

Northern Gas Networks - VCMA Communications Manager

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

1. Problem(s)

There is need for a dedicated VCMA Communications Manager role to support the vulnerability team in promoting VCMA projects and managing VCMA comms campaigns (NGN specific campaigns and our involvement in collaborative GDN campaigns). The role will help to deliver the communications strategy, plans and processes for programmes and projects funded by energy regulator, Ofgem's, Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA), ensuring opportunities are maximised through seamless engagement with the Social Strategy team and external partners.

Solution

A full-time role is required throughout the remainder of GD2. The role will involve working with NGN's Social Strategy team, other GDNs and VCMA partners to understand priority project and programme objectives and consider opportunities for communications to enhance and support delivery including drafting comms plans and core collateral including lines to take, press releases, op-eds, and articles. The role will also involve developing compelling content to promote the benefits that VCMA funded activity is delivering and engage key stakeholders through various mediums such as copy, email, photography, video, social media, illustrations, and infographics.

2. Scope and Objectives

2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

NGN aims to support VCMA project and vulnerable customers by having a dedicated communications manager in post until the end of GD2.

2.2 Scope

- Develop and deliver comms strategy, process and plan to maximise the opportunities to promote and enhance VCMA funded programmes and projects and improve ways of working with NGN's Social Strategy team and external partners
- An understanding of the organisation's brand and communications strategy, approach and objectives and ensure it is reflected in all planning and delivery of both NGN led and collaborative campaigns and activity to support our VCMA funded projects and programmes
- Work with NGN's Social Strategy team and VCMA partners to understand priority project and programme objectives and consider opportunities for communications to enhance and support delivery including drafting comms plans and core collateral including lines to take, press releases, op-eds and articles
- Develop compelling content to promote the benefits that VCMA funded activity is delivering and engage key stakeholders through various mediums such as copy, email, photography, video, social media, illustrations, and infographics
- Ensure all collateral, the website and social media channels support the communications strategy and plan
- Handle media enquiries relating to our work to support vulnerable customers and raise awareness of carbon monoxide (CO) and build and maintain relationships with key media contacts

- Prepare and disseminate timely and accurate information to media, the public and other stakeholders
- Conduct post-campaign evaluations and recommend improvements
- Manage/work closely with an external communications agency to deliver VCMA funded PR campaign
- Serve as the dedicated lead for key areas of NGN's website that support vulnerable customers
- Provide copywriting, editing and proofreading support for key reports and publications
- Event management for VCMA activities
- Building strong relationships with national, regional and local media to raise positive profile of NGN's work to support vulnerable customers and CO awareness, horizon scanning for potential reputational risks and opportunities, guiding and advising on how to maximise or mitigate these
- Working with in-house brand and creative and external design agencies on the production of new content and literature
- Managing the VCMA comms budget, carrying out accurate forecasting and regular reporting and ensuring that all activity is delivered within budget

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 and VCMA projects/partners, as well as raising awareness of CO and the PSR. As the role will cover all NGNs vulnerability themes, it aligns with NGN's Vulnerability Strategy.

There will be no funding 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
 - Socio-demographic
 - Cultural
 - Temporary vulnerability
 - Mental Wellbeing themes
 - Medically Dependent on Energy
- 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. 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
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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 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

Part of the success criteria will be that as a result of this role, the NGN vulnerability team will have a dedicated single point of contact (SPOC), with knowledge and experience of vulnerability communications.

5.1 Outcomes

- Increased awareness of the PSR
- Increased awareness of the dangers of CO
- Promotion of VCMA projects
- Linking up and working with VCMA partners

5.2 Success criteria

- Increased awareness of the PSR through promotion and social media campaigns
- Increased awareness of the dangers of CO through promotion and social media campaigns
- Promotion of VCMA projects
- Linking up and working with VCMA partners
- SPOC for the NGN vulnerability team
- Ensuring the comms VCMA budget is on track

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

NGN will not be working with any third party or partners to deliver this role

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

December 2024 - March 2026

Geographic area

The role will cover the whole of NGN network

Approved by

Eileen Brown
Customer Experience Director