

Warm and Safe Homes Advice Service (WASH)

Funding GDN(s)	The Network Licensee(s) which register(s) the project
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	The specific role(s) of GDN(s) participating in a collaborative VCMA Project
Date of PEA submission:	01 April 2021
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Total cost (£k)	
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	*detailed separately

1. Problem(s)

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

Cold homes can kill

- We've seen increased Winter Mortality figures in both of our regions increase in recent years
- UK 6th out of 30 countries in Europe
- "Cold homes are a bigger killer across the UK than road accidents, drug abuse or alcohol abuse"
- "Cold man of Europe" report 2016/17 there were 37,020 excess winter deaths in the UK, the second highest number in five years. 11,110 of these deaths were attributable to cold homes

Over four million UK households live in fuel poverty. This means people living in cold, energy inefficient homes which they can't afford to heat. Whilst the definitions for fuel poverty are varied, most focus on the proportion of income that people must spend on their energy bills to stay warm safely. A proportion of income however cannot explain/justify the true effects such as the cold that makes fingers raw, the misery of having to wash in cold water, going to bed early because you cannot afford to have the heating on, or making the decision between paying to have the heating on or using that money to buy food. Fuel poverty can lead to poor physical and mental health, increased inequality, and a reduced quality of life.

This is fuel poverty; not just proportions of income but things that are more important to feel than to measure. Fuel Poverty is avoidable however with societal challenges exacerbated by Covid over the last 12 months we have seen more people fall into fuel poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the ordinary problem of fuel poverty. Fuel poverty worsens under 'normal' recessions or other times of economic pressure, but the necessity to stay at home during the pandemic means that, even if a household has not seen declining income, they might be experiencing much higher fuel bills. This comes in addition to pressures of unemployment or reduced income, which can cripple a family's ability to pay for their energy. This could lead to increases in energy debt, self-disconnection, and dangerous energy behaviour. Additionally, customers who might never have been in fuel poverty or experienced energy vulnerability before might find themselves exposed and without the skills or resources to address the challenges faced.

It is vital now more so than ever that these households have access to crisis support, and a holistic, accessible service to ensure their needs are understood and that they receive appropriate help, advice, guidance, and the support needed to reduce their hardship, linking people in need to services, support and grant schemes they are eligible for whilst building these skills in the households that need them most.

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.

The project aims to support in the region of 1,500 (1,000 in South England and 500 in Scotland) households in vulnerable situations including those at risk or living in fuel poverty per annum with tailored support provisions to improve the health, wellbeing and financial outcomes for the residents of the household.

Access to crisis support, accurate and accessible advice and information to help people remain warm in their homes is vital, particularly for people facing vulnerable circumstances or struggling on a low income. Project partners, National Energy Action (NEA) launched their Warm and Safe Homes Advice Service (WASH) in September 2019 to provide a single point of contact for people on low incomes or living in vulnerable circumstances to address their energy issues and ensure a client is provided with holistic advice.

This project will extend this existing service, adding in crisis funding, broadening the geographic areas covered and the scope the services to include gas safety information and specifically targeting the offer of support to SGN customers who are in need with personalised energy advice based upon their circumstances.

Accredited fuel poverty energy advisors will offer in-depth advice to all SGN customers who require it. Those with more complex needs will be triaged to Project Development Co-ordinators who can offer more specialised advice and support to address the issues faced by the household.

In addition to addressing current challenges, the ambition is to build the confidence and skills, therefore empowering consumers to manage and take ownership of household utility consumption/costs and the knowledge of a safety net that is available to them should they need assistance in the future.

The project is committed to providing services that work for all customers who need this help and we have built partnerships to ensure the service is inclusive and fully accessible to all those in need of the service across all four geographical areas.

2.1 Scope

1. Personalised energy advice and advocacy services to ensure that users of the service are getting 'fair' access to affordable utilities and can address existing issues with current utility providers and building skills and accountability.
2. Referral service for SGN customers into the Warm and Safe Homes service.
3. Marketing for key communities where fuel poverty is recognised as a regional or social issue to effectively engage households in fuel poverty.
4. Tailored energy and CO safety support services including access to a free CO Alarm including accessible integrated home safety systems as required.

NEA and Wise Group will:

- Ensure all customer engagement reflects the requirements of geographical areas and the customers they serve.
- Provide enhanced accessibility services for all customers;

The partnership subscribes to:

- SignVideo, a British Sign Language interpreting service which supports our delivery of advice to Deaf clients.
- Language Line Solutions, an interpreting service which supports our delivery of advice and support to clients where English is not their first language.

Where appropriate, produce documents in Easy Read, large print and Braille and will make necessary referrals into the PSR for support.

