 village hall / community building volunteers
- Write and implement 14 environmental policies
- 14 energy audit reports
- Work with 20 volunteers to access funding
- 8,000 residents per year supported
- 140 PSR referrals
- 14 Community showcase events
- 140 - CO Awareness Questionnaires

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This project qualifies under the criteria for VCMA funding, as it will support vulnerable customers who are living in rural isolation within Northumberland.

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

3.1 Eligibility criteria

- The project supports NGN's Vulnerability Strategy by aligning with the Fuel Poverty and Energy affordability theme
- Has defined outcomes as required
- Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
- NGN have calculated that this project will have a positive SROI

4. Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

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.

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 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 customers in vulnerable situations which meets the needs of our stakeholders.

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

5.1 Outcomes

Communities are increasingly concerned with the rising costs of energy, including community buildings such as village halls, and are keen to reduce energy consumption for environmental as well as financial reasons. CAN have been supporting community buildings for 73 years, and their knowledge, expertise and networks have been invaluable in taking forward several energy projects to support village halls and communities across Northumberland. These include, solar and PV panels, ASHP, GSHP and batteries. These halls are then used as resilience/emergency centres during floods, power cuts etc. ACRE (Action for Communities in Rural England) stated they believed 2 out of 3 village halls may have to close during winter due to high energy costs, it is important to keep these halls open, warm and energy efficient.

We will continue to cover all the targets highlighted in our original application. Including highlighting the importance of CO awareness and the Priority Service Register.

5.2 Success criteria

- Train 28-38 village hall / community building volunteers
- Write and implement 14 environmental policies
- 14 energy audit reports
- Work with 20 volunteers to access funding
- 8,000 residents per year supported

- 140 PSR referrals
- 14 Community showcase events
- 140 - CO Awareness Questionnaires

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

CAN will be working alongside village halls and community buildings within Northumberland.

7. Potential for new learning

Any learning will be shared with stakeholders, including GDN's, DNO's and water companies

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

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.

1st November 2024 – 31st March 2026

Geographic area

This project will take place across Northumberland.

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director