

Energy Matters

Keeping communities safe and warm in
North Oxfordshire and West
Northamptonshire

February 2023



SGN

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1 Description

Funding GDN(s)	SGN
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	N/A
Date of PEA submission:	20 February 2023
Project contact name:	Kerry Potter
Project contact number/email:	Kerry.potter@sgn.co.uk 07427 031 200
Total cost (£k)	£207,800
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	£202,800

2 Problem statement

Against a backdrop of the UK's energy prices doubling in the past 12 months it is currently estimated that there are over 6.7 million households living in fuel poverty in the UK.

From 1 October 2022, the government implemented an energy price guarantee, which limits the amount households can be charged per unit of gas or electricity. The energy price guarantee has been amended many times throughout its introduction in October 2022, however it has recently been announced in the 2022 Autumn Statement that the energy price guarantee will last until April 2024¹. It is worth noting, the energy price guarantee stays as it is until the end of March 2023, after which it will rise by about 20% (so an 'average' household will pay £3k instead of £2.5k).

It is predicted that such price rise will increase the number of households into fuel poverty to almost 11 million, that is 1 in 3 households, many of which will be in extreme fuel poverty. (NEA, Fuel Poverty Coalition, Cornwall Insight)

In Cherwell (North Oxfordshire), 7.8 % of households (4,826 out of 61,676) were in fuel poverty in 2020. According to the ONS data, 6 LSOAs have more than 15% fuel poor households.² Over a 6-month period in 2022, Citizens Advice provided energy vouchers to 1029 households in fuel poverty to prevent crises. When the third round of the Household Support Fund was open for application in Cherwell in January 2023, 480 applications were received within the first 24 hours highlighting the urgency of need.

On 18 July 2022, Cherwell District Council in North Oxfordshire declared a Food Poverty Emergency citing that 'Many residents throughout Cherwell are facing the terrible choice of heating or eating. The situation this coming winter is set to get worse. Fuel bills and the cost of food are both likely to increase again in the autumn. The knock-on effects on declining mental health will increase the burden on the NHS.'³ According to research conducted by UCL, there is a significant link between financial hardship and dietary quality'. The latest research by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute 'shows that the cost of living crisis is having a severe psychological impact, and that people with existing mental health problems are being hit hardest.' All these factors have an impact on each other and cannot be solved in isolation.

Since the start of the pandemic, the number of people seeking help from Citizens Advice has drastically increased. Not only were they disproportionately affected by the pandemic, most disadvantaged people are faced with extremely challenging circumstances during the current cost-of-living crisis. The 2021 Census uses four indicators, Education, Employment, Health and Housing, to classify household deprivation. Figure 1

¹ [Energy bills support factsheet - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/108442/energy_bills_support_factsheet.pdf)

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/sub-regional-fuel-poverty-2022>

³ <https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?MIId=3645>

highlights areas in North Oxfordshire and West Northamptonshire with over 20% of households suffering from deprivation in two or more dimensions.

