

## Centre for Warmth – Hope Foundation

<b>Funding GDN(s)</b>	<b>Northern Gas Networks</b>
<b>For Collaborative VCMA Projects:</b>	Role of GDN(s) N/A
<b>Date of PEA submission:</b>	March 2026
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<b>Total cost (£k)</b>	Update: February 2026 £155,096.48
<b>Total VCMA funding required (£k)</b>	Update: February 2026 £155,096.48

## 1. Problem(s)

Middlesbrough is one of England's most deprived and lowest skilled communities. Half the local government wards are in the 10% most deprived nationally with unemployment twice the national average and 40% of young people do not have a GCSE equivalent qualification in maths or English. Many people in the community face a lifetime of low skills, unemployment and poverty.

Food, digital and fuel poverty is the norm for many people and families report having to choose to heat or eat. In Middlesbrough 48.7% of children live below the poverty line. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation study UK Poverty 2023 shows that around 6 in ten people on average are heating their home less since the cost of living crisis started. Half are reducing the number of showers they take. People in work locally are generally in lower paid jobs making it more difficult to make ends meet. Recent power cuts caused by the weather led to some anecdotal evidence locally of the most vulnerable not having access to services quickly, despite their disabilities, as they did not know they needed to be PSR registered. Current work with Christians Against Poverty, warm space and the benefits advice service indicates that there is a real need for focussed support around fuel poverty and how people can save money alongside having access to the benefits they should be receiving. There is a need to educate and supply information to help residents make better choices around their energy use. To have the right benefits to be able to meet their outgoings. Registrations on the PSR will ensure vulnerable people have the right support and access when emergencies occur.

## Solution

The Hope Foundation has applied for VCMA funding to become a Centre for Warmth. The centre is owned by the Foundation and as an independent community hub provides a range of services with and for the community. They have been providing support and services for almost 30 years as part of our community helping to relieve poverty, raise aspirations and help people participate and have the support they need to improve their life chances. The community is from all walks of life with many vulnerable groups including older people, long term unemployed, people with mental health, drug and alcohol issues, ex-offenders, those from trafficking situations, people with physical and learning difficulties, asylum seekers and refugees.

The Centre for Warmth concept was developed to ensure a holistic approach to supporting fuel poor households within a community setting. Centre users will receive a combination of services such as:

- energy advice
- CO awareness and advice
- income maximisation through benefit entitlement checks and managing debt
- free or reduced cost food/clothing
- fuel top up vouchers
- connections to other NGN funded partner information/assistance

Plus training, information, advice and services bespoke to their individual neighbourhoods. All provided in a warm safe space designed to improve health and wellbeing, increase household income, and help communities better manage their energy.

## **2. Scope and Objectives**

The Hope Foundation Centre for Warmth project aims to directly serve 1210 beneficiaries through a range of measures. This is a two year project based in the town centre of Middlesbrough. As a trusted provider within the Middlesbrough community they are in an ideal position to deliver this project.

Middlesbrough has the largest number of disadvantaged wards in the country. Poor health and poverty are indicators of the difficulties people are experiencing. The diversity of the people groups available are a key to meeting those most excluded.

The funding will be used to:

Employ a volunteer co-ordinator and an energy ambassador who will deliver the project alongside a team of volunteer Energy Buddies.

Regular drop in sessions will be held, in the centre, supported by the energy buddies. They will be supervised by the volunteer manager and will refer in more complex cases to the Energy Ambassador. This model is based on their successful digibuddies tea and tech session model that works to reduce digital poverty and encourages the community to attend to access support and then referred to more in depth support if needed. Alongside these weekly sessions there will be timetabled sessions covering particular subject areas for example PSR and CO awareness sessions organised by the Energy Ambassador and supported by the energy buddies. There will also be the potential for 1:1 appointments as required with the Energy Ambassador. Alongside the information and PSR registration the CO awareness will be linked to distributing free CO alarms as needed.

Work to reduce loneliness and isolation centres around the café and warm space (snug). As well as delivering daily activities which include crafts, bingo, a coffee morning, bingo, a quiz, tea and tech, board games and a record club with a new winter warm meal on an evening once a month. Hope Foundation supports the delivery of the Middlesbrough mental health collective project as part of the community supporting those struggling with life and their mental health. Low cost healthy meals are provided to promote good health and wellbeing alongside social activities. The prices are kept low by accessing food from fareshare reducing waste food from supermarkets and subsidising the meals.

