

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	Maryport – 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	January 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>Maryport is a small town in West Cumbria and is one of the furthest English constituencies from Westminster. Maryport is an ex-mining, ex-shipping, ex-steel industry community.</p> <p>The Centre is based in the middle of a residential estate in Maryport called Ewanrigg - one of the 2.5% most deprived communities in the UK. Statistics show that the surrounding areas of The Centre are ranked as worse than a typical 'left behind neighbourhood'. The daily experience of The Centre volunteers and staff, as well as 'year on year' statistics, plus feedback from regular community workshops – all support the view that people in Maryport are in an extremely vulnerable situation and the trajectory continues to worsen.</p> <p>Factors that influence the vulnerability of local people are complex, multifaceted and generational. Our experience suggests that the Maryport community will struggle on, but data trends indicate that more will struggle, and those who struggle will find their issues becoming more complex in a context of ever reducing services, support, and help. Maryport faces a 'multiple whammy' of vulnerability including but not limited to the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term, increasing, high levels of generational deprivation can be seen with food poverty, digital poverty and health poverty. • Maryport is the hidden/forgotten town in West Cumbria. Services are generally located in Workington, Whitehaven, Cockermouth and Keswick. Apart from a Post Office and a library, Maryport has few 'walk in' services.
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	<p>The Centre is the only 'drop in' community hub that has an open access activity every weekday in Maryport.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As services disappear or go digital, with low levels of digital confidence and high levels of digital exclusion, local residents increasingly struggle to access basic services including banking, health appointments, and transport. • The small high street has many empty premises, with independent shops closing each month. • There is an ongoing weakening of the fragile community infrastructure, with sparse, fragile and decreasing third sector provision e.g the closure of Age UK West Cumbria and West Cumbria Mind. • Pride and a culture of resilience contribute to people struggling to ask for help • Rural coastal towns face a disproportionate Covid and more recently Cost of Living impact and vulnerability • Capacity in local NHS, mental health, and care sectors is ever decreasing • Levels of literacy, and qualifications on leaving school are amongst the lowest in the UK • There is a disproportionately high take up of incapacity claims • Residents complain of increasing anti-social behaviour • Few secure, adequately paid, stable working jobs and contracts available in the town • Lack of, and cost of public transport in a town built on a hill, where approx. 50% don't have access to a private car, and where all major services are many miles away. • Under resourced local authorities and criss-crossing new boundary lines drawn up with new health authorities, unitary authorities and new electoral boundaries further reduces the limited contact and proximity local residents have to decision makers with a remit for Maryport, resulting in reduced access to officers/representatives, reduced access to funding, partnerships and reduced community power, representation and visibility • Coastal erosion is predicted to leave parts of Maryport underwater in the next ten years • A culture of 'staying put' makes financial independence challenging for all ages, with limited further education and job opportunities in the town. <p>Solution</p> <p>The Centre is to become a Centre for Warmth. This will enable them to sustain, embed and develop communication and engagement activities. Over the last ten years they have developed highly effective communication and engagement strategies in order to help local people to overcome barriers to support, services, activities and opportunities. Without this, people miss out on vital information and opportunities which impacts their health, wellbeing, finances, family and on their safety.</p> <p>This project will enable them to recruit a full time Community Connector post. Ideally recruiting someone who lives within walking distance of The Centre i.e.</p>
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	<p>from an area of high deprivation, who has the appropriate competencies, values and experience for the role, who may be facing barriers to employment, and for whom this would be a supported role into employment with professional development opportunities. This person will engage with local residents face to face and will signpost them to support and services available to them and will initiate appropriate training and awareness raising activities to increase CO safety, reduce fuel, food and digital poverty and reduce loneliness and isolation. This post will engage with vulnerable community members one to one in The Centre and in outreach, and will also engage with existing groups, as well as establishing new group activities to fulfil the project objectives.</p> <p>This project will also enable them to both sustain and increase communication activity to support the objectives of the Community Connector post. This will include production of four editions of Maryport Matters. Each edition will be hand delivered through 8000 letterboxes with an estimated readership of 15,000. In addition they will use their expertise to create and deliver digital and print campaigns to support the Community Connector's objectives - ensuring that campaign messages are delivered through letterboxes and to people's digital devices, and that messages are understood, well received and responded to by community members. Communication activities will help promote training and awareness raising to increase CO safety, and to reduce fuel, food and digital poverty and reduce loneliness and isolation.</p> <p>The Centre for Warmth concept was developed to ensure a holistic approach to supporting fuel poor households within a community setting. A Centre for Warmth Strategy has been developed and approved by our independent Governance Panel on 30th July 2024.</p>
Scope and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The primary objective of the project is to create a sustainable and community-driven Centre for Warmth in Maryport. The project seeks to deliver immediate, tangible benefits to vulnerable residents by addressing fuel poverty, carbon monoxide (CO) safety, and income maximisation. <p>The objectives of this initiative are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat fuel poverty by offering energy-saving advice, fuel vouchers, and practical support to help residents manage and reduce their energy costs. Increase CO awareness by providing free CO alarms and educational workshops to ensure household safety, especially in poorly maintained homes. Maximise household income through benefit entitlement checks and debt management services, helping residents access financial support and the social supermarket. Foster community resilience by offering food support, clothing, and a warm, safe space where vulnerable people can gather, reducing isolation and improving mental well-being. Support and educate by providing education and support to vulnerable groups by helping them navigate emerging energy policies and prepare for the digital switchover. As a registered digital inclusion hub, Focus4Hope

