

Scope's Utility Helpdesk

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| Funding GDN(s) | SGN |
| For Collaborative VCMA Projects: | |
| Date of PEA submission: | 01 April 2021 |
| Project contact name: | Kerry Potter |
| Project contact number/email: | Kerry.potter@sgn.co.uk |
| Total cost (£k) | *provided separately |
| Total VCMA funding required (£k) | |

1. Problem(s)

This should outline the problem(s) which is/are being addressed by the VCMA Project.

Disabled people are more likely to face financial vulnerability, fuel poverty, increased energy costs and also find it more challenging to access information and support. We are expecting to see increasing numbers of disabled young people, 1.25m by 2029. (SIA Partners Vulnerability Research 2020)

Low-income households spend a substantial share of their income on utility services such as electricity, heating and water. This is particularly disproportionate in the case of many disabled people, as disabled people;

Consume more energy and water based upon need.

On average have less household income and face 2x unemployment rates and poverty is 6% higher in the disabled community.

Benefit from or require tailored communication.

Are disproportionately not accessing services they are eligible for, often because they are not aware of the Priority Services Register (PSR) and the financial advice and support available to them.

Current data tells us that 8% of children, 19% of working age adults and 44% of people at pensionable age have a recognised disability, with all groups forecast to increase. (SIA Partners Vulnerability Research 2020)

Scope's 'Out in the cold' report published in 2018 highlighted that over a third of disabled adults say that their impairment or condition has a significant effect on their energy costs;

That 55% of disabled adults worry about paying their energy bills.

That disabled families pay significantly more on their utilities than non-disabled families and that more than 900,000 households with a disabled person in England is living in fuel poverty.

Scope's recent research into the impact of Covid 19 has only widened the gap here.

Recent research conducted during Covid 19 by Accenture and Scope identified that the impact of sustained shielding has had a further detrimental impact on disabled people.

SGN employees work in the community, in disabled people's homes and can identify there is a need that could be met should the customer have access to trusted support.

Scope are a trusted support network for many disabled people, it has an active online community that looks to link disabled people to support and advice services. Many disabled people come to Scope for guidance in crisis, for tips or advocacy services for disabled people.

2. Scope and Objectives

The scope and objectives of the VCMA Project should be clearly defined including the benefits which would directly impact customers on the participating GDNs' network(s), and where the benefits of the VCMA Projects lie.

2.1 Objectives

To provide a bespoke and dedicated utility advocacy service for disabled people, designed for and marketed to disabled people. To ensure that service users get the support that will help them understand and address their utility needs.

The services that will be provided through the VCMA Project will:

- Support in accessing the most appropriate tariff for the customer.
- Application support for the Warm Home Discount.
- Application support for the energy and water Priority Services Registers.
- Option to warm transfer the customer to the supplier or speak to supplier on behalf of the customer when this is required.
- Support in applying for a smart meter.
- Support in applying for debt relief to energy and water suppliers.
- Funding support for meter moves where access is impacted.
- CO safety awareness information for customers with gas services or solid fuel.

Customers can pre-book up to 3 x 45minute appointments with an expert advisor and will receive an action plan of steps to take; to address their concerns and empower them as engaged and confident 'consumers'.

Outcomes and wellbeing impacts will be captured to make improvements and provide valuable insight.

We are looking to achieve and report upon the following: increased confidence and skills to access and manage household utility costs, reduce household bills, increase household incomes and ensure that disabled people are getting 'fair' access to live in a safe and warm home.

2.2 Scope

Enhanced Utility Advice Service for disabled customers that delivers advice and advocacy services to ensure that users of the service are getting 'fair' access to affordable utilities.

Referral service for disabled SGN customers into the Utility Help Service.

Marketing for disabled people via the Scope network and community, internal cross referrals for people who are accessing the advice and benefits support services.

Tailored energy and CO safety support services, including access to a free CO Alarm including accessible integrated home safety systems as required.

1. Insights and data related to the needs of disabled people and baseline awareness and annual review of utility schemes including the Priority Services Register and how to 'shop' for the best tariff.

3. Why the Project is being funded through the VCMA

This should include an explanation of why the VCMA Project meets the VCMA eligibility criteria. This is a requirement

This project meets the VCMA eligibility criteria as it will provide energy safeguarding services including direct advice and support to consumers in vulnerable situations including those most at risk or living in fuel poverty.

4. Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

This should provide information of the customer engagement that has taken place in the development of VCMA Projects where appropriate. If there is no evidence of stakeholder engagement or customer support, this should justify why it was not appropriate to engage with stakeholders and customers.

4.1 Customer Experience Roadshows 2018

During 2018, we surveyed 500 emergency engineers and asked them to name the top 5 scenarios they found it *difficult to walk away* from following a gas emergency visit. One of our top categories of concern for engineers was leaving a vulnerable customer facing financial hardship, in a cold home, fuel poor, with evidence of damp and condensation and/or lack of credit on their meter. This is especially hard in the winter months, when the impact of living in a cold and damp home is greater on health and wellbeing. In addition, another of the top concerns raised is 'supporting a customer living with dementia or learning difficulties who may not understand our works' this looks at disability from a capacity perspective. We are looking to build engagement, confidence and capacity for disabled people including people with learning disabilities.

4.2 Moving Forward Together – Stakeholder Workshops held during 2018 and 2020

Sharing our top 5 scenarios with our stakeholders during our engagement workshops in 2018, they agreed that providing essential emergency funding for customers in vulnerable circumstances should remain one of our top priorities due to the impact of Covid on our most vulnerable customers in relation to affordability. In addition, our stakeholders wanted to see us approach affordability broader than 'gas', that customers who face financial hardship need support with all their utilities, water, gas and electricity should be approached as essentials services.