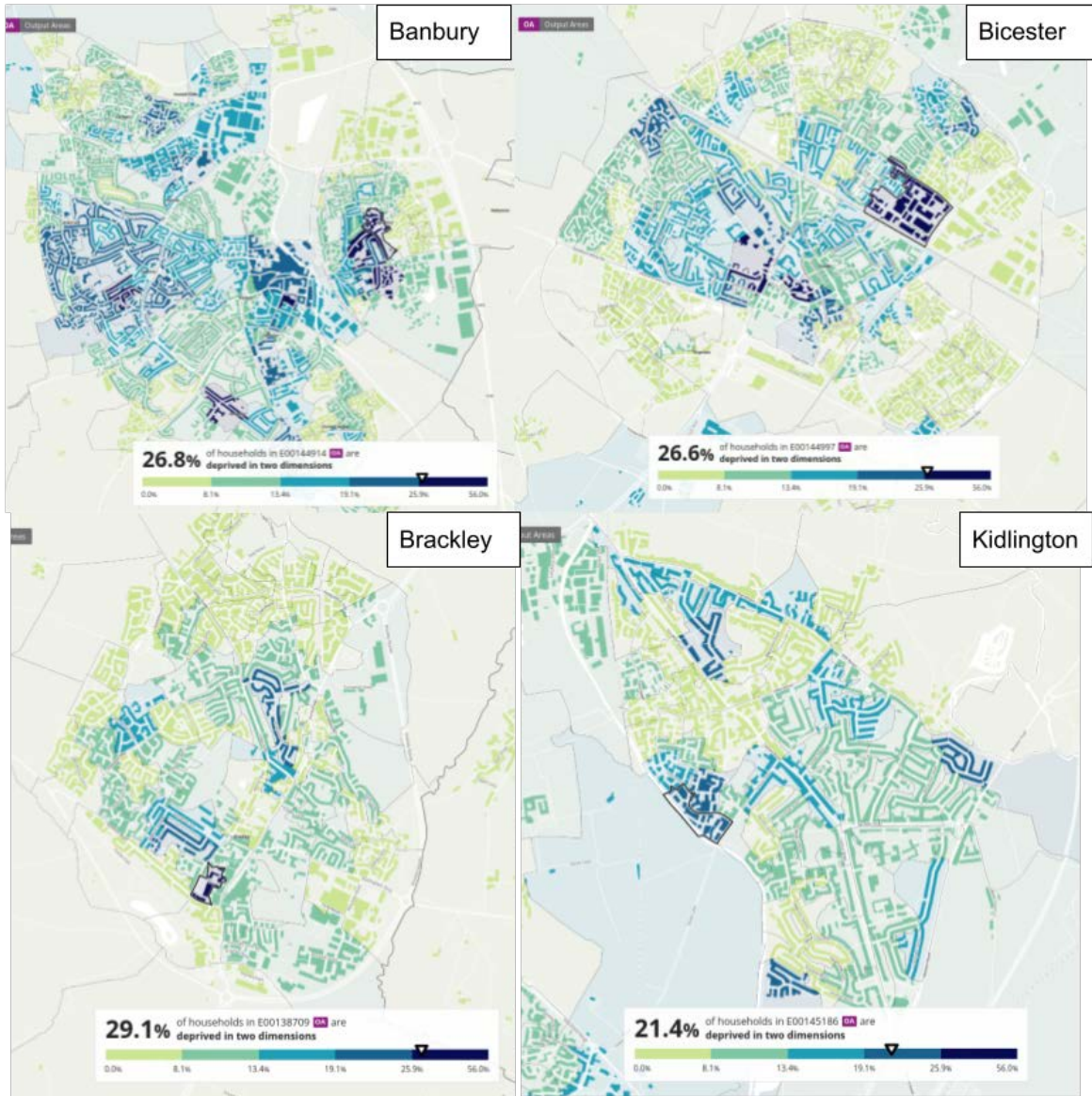


Figure1 Areas with high deprivation in Banbury, Bicester, Brackley and Kidlington

Deprivation

Banbury has a 20% higher personal debt (£849.60) than the England average (£699.5). It also contains 6 wards which are in the 10% of most deprived areas nationally. 44.8% of the Banbury population are deprived in the education domain (compared to 19.8% England average).⁴ Banbury is a culturally and ethnically diverse town. Some areas, such as Grimsbury and Neithrop, have over a high percentage of residents who are identified with Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh. Since the end of 2022, many hotels in Banbury are used to house asylum seekers.

⁴ https://www.oxford.gov.uk/districtdata/download/downloads/id/1198/2021_banbury_parish_report.pdf

Even though Oxfordshire is perceived as a wealthy county, there are pockets of severe deprivation as highlighted in Figure 1. High deprivation causes high stress which affects people’s resilience to external changes. The high energy price pushes more and more people into fuel poverty and energy debts. The demand for food bank support in North Oxfordshire has been rising at a rapid rate as shown in Figure 2.

A recent report by Citizens Advice highlights the risks of being disconnected from their energy supply amongst people in vulnerable circumstances.⁵ The survey found that more than 4 in 10 (42%) of those struggling to top-up their prepayment meter in the past year are disabled or have a long-term health condition. One in five (19%) prepayment meter customers cut off in the past year then spent at least 24 hours without gas or electricity. Nearly one in five (18%) households including a disabled person or someone with a long term health condition, who ran out of credit last year, went on to spend two days or more without energy supply. More than a quarter (27%) of those struggling to top up their prepayment meter, over 850,000 people, are disconnecting from their energy supply at least once a week. Similar trends are observed in Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire.



Figure 2 Number of people supported by food vouchers issued by Citizen Advice in North Oxfordshire

Digital exclusion

It is estimated that up to 40,000 people in Oxfordshire are not online. Digital exclusion is a long-term, existing issue that has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many older people are isolated and feel disconnected in their own homes, lacking confidence or the skills to access the digital world, or even understand the many ways in which being online can improve quality of life. This isolation then has an adverse effect on their health, both physical and mental. Without access to accurate and up-to-date information and advice, many people remain unaware of the support they are eligible to receive, nor how to stay safe and warm during the challenging times.