	<p>offers essential resources and assistance to individuals who may not have access to digital services, ensuring they are not left behind during this transition.</p> <p>Scope</p> <p>This project will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit a full time Community Connector for 12 months. • The Community Connector will scope and connect with available speakers, trainers, advocates and organisations who have a remit for providing benefit, debt, CO, finance, energy and digital, health and wellbeing advice and support in the community. • The Community Connector will be a fantastic communicator, and will work in The Centre and in outreach, identifying vulnerable community members, chatting to people and signposting them to support available and engaging them in The Centre and wider community activities. • The Community Connector will organise for a programme of weekly speakers, trainers and advocates to be visible and present in The Centre providing benefit, debt, CO, finance, energy and digital, health and wellbeing advice and support. This will include Community Energy Ambassador advice training sessions. • The Community Connector will match community members to volunteering opportunities where appropriate. • The Community Connector will work with The Centre's communication worker to create campaigns to expand awareness on key topics (including CO and fuel poverty) and to signpost to related information, support and advice. Campaigns will be supported by a drip feed of information in Maryport Matters (with one full page dedicated to the campaign) and on our social media platforms and in and around The Centre. • Four editions of Maryport Matters will include the logo of Northern Gas, plus one full page dedicated to promoting this project and key awareness and information messages to support the campaign. Distribution each edition is to 8000 letterboxes, shops and community buildings in the Maryport and surrounding areas. • Maryport Matters will be distributed by community volunteers (our last edition was delivered by 96 volunteers aged 1 years of age to 86 years of age) to the housing estates around The Centre. Maryport Matters is delivered to the town centre and surrounding villages by a professional distributor. This will be another opportunity to connect people to the project. • The Community Connector and communications worker will build up contacts with local groups, organisations and businesses who can support this project, who are values aligned and who can become useful stakeholders for The Centre. • The Centre will work up plans and trial paid for digital advertising to support the sustainability of Maryport Matters. • The Centre will deliver four large scale annual activities which will be an additional platform to connect vulnerable community members to this
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	<p>project. Based on previous years attendance, we anticipate that collectively these events will attract 1500 people.</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</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 • Goes beyond NGN's licence obligations and price control funded mechanisms
<p>Evidence of stakeholder or customer support</p>	<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>

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:

	<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>As a result of developing a Centre for Warmth they will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint a Community Connector for 12 months. • Implement a communication strategy that will work in alignment with the Community Connector, creating dialogue and engagement with vulnerable community members and communicating vital information regarding benefit, debt, CO, finance, energy and digital, health and wellbeing advice. • Deliver 4 x large scale community events which will create engagement opportunities with an estimated attendance total of 15,000 local vulnerable community members. <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness of energy efficiency measures to help reduce fuel poverty • Raise awareness of Carbon Monoxide, gas safety, and provide CO alarms • Advise and register households on the PSR • Connect vulnerable people to support around money management, income maximisation, benefits and access to services • Reduce isolation • Raise awareness of Carbon Monoxide, PSR and energy efficiency through social media <p>Energy efficiency advice - 250</p> <p>Awareness of Carbon Monoxide – 20,200</p> <p>Awareness of Gas Safety – 20,200</p> <p>Provide CO Alarms - 300</p> <p>Advise households about PSR – 20,200</p> <p>Sign up to PSR - 300</p> <p>Support around money, benefits and access to services - 300</p>
Project Partners and third parties involved	The Centre works in partnership with many groups, organisations and businesses.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursery, infant, primary, secondary schools in the area • Groundwork – including Green Doctor • Every Life Matters • Workington Citizens Advice Bureau • Andy's Man Club Maryport • Action for Health North Cumbria • Maryport and Cockermouth ICC • Maryport Extended Schools Partnership • North Lakes Foodbank • Cumbria Police • North Cumbria CCG • West Allerdale Children's Centre and Family Action • Maryport Boxing Club • Maryport Boys and Girls Club • Glasson Rangers Rugby Club • Maryport Amateur Rugby Club • Maryport Hospital staff and services • Maryport Library • SHOUT Parent Support • Cumberland Council • DWP • West Cumbria Carers • CADAS • Rainbow HQ and Pinc • Raise • Health and Wellbeing Coaches Cumberland Council • Home Group • Bell Group UK • Fit 4 Life • Speech After Stroke Support Group • Ewanrigg Community Choir • Maryport Chess Club • Ewanrigg Brownies, Maryport Beavers, Cubs, Scouts, Guides and Rainbows. • Active Cumbria • Cumbria Yoga Foundation • Maryport Settlement • Maryport Roman Museum • Local Trust • Novus • Maryport Aquarium • Hospice at Home West Cumbria • Maryport Sea Cadets • Maryport Rescue • Cultura Trust • Tivoli • Shipping Brow Gallery
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends of the Earth • Maryport Rotary
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: £2.19</p> <p>NPV: £116,527.57</p>
VCMA Project start and end date	November 2024-October 2025
Geographical area	Cumbria
Internal governance and project management evidence	<p>VCMA Governance Group Meeting: N/A</p> <p>Outcome of meeting: Our Centre For Warmth Strategy was approved at Governance in July 2024.</p>
Approved by: Job Title:	<p>Eileen Brown</p> <p>Customer Experience Director</p>
Signature:	