

Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

Project title:	Groundwork North East & Cumbria
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>Energy advice can be found across parts of the region and Cumbria but it is geographically patchy and can be limited in scope. At the same time the cost-of-living crisis and rising energy costs continue to increase the numbers of households in fuel poverty and at risk of fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is higher than the national average across the north east and Cumbria. In Tyneside and Wearside fuel poverty is particularly high and widespread and presents specific challenges.</p> <p>Solution</p> <p>Green Doctors will provide dedicated wrap-around support and advice to help vulnerable community members to best manage the pressures they are facing.</p> <p>The Green Doctors will deliver support to 450 households across the North East and Cumbria through home visits, advice in community settings and, if applicable, telephone advice to improve energy efficiency, save money, encourage behavioural change, enhance quality of life and contribute to environmental sustainability.</p> <p>They have prioritised greater support in the areas of greatest need. In addition, they will focus support on urban high-rise accommodation which can be overlooked and, where the use of electrical storage heaters can increase energy costs and accentuate fuel poverty.</p>
Scope and Objectives	Scope

	<p>Tackling fuel poverty across the North East and Cumbria through energy advice, improving the energy efficiency of homes, encouraging behavioural change, enhancing quality of life and contribute to environmental sustainability. Green Doctors will increase resilience in the regions most vulnerable communities.</p> <p>The objectives of this initiative are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To deliver the Green Doctor Service to 450 vulnerable householders across the North East and Cumbria • To offer face to face and tailored energy advice to vulnerable householders • To provide onward to referral to partners services appropriate to individual customers' needs • To prioritise increased awareness and to provide specific advice on the risks of carbon monoxide in homes. • To prioritise increased awareness and encourage inclusion on the Priority Services Register. • To generate household savings of £4,500
<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>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</p>

we are well informed to address the needs of customers across our network and through collaborative projects.

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:

- Fuel poverty
- Benefit claims
- No qualifications
- Long term health problem / disability

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.

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.

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)

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>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of household energy efficiency, carbon monoxide and the benefits of the Priority Services Register • Reduced household energy debt • Reduced household energy costs • Improved wellbeing <p>Success criteria</p> <p>To deliver the Green Doctor Service to 450 vulnerable householders across the North East and Cumbria.</p> <p>Use of a range of monitoring and evaluation tools, and follow up calls with customers, to evidence our success in delivering these outcomes.</p> <p>Project specific questionnaires covering all of the outcomes to help understand the impact of support to vulnerable community members.</p> <p>Green Doctors will use their dedicated Salesforce CRM to capture, analyse and report effectively on all monitoring data.</p>
Project Partners and third parties involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities • Social Landlords • Community groups • Health services • Advice and Guidance Organisations • Church Groups
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: £3.66 NPV: £479,263.56
VCMA Project start and end date	January 2025-December 2025
Geographical area	North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Cumbria, Northumberland, Newcastle, Sunderland, Gateshead, Durham and Tees Valley.
Internal governance and project management evidence	VCMA Governance Group Meeting: 26 November 2024 Outcome of meeting: Approved
Approved by:	Eileen Brown
Job Title:	Customer Experience Director
Signature:	