Disadvantaged ethnic minorities

A recent report by an independent charity, RSA, found that minority communities have found it harder to access financial support despite being badly hit by the pandemic and half of Asian and Black respondents have faced discrimination when accessing local services. However, specialist public services helped address various barriers to people accessing services are often popular. For example, Muslim Youth Helpline had a 300% Increase in Call

⁵<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/policy/policy-research-topics/energy-policy-research-and-consultation-responses/energy-policy-research/kept-in-the-dark-the-urgent-need-for-action-on-prepayment-meters/>

Volumes during the pandemic.⁶ They conclude that the institutional distrust may be contributing to vaccine hesitancy. It is also possible that the distrust and previous negative experiences have reduced their motivation to seek support from certain organisations.

Mental health and older people

Financial and health issues are intricately linked. Mind's 2021 research suggests that there is still a lot of shame and worry about privacy for people facing poverty.⁷ People are reluctant to seek help due to social stigma and the worry of losing choice and control. As a result, people often struggle in silence, feeling even more isolated.

NHS England have found that six in 10 people in the UK aged 65 or over have experienced depression and anxiety.⁸ Between 2011 and 2021, there is an increase of 29.5% in people aged 65 years and over in Cherwell. As the ageing trend continues, the projected ONS data suggested that 22.2% of the Cherwell population will be over the age of 65 by 2030.⁹ The demand for support services will naturally increase as the size of the vulnerable population grows.

3 Scope and objectives

Working in partnership with the local authorities and a large number of local community partners, Energy Matters is an innovative project that uses a proactive approach to tackle fuel poverty by reaching a wide range of vulnerable community groups.

It will prioritise households in crisis, offering them immediate access to emergency support such as energy and food vouchers. Building upon the existing referral pathways, it will develop new multi-directional referral with new partners to provide holistic support directly to people with complex needs.

Since deprivation and fuel poverty often coexist, Energy Matters will deliver an energy information and advice service in areas with high levels of deprivation as highlighted in Figure 1. Working with local partners, the aim is to improve the wellbeing of those who are disadvantaged due to digital exclusion, ethnicity, ill-health or old age.

The work will be delivered through a mix of volunteers and trained employed advisers;

- Train and support community leaders on to identify and support households living in fuel poverty or eligible to join the Priority Services Register
- Provide energy advice including information on current and local support to reduce energy costs and increase household income
- Access to case worker support to address energy debt and complex housing and safeguarding issues
- Carbon monoxide alarms and advice on carbon monoxide safety
- Access to emergency funding for those in food and fuel crisis e.g., food voucher and/or fuel voucher (funded by SGN and Trussell Trust)
- Access to the Household Support Fund resources and facilitated applications
- Access to the Priority Services Register

⁶ <https://www.thersa.org/reports/crisis-communities-change>

⁷ <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-strategy/working-harder-for-people-facing-poverty/facts-and-figures-about-poverty-and-mental-health/>

⁸ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/01/older-people-encouraged-to-ditch-stiff-upper-lip-approach-to-mental-ill-health/>

⁹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/subnationalageingt001/2020-07-20>

- Providing heat the person resources including heated blankets to those unable to afford to heat their home

One of the main barriers to accessing support is people's hesitation to seek help early, due to embarrassment or social stigma. Issues are often ignored until it reaches crisis point. Energy Matters will have a dedicated team of trained staff and volunteers who proactively reach out to the target audience by embedding a support service into the activities organised by our partners. For example, Restore, an Oxfordshire mental health charity, runs in-person group sessions in Banbury for their service users to socialise and to learn new skills in cooking, woodwork, and arts and crafts. They create an environment that supports members to gain insights into their strengths and make positive changes. Energy Matters will collaborate with Restore to organise joint sessions. While people may join a Restore session primarily for their mental health or to gain new cooking skills, they will also gain information and advice on energy from our staff or volunteers in a non-intrusive way. As they are already on a path to make positive changes, they will have increased motivation to work with Energy Matters. The personalised advice they received is more likely to lead to lasting energy efficiency behaviour change.

By engaging partner organisations who work with a diverse population, Energy Matters will build upon the trust they have already developed with people in vulnerable communities. The same strategy will be applied to other target groups. For example, Sunrise Multicultural Centre supports ethnic minority families in Banbury who are mainly of Pakistani descent. They run group activities for children and a Ladies Drop-In group. Energy Matters develop the local support network by creating collaborations between organisations. The project will support smaller charities to organise events for their service users to create opportunities for identifying fuel poverty. Leaders and frontline staff of partner organisations will be trained to identify fuel poverty and they can make direct referrals for further support.