The cyber café provides drop in digital support for the community enabling people to access online services and information while upgrading the skills of local people. Working as part of the South Tees digital partnership to tackle digital poverty around skills, devices and

connectivity, **furbdit** was formed. The project collects and refurbishes unwanted laptops, phones, computers, tablets and other digital technology from local businesses, individuals and organisations throughout the Tees Valley area. The devices are distributed through a network ensuring that those most excluded are able to access technology and connectivity. With over 80 distributors they have redistributed over 400 machines including lap tops, phones, tablets and CPU's. They are also able to supply connectivity with SIM card distribution through a partnership with the Good Things Foundation supported by Virgin 3 and O2.

The main services provided will include:

- Listening and support service
- Energy efficiency advice
- Energy safeguarding
- Reading and understanding charges
- Support calls with the person to suppliers as needed
- Educate individuals on carbon monoxide (CO) awareness
- Provide CO alarms
- Raise awareness of the Priority Services Register (PSR)
- Signpost to other support agencies in the area including the Financial Inclusion Group and welfare benefits appointments and Christians Against Poverty delivery.
- Sign families onto the PSR
- Signposting to other support services as needed including exercise, mental health support and banking.
- Support to access training, volunteering and employment
- Group activities to reduce isolation
- Support to learn to cook on a budget using slow cooker with recipes

Google classroom is used to support the learning delivery in the centre. A google classroom will be developed for the energy buddies with online materials to access and revisit as needed. This will enable a hybrid of training both face to face and online. Materials will also be available online and on YouTube.

Marketing support will be multi-faceted and will include the production of materials and innovative, creative engagement solutions to help people get involved with the project. Social media campaigns will include the promotion of the workshops as well as resources to include the messages around PSR, CO and energy efficiency to reach a wider audience.

### **2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:**

- To improve health and wellbeing of the centre users
- To reduce fuel poverty
- To increase income through benefit maximisation and debt management
- To provide CO awareness and advice
- To increase awareness and registrations of the PSR

## 2.2 Scope

- 50 volunteers will be recruited and trained to support people with their understanding of energy and energy efficiencies.
- 50 people will complete the community energy ambassadors training to enable them to support others with their energy bills.
- 1 Google classroom will be created with the materials developed to deliver online learning to 50 people.
- 1210 people will access the listening and support service over the 2 years
- 1210 will receive energy efficiency advice
- 1210 people will receive awareness advice around CO
- 200 people will receive or be signposted to access to CO alarm.
- 250 people will receive advice on using bags supplied from food bank and how to create healthy meals.
- 200 people will receive advice on slow cooking and the benefits in saving energy 100 will be given a slow cooker
- 10 partner organisations will be engaged to work in partnership with us supporting delivery to their client groups.
- 1210 people will be made aware of PSR
- 600 people will be signed up to PSR
- 450 people will participate in organised activities.
- 225 people will be referred into learning, volunteering or employment.
- 12,000 people will receive information regarding CO, PSR and energy efficiency through social media channels and marketing.

## 3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

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 across the Middlesbrough and wider Tees Valley locality, 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.

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

### 3.1 Eligibility criteria

- 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:
  - 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

#### **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.

Recent social indicator mapping research carried out in June 2022, indicated that Bradford, Hull, Scarborough, South Tyneside, and Sunderland were the top five places, to emerge as

having the greatest concentration of vulnerabilities within NGN's network. This was based on a combination of the following vulnerability factors:

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

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:

- 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

#### **4.2 Customer Engagement Group (CEG)**

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**

The Hope Foundation will employ 2 members of staff a volunteer co-ordinator and an energy ambassador who will deliver the project alongside a team of volunteer Energy Buddies.

The Energy Ambassador's role is to lead the advice element of the project. Their role will be to work with partners to promote the project and access people from the area who would benefit from the advice and information sessions. They will give advice to people referred in from partners and from the energy buddies conducting more in depth support and guidance. The Energy Ambassador will complete the Fuel Debt Advice and the Energy Awareness level 3 qualification in year 1. Their role will be to monitor and support the project to ensure that the interventions are working and take action as needed to continue to adapt and grow the project. An important part of the role is to ensure that the right partners are accessed and engaged offering quality signposting and collaborative work. The Energy Ambassador and Volunteer co ordinator will work very closely together to cascade skills and knowledge to the Energy Buddies.