4.3 Customer Engagement Group 2019/20

Shaping our business plan to support customers in vulnerable circumstances we have committed to over the 5-year price control supporting over 250,000 vulnerable customers to use gas safely, affordably and efficiently. We have a three-tiered approach and tier 1, 2 and 3 priorities include providing independent support to help provide vulnerable customers with independent access to affordable energy.

4.4 Vulnerable Steering Group

During 2020/21 our Vulnerable Steering Group has helped us shape our vulnerability strategy and our priorities for GD2. For year 1 we prioritised key initiatives to support our most vulnerable customers and they recommended that we work with established charities that support disabled people with a proven track record of effectively engaging and supporting disabled people with advice and support services aligned to personal wellbeing and safety.

It is with guidance and support from our dedicated stakeholder panel that SGN are prioritising supporting disabled people in accessing tailored support to reduce fuel poverty. This scheme as it is co-designed with Scope, the leading pan disability charity that looks to bridge the gap that disabled people face to equality and fair access to affordable utilities, has been endorsed by our strategic panel as it looks to provide a holistic and empowering service in partnership with other utilities.

4.4.1 Scope – research 'Out in the Cold'

Scope conducted research resulting in the – 'out in the cold' report, this research highlights the increased costs disabled people face to keep a safe and warm home and the access gap disabled customers experience with their utilities.

<https://www.scope.org.uk/scope/media/files/campaigns/out-in-the-cold-report.pdf>

4.4.2 Scope – research ‘The impact of Covid 19- Disabled customers and access to their utilities’

Scope conducted research in partnership with the Utility Consortium to understand the impact Covid 19 has had on disabled people, their access to their utility companies and the cost / isolation impacts on health during this time.

<https://www.scope.org.uk/partners/utilities-partnership/>

5. Outcomes, associated actions, and success criteria

Details of the VCMA Project outcomes and the associated actions to achieve these, interim milestones and how the Funding Licensee will evaluate whether the project has been successful. Each action should have a proportion of the funding allocated.

5.1 Outcomes

- Dedicated skills and resources in the advice and benefits team to support disabled people.
- Promotion of how to access the utility market and safety information related to co awareness to disabled people.

5.2 Success Criteria – Year One

- Number of referrals from employees (SGN).
- % increase in awareness and confidence in energy matters for disabled people (use energy safely, efficiently and affordably).
- Over 1152 of disabled people supported to reduce energy costs and increase energy efficiency.
- 5,000 disabled people engaged on safely, efficiently and affordable use of energy through Scope's existing contacts and engagement channels including their online community.

5.3 Outcomes against the following

- Number of disabled people engaged on energy switching.
- Number of PSR referrals.
- Number of people who feel that they have the wellbeing impacts of being supported by the service.
- Number of people having a CO Alarm installed and a CO awareness survey completed.
- Number of disabled people accessing benefits checks and advice.

6. Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

SCOPE – Delivery partner will provide the training, the marketing and the delivery of the Utility Help Hub services. Scope will work with partnering delivery partners including Home Energy Scotland and the Wise Group to provide the service to SGN customers in Scotland.

Energy Savings Trust – provided the Redress Funding which will also be funding the national service as previously agreed.

Anglian Water and UK Power Networks and a number of energy retailers – will support the identification and referral of disabled customers and co-funding of the Utility Help Desk service.

7. Potential for new learning

Details of what the GDN(s) expect to learn and how the learning will be disseminated.

We are looking to better understand how to best engage and support disabled people to confidently manage their utilities ensuring that access is fair.

We intend to learn how to effectively engage, better understand the challenges faced by disabled people and share these stories to improve accessibility and service.

This will be collated through a monthly report with case studies of service users and shared with funders.

8. Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations

The Funding Licensee(s) should justify the scale of the VCMA Project – including the scale of the investment relative to its potential benefits. As part of this, it should provide the SROI calculation.

The Energy Redress Funding seeks to support 4700 disabled customer through the Energy Advice Service, this additional funding from the Utility Membership looks to provide an additional support service to 1152 service users per year with extra advocacy services.

This equates to an average value of £104 per service user to provide tailored access to support services over 3 meetings including an agreed action plan and customer satisfaction/ insights survey to ensure that the customer gets what they need to address their concerns.

Referral outcomes; Target 1152 households per year

Based upon our similar services (not dedicated to disabled people) we would expect to see customers who access the services achieve the following however we anticipate that with nature of need that we could expect higher representation in the PSR outcomes and disability benefits and income maximisation outcomes. Performance against these assumptions will be monitored closely throughout the programme.

- 100% Energy Efficiency advice
- 20% to join PSR
- 30% to be supported with a WHD
- 10% to be supported with utility debt (water or energy)
- 40% move to a better tariff
- 10% to be supported with a water social tariff
- 3% to be supported with grant applications based upon need
- 20% provided with CO Safety advice and CO Alarm
- Benefits and income maximisation financial outcomes.

Social Value Measurement

Working with leading social impact research consultancy Simetrica we have developed a bespoke social value bank of financial and wellbeing outcomes applicable to our services for vulnerable customers. The approach used to estimate social value is based on best practice endorsed by HM Treasury for the evaluation of social policy, and utilises values from the Treasury's 'Green Book' where applicable.

SROI information provided separately

VCMA Project start and end date

Detail start and end date of the VCMA Project and, where relevant, the VCMA Project that preceded this initiative.

1st April 2021- 1st April 2023

Geographic area

Details of where the VCMA Project will take place. If the VCMA Project is collaborative, the Funding Licensee area(s) in which the project will take place should be identified.

The service will support customers in England, Scotland and Wales.

SGN will be actively promoting the partnership in the geographic regions it operates in.

Approved by

Rob Gray

Director of Stakeholder Relations and Communications