Energy Matters aims to improve people's overall wellbeing by providing a wide range of direct energy support. If eligible, they will be supported to sign up to the Priority Services Register, apply for local and national support grants, gain access to food vouchers and carbon monoxide alarms. Where it is identified that the customer is unsafe at home as a result of their financial and health, they may be offered heated blankets and fuel vouchers to keep them safe and warm. They will be offered benefits eligibility checks and information on energy bills. People with complex needs will be referred to a specialist advice team with expertise in housing, employment, and debts.

4 Why the project is being funded through the VCMA

This project will provide support to residents in energy crisis, providing access to key support services including carbon monoxide safeguards, interventions that address fuel and water poverty and broader safeguarding and wellbeing services including the PSR whilst delivering a positive Social Return on Investment. The project will work collaboratively with expert agencies to maximise positive impacts beyond energy, increasing the health and wellbeing of the individuals supported and delivering defined outcomes.

5 Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

5.1 Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice frontline advisers have consistently seen people in vulnerable circumstances struggling to make ends meet since the COVID-19 pandemic. Last September, a report 'Out of the cold' points out the escalation of debt collection activity through prepayment meters, leading to energy disconnection. Last November, another report shows that digitally disadvantaged consumers are at much higher risk of loyalty penalties as they rely on offline services.

Citizens Advice provides free impartial, confidential and quality advice on a person's rights and responsibilities on a wide range of topics including employment, debt, benefits and housing. Citizens Advice South Oxfordshire¹⁰ distributed the household support funds on behalf of Cherwell district council. Last year, over 1,000 fuel vouchers were issued and a rising number of food vouchers are provided to clients in crisis. Through a range of community projects, such as Getting Oxfordshire Online, a project to combat digital exclusion, and Volunteer Driver Service, a project that takes vulnerable people to medical appointments when there is no reasonable alternative transport available, we have learnt that certain client demographics are more likely to have multiple problems that require support simultaneously. For example, isolated older people are less likely to have used the internet to research energy saving methods and they may fall victim to scams selling so-called 'energy-saving boxes' that may be dangerous, or they may receive misinformation about other unsafe cost saving measures. To bring targeted and lasting changes, it becomes paramount to provide a holistic service that addresses the root causes of these problems as more households are expected to fall into poverty in the coming months.

5.2 Brighter Futures partnership

[Brighter Futures](#) is a long term programme of projects designed to relieve deprivation by improving access and opportunity for individuals within Banbury's most disadvantaged areas. It brings together local authorities and organisations including charities and housing providers, community and faith groups, with the aim to break the cycle of deprivation. Underpinning all the projects are the aims of increasing opportunity, social sustainability and community cohesion and community resilience.

The Brighter Futures steering group has representatives from

- Cherwell District Council (including Safer Communities, Wellbeing, Housing)
- Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group
- Thames Valley Police
- Sanctuary Housing
- Banbury Schools Partnership
- Citizens Advice
- Visit Banbury
- Oxfordshire County Council (including Social Care, Public Health, Performance and Insight)
- Department for Work and Pensions
- The Hill
- The Sunshine Centre
- Banbury Madni Mosque

The influence and reach of this partnership stretch out to other professionals, organisations and community groups. Cherwell District Council recognises the challenges faced by many and declared a Food Poverty Emergency last year.¹¹ They partner with Citizens Advice to distribute the Household Support Fund to address the cost-of-living crisis. Working with partners to address the causes of health inequality and deprivation is one of their strategic priorities.¹² Oxfordshire County Council has been funding a project called, Benefits in Place, to address health inequalities in areas of high deprivation through a network of organisations including GP surgeries and Citizens Advice. Tackling inequalities and prioritising the health and wellbeing of residents are within their top nine priorities in their strategic plan.¹³

Energy Matters shares a common objective with all organisations in Brighter Futures - to address deprivation and inequalities. Brighter Futures endorses outreach work that promotes energy efficiency and supports people in crisis.

¹⁰ The 2021-22 impact report. www.canosn.org.uk/our-impact

¹¹ <https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?MIId=3645>

¹² <https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/189/performance/934/business-plan-2022-to-2023/2>

¹³ <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/council/our-vision-0>

5.3 Age Friendly Banbury

Age Friendly Banbury is a partnership between local organisations committed to making Banbury an age-friendly town, which encompasses both the built environment, such as housing, transport and outdoor spaces, and the social environment, such as health and information services, civic participation and social activities. Their services range from befriending and activity clubs, to 'men in sheds' or community-owned pubs. By offering a joined-up approach to social action specific to Banbury, they focus on improving access to services and support that help people be as healthy as possible.

