

## Northern Gas Networks - Customer Care Advisor (Services Beyond the Meter)

<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>	October 2024
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<b>Total cost (£k)</b>	*Detailed separately
<b>Total VCMA funding required (£k)</b>	*Detailed separately

## 1. Problem(s)

In the UK as many as one in six homes could be living with an unsafe gas appliance. This equates to around four million households at risk of being disconnected from supply should their appliance be checked by a gas engineer. Whilst many households can afford to repair or replace an appliance, vulnerable and low-income households may face financial or other barriers, which prevent them from doing this. As a result, these households are at an increased risk of not having critical heat/hot water or cooking facilities. They may also resort to potentially hazardous coping mechanisms, all of which can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.

There is support needed to directly communicate with these customers, post the engineers visit. Engineers are trained to identify vulnerability however, they do not have time to provide this additional support service. Nor do they have the skills or knowledge to support customers with complex needs. The role will involve engaging with customers to understand and identify the needs of those who could be living in vulnerable circumstances, highlighting opportunities where NGN can provide help and advice. The role will also manage customer cases being the customers single point of contact (SPOC) during their journey with us, ensuring that they receive excellent service and the help and support they need by proactively contacting customers, key stakeholders and operational colleagues to arrange support, dealing with letters, emails and any complaints.

### Solution

A full-time role is required throughout GD2. The role will involve working with NGN's Services Beyond the Meter team and customers referred through for an appliance service, repair or replacement. Once vulnerability and additional needs are identified by the engineer, this is where a SPOC role would get involved. The role would involve making follow up calls with the customer and working through each case to achieve a resolution for the customer's need. Customers with complex needs can require a lot of time to be invested, which a role such as this, would be able to support.

## 2. Scope and Objectives

### 2.1 The objectives of this initiative are:

The scope would cover any scenario where an NGN engineer isolates a gas appliance/gas supply to a customer. Regulations state that engineers are required to disconnect or isolate the supply of gas to an appliance or property in the event of a gas emergency, which poses a risk to life and property. However, this can leave vulnerable customers unable to cover the costs of repairing or replacing these appliances, exposing them to the dangers of living in a cold house, potentially with no heating, hot water or means of cooking. This would further compound any existing health conditions. The objective is to ensure NGN has a robust support network in place to assist those most in need and in doing so, support NGN's strategy for supporting vulnerable customers following disconnection. Some of the benefits are to minimise the amount of time a customer is potentially 'off gas' and also addressing other safety issues such as minimising risk to life due to CO leakage. The role would enable a customer to be supported from cradle to grave on any issues they are experiencing. For example, debt advice, energy efficiency advice, home safety visits from fire and rescue etc.

### 2.2 Scope

- Provide support to vulnerable customers/their families
- Signpost these customers to the relevant organisation to ensure they understand next available steps/support available – such as providing the Gas Safe Register helpline telephone number
- Referrals to the Priority Services Register
- Raise awareness of energy efficiency and provide details of the organisations that specialise in ways these customers can save money on their energy bills – such as Green Doctor
- Support the network with advice and referrals to parties such as adult social care, fire and rescue etc.
- Refer customers to debt advice services where needed
- Help vulnerable customers in fuel poverty to enable them to get their appliances checked and their gas supply restored
- Provide one to one support and advice, if required for customers with complex needs
- 1 x full time vulnerable customer advisor
- Any customer who has been affected by a gas supply interruption and has had an appliance disconnected
- Case studies from beneficiaries (anonymised)
- Covers all of NGN network

### 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 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 MECC pilot 2018/2019 (background information)**

The MECC protocol was piloted over 12 months in two pilot patches within the NGN network: Bradford and North Tyne. When an NGN first call operative (FCO) from the trial patches had disconnected one of our customer's gas supply during a gas emergency job, the engineer would then identify whether their customer was living in a vulnerable situation. If the customer was vulnerable

the FCO would then complete the warning notice document and tick that the section indicating their customer was vulnerable. The warning notices were then sent through to the customer care team and customer care reception. This would trigger a 'priority' follow-up call the following day. Referrals were also sent via the Customer Interface App (CIC) within NGN (this is the route by which engineers made referrals and highlighted additional support needs).

The MECC protocol represented a new way of working for NGN, more so its FCOs and frontline operational staff, who do often come into contact with customers that are living in vulnerable situations. These customers had not previously been identified as being a vulnerable customer (not on PSR). A robust process was required to offer further support from the point of disconnection of their gas supply. Gas supply disconnection can in itself create a vulnerable situation for customers who may already have vulnerability risk factors present, or the gas isolation can in itself create vulnerability.

NEA surveyed staff from NGN Customer Care team (CCT). All respondents at survey point 1 (mid-way through the pilot) and survey point 2 (at the end of the pilot) expressed that they understood how to support a vulnerable customer through MECC and were confident in doing so. In turn, the staff on CCT felt confident in putting their understanding into practice and agreed that they felt able to support vulnerable customers through MECC and knew which agencies to refer a customer to, 50% strongly agreed with this statement.

Data provided indicated that all referrals for follow-up support came via the CIC App. Across both patches, 78 additional vulnerable customers were identified and received follow-up support that would not have otherwise been offered this support. Calculated across the NGN network, this resulted in potentially 229 vulnerable customers that would not have been identified as vulnerable therefore not offered this additional support. These figures represent the counterfactual impact of the pilot. That is, support offered, or that could be offered that would not have otherwise occurred (i.e. had the pilot not been implemented). 95 onward referrals were made for those customers that were identified as vulnerable during the pilot.

The pilot also suggested an emergency telephone helpline for FCOs and other operational staff to access immediate support for those customers in crisis. This would be a single-point-of-contact support line which immediate support could be accessed for vulnerable customers who are in crisis and relieve the responsibility for FCOs who often feel unprepared, inadequately trained or frustrated at not being able to help as morally they wanted to help their customer. Therefore, this role would support this finding as there would be one dedicated full-time member of staff on the customer care team, making the MECC calls to customers. This role would also ensure a SPOC was on hand to provide back-office support to liaise and assist FCO's and operational staff network wide.

This role will involve trying to call the customer 3 times, sending a letter if unable to reach a customer via telephone asking them to contact NGN and logging an enquiry onto the system to keep this customer on our records. The duration of these call-backs/time spent helping a customer will vary dependant on the customers' needs/circumstances. For example, the case study mentioned above, this 1 customers situation and the series of calls required took a total of 2 hours. Another example is language barriers and communicating with the customer via the language line. This would therefore increase the time spent making the MECC calls and the need for 1 FTE within the customer care team to be able to provide this service/additional support for vulnerable customers.

### 4.3 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.

### 4.4 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, a single point of contact (SPOC) for the NGN vulnerability team, with knowledge and experience of vulnerability communications.

### 5.1 Outcomes

Part of the success criteria will be that as a result of this role, a single point of contact (SPOC) with knowledge and experience of energy vulnerability and assisting vulnerable customers will be established. Office-based, visible and approachable they would provide additional support and guidance to NGN staff on vulnerability and the MECC protocol either by email, phone or in person.

Staff would be able to receive regular updates on the outcomes which have been achieved for customers as a result of MECC. This could act to increase referrals and maintain engagement.

- Number of customers supported through the process and the number of appliances repaired and replaced.
- Number of different referral routes identified
- Anonymised case studies
- Knowledge gained around CO
- Increased PSR referrals
- Increased number of partner referral routes

### 5.2 Success criteria

- PSR referral sign ups across the NGN network

- Number of referrals by each category where customers who have been disconnected have been helped
- SPOC for FCO's and NGN staff

## **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