The Volunteer Co-ordinator's role will be to recruit, train and support the energy buddies. They will agree roles and responsibilities as well as boundaries for the energy buddy roles. They will ensure that buddies are aware their role is to give information rather than advice and hold regular supervision to ensure the buddies are equipped and supported and are able to adequately deal with any difficulties or challenges they are facing. This will include identifying and accessing external training or any development support as needed. The volunteer co ordinator will complete the Fuel Debt Advice in the community qualification in year 1 to enable them to cascade the learning to the volunteers.

50 Energy Buddies will be recruited, trained and managed to be able to provide general information and support across Middlesbrough as well as in Hope's own centre. They will work with and alongside the volunteer manager and the energy ambassador. Regular drop in sessions will be held, in our premises, supported by the energy buddies. They will be supervised by the volunteer manager and will refer in more complex cases to the Energy Ambassador This model is based on our successful digibuddies tea and tech session model that works to reduce digital poverty and encourages the community to attend to access support as it is needed and are then referred into more in depth support if needed. Alongside these weekly sessions there will be timetabled sessions covering particular subject areas for example PSR and CO awareness sessions organised by the Energy Ambassador and supported by the energy buddies. There will also be the potential for 1:1 appointments as required with the Energy Ambassador.

Alongside the information and registration the CO awareness will be linked to distributing free CO alarms as needed.

The sessions will help people struggling to pay their bills and accessing our warm space in centre. The marketing will include our partners and the wider local community to ensure coverage and 'buy in' locally.

## **5.1 Outcomes**

The main services provided will include:

- Listening and support service

- Energy efficiency advice
- Energy safeguarding
- Reading and understanding charges
- Support calls with the person to suppliers as needed
- Educate individuals on carbon monoxide (CO) awareness - 1210
- Provide 200 CO alarms
- Raise awareness of the Priority Services Register (PSR)
- Signpost to other support agencies in the area including the Financial Inclusion Group and welfare benefits appointments and Christians Against Poverty delivery.
- Sign 200 families onto the PSR
- Signposting to other support services as needed including exercise, mental health support and banking.
- Support to access training, volunteering and employment
- Group activities to reduce isolation
- Support to learn to cook on a budget using slow cooker with recipes

The marketing support will be multi faceted and will include the production of materials and innovative, creative engagement solutions to help people get involved with the project. Social media campaigns will include the promotion of the workshops as well as good news stories to ensure that people understand the benefits of understanding energy efficiencies and how it can help them.

### **Further outcomes**

Improvements in feeling safe

Increase in benefits accessed through support services accessed

Improved peace of mind due to the CO alarm fittings

Reduction in feelings of loneliness and isolation

Digital inclusion

Improved feelings of health and wellbeing due to access to food and energy support and advice.

### **5.2 Success criteria**

Number of total direct beneficiaries <b>1210</b> (broken down as):	1210	50	200	250	450	225	900	12000
Google classroom learning		✓						
PSR awareness	✓							
signup for PSR			✓					
energy advice	✓							
Listening and support service	✓							
Income maximisation					✓			
Signposting to partner services							✓	
CO awareness	✓							

CO alarm issued			✓					
Healthy foodbank meals				✓				
Energy saving with slow cooker			✓					
Organised activities					✓			
Learning, volunteering or employment						✓		
Indirect Beneficiaries via social media channels and marketing regarding CO, PSR and energy efficiency.								✓

## 6. Project Partners and third parties involved

In order to deliver the project, where specialist intervention is needed, the centre will be working in partnership with a range of providers which they will signpost to. They will work with fareshare, community grocers and the food bank and develop meals and recipes to prepare healthy nutritious food from donated surplus food and limited ingredients through café staff. Good Things Foundation for free SIMs and data.

Linking in with partners such as Middlesbrough environment city, the fire service and others will enable them to support their initiatives directly around climate action, staying warm in winter and reducing fuel poverty.

Hope is currently working with Business in the Community to look at energy saving for the charity itself. This will include looking at all aspects of the charities energy usage and this could link effectively with this work as improvements are made.

## 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

March 2024-February 2026

**Geographic area**  
Middlesbrough

**Approved by**

Eileen Brown  
Customer Experience Director