Provide staff training on how to effectively engage with customers in vulnerable circumstances including but not limited to: Dementia Friends; Mental Health Awareness; Deaf Awareness; How to Offer Emotional Support

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 at risk or living in fuel poverty. The services delivered will also include CO Safety as the team will be providing access to CO alarms, and ensure all service users who are at risk of CO exposure are provided with CO advice services and a CO alarm where required, completing the CO Awareness Survey at completion

3.1 Eligibility Criteria

5. We forecast that the initiative will have a positive SROI for gas consumers.
6. Will support customers in vulnerable situations with both energy safeguarding and increase awareness of CO and reduce the risk of harm caused by CO.
7. Has defined outcomes as detailed in the outcome section.
8. Goes beyond our price control funded mechanisms and licence obligation.
9. That although there are funded services that provide access to energy advice services available that this initiative goes beyond the provision of service and scope of existing service provisions and creates further capacity to serve more families in hardship

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 where 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.

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 was the 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 of 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 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 recognised introducing a consistent service that could be referred into via our front-line teams, or be promoted widely by our community partners was a priority area agreeing with us to working with leading experts in fuel poverty support in England and Scotland.

<https://www.nea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Surviving-the-wilderness-final-version.pdf>

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

The WASH service will deliver the following outcomes across SGN geographical area:

- Increase the number of households which can manage their utility bills, keep warm and healthy at home by addressing current challenges and building household skills to independently manage utility costs in the future.
- Link households in need with unclaimed industry initiatives including but not limited to WHD, ECO and fuel voucher schemes.
- Strengthen household resilience by relieving stress and managing current utility debts and/or addressing problems with their utility provider.
- Support the identification of households eligible for the Fuel Poor Network Extension Scheme.
- Increase the number of households signed up to the PSR.
- Increase awareness of risks of CO and increased distribution of CO alarms in households where CO exposure is a risk.

5.2 Actions to achieve outcomes

The outcomes will be achieved through the provision of personalised energy advice directly to consumers in vulnerable situations. The WASH service will incorporate:

- Energy efficiency advice (behavioural guidance)
- Information on Smart meters and benefits for customers
- Warm Homes Discount Application support
- Priority Service Register information and sign ups
- Switching opportunities/checking tariffs for the best deals
- Support with gas and electricity accounts including fuel debt and billing
- Referrals to local and national sources of help to ensure customers are fully supported (including grants and other financial assistance available)
- Support with resolving gas and electricity account issues including dealing with fuel debt issues, negotiating with suppliers, and escalating complaints as required
- Making applications to Trust Funds and other sources of financial support for clients experiencing hardship
- Addressing water debt issues via access to services supported by NEA's Water Poverty campaign work
- Identification of households potentially eligible for FPNES Scheme
- CO Awareness and where required allocation of a CO Alarm that works for the household need (accessible options available)
- Identification of homes who would benefit from the Locking Cooker Valve
- In home and community energy support services where required (as government restrictions allow)
- Other related issues as they arise

5.3 Success criteria

Project partners will work closely to ensure all data is captured accurately and reported on consistently to ensure a full assessment of the project can be undertaken. A secure web-based client management system called AdvicePro will be utilised to manage all customer referrals – this will allow comprehensive data to be extracted on how many people have been supported, their location and any relevant outcomes achieved with the client.

This data will be used to report on progress or delivery against outcomes, ongoing review of the SROI against our pre assessment and to evaluate the success of the project.

6 Project Partners and third parties involved

Details of Project Partners or third-party involvement

National Energy Action (NEA) and the Wise Group will be working in partnership to provide the energy advice services across both SGN's licence areas.

This funding would look to build upon the existing WASH service, to extend the reach and scope of support offered to vulnerable customers located in SGN's geographical footprint.

7 Potential for new learning

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

Both NEA and the Wise Group are both industry leaders in the provision of fuel poverty and energy advocacy support services, both organisations have grass roots partnerships providing access to local support where required. By working together the two organisations will share best practice and provide regional case studies to support learning. The teams will be sharing reporting and client outcomes, methods to effective identification of households in need (campaign), how to collaborate partnership ideas for the benefit of enhancing support services driven by client need.

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 1 April 2021 this, it should provide the SROI calculation.

8.1 Referral outcomes

Year 1 Target = 1,500 households in SGN's footprint

Based upon our current service we would expect to see customers who access the services achieve the following;

- 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

8.2 Social Value Measurement

Working with leading social impact research consultancy Simerica 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 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.

1 April 2021

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.

South/South East and Scotland

Approved by

Rob Gray

Director of Stakeholder Relations and Communications