One of their priorities is to improve community cohesion. That is to increase the range and accessibility of activities to tackle isolation and loneliness, providing more opportunities for people to get together, and providing information so people know what's going on. Not only will it provide energy related information and advice, Energy Matters will collaborate with local organisations to organise activities that bring people together. As partners within Age Friendly Banbury recognise the link between fuel poverty and health, they support this joined-up approach where residents will gain energy advice as well as growing a strong social network.

5.4 SGNs Vulnerability Steering Group

Our Vulnerability Steering Group has helped us shape our vulnerability strategy and our priorities for GD2. With their guidance we intend to prioritise key initiatives to support our most vulnerable customers. It is with guidance and support from our dedicated Vulnerable Steering Group that SGN use data to prioritise and target communities most likely to be living in a cold and unhealthy home. In 2021 our strategic steering group reiterated the vital impact we could have by co-ordinating our activities with others to support those most in need, those most impacted by the cost of living and energy cost crisis.

6 Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria

6.1 Outcomes

The partnership will promote community engagement for vulnerable residents in North Oxfordshire and South Northamptonshire at a time of increased need. The purpose of this engagement is to identify fuel poverty, share information and resources that help keep customers safe and warm this winter, as well as providing a community resource that supports those in energy crisis with access to skilled case workers who can provide tangible help.

The partnership will embed a dedicated Project Lead with a team of volunteers to work collaboratively to address the barriers households face to maintaining a safe and warm home now and in the future.

The partners provide the following outcomes for customers and faith community groups.

- Be provided with current information on the help available this winter and offered access to crisis support should they need help to maintain a safe and warm home
- Be offered access to advisory services designed to increase household income and keep safe and warm this winter
- Be supported to access help around critical primary needs, energy and food poverty, debt support and onward referrals to additional financial capability support where needed
- Be supported to join the Priority Services Register where eligible - providing them with the security and support they would need in the event of an unplanned outage from all their regional utility companies
- Be more aware of the risks of Carbon Monoxide and how to mitigate them
- Be assessed for eligibility for free retrofit schemes to receive longer-term cost saving measures
- Be assessed for eligibility to the Household Support Fund when available
- Be provided with heated blankets if unable to afford to heat their home adequately.

6.2 Success Criteria

We are working together to provide a minimum of 2,150 vulnerable households with trusted information to help those most likely to be living in fuel poverty and energy crisis over 24 months. We are aiming to support the following customer outcomes, which has formed the basis of our social return on investment modelling.

To monitor the impact of our programme we will monitor outcomes of those using the services provided by capturing data on who is using the service including demographics, vulnerabilities and needs.

In Year 1;

- 1000 households provided with personalised energy information and advice
- 800 customers provided with support to make boilers / heating systems more efficient
- 800 customers provided with CO safety awareness discussions
- 450 customers provided with CO alarms
- 300 customers assisted to sign up to the Priority Services Register
- 450 customers provided with energy crisis support – fuel vouchers
- 300 customers provided with access to crisis food / meal support
- 10 frontline community representatives provided with the tools to identify, triage and refer customers on where needed for energy advocacy services / in home measures are required
- 200 customers provided with support to access the Household support Fund when available
- 350 customers provided with heated blankets to keep them warm
- 550 customers refer to other support services
- 300 customers receiving benefit checks

In Year 2, the project deliverables will be increased by 15%.

7 Project partners and third parties involved

- SGN – funding the programme, providing access to a boarder support network and access to core services including carbon monoxide training and the locking cooker valve.
- Citizens Advice – identifying those households most in need of tailored support interventions, delivering the training and support services to customers and supporting the regional network of partners with a gateway referral pathway
- Regional network for partners including but not limited to the Sunrise Multicultural Centre, Sunshine Centre, Restore, Sanctuary Housing, Banbury Mosque, Cherwell Larder and Trussell Trust Food bank

8 Potential for new learning

Monitoring and evaluation

The following activities will be in place to monitor and evaluate project progress and impacts:

- Quantitative and qualitative service user outcomes and demographics/vulnerabilities recorded/monitored
- Service user before-and-after-support surveys
- In-bound and out-bound referrals from/to partners and other services recorded/monitored
- Feedback, indicators, outputs and outcomes reported on quarterly
- Project progress management: these include monthly and quarterly partner meetings to share ideas and challenges through individual and organisational partnership case studies.

9 Scale of VCMA Project and SROI Calculations

Social Value Measurement

Working with SIA Partners we've developed a number of social proxy values aligned to the work and outcomes we and our partners are delivering. Using these along with the DNO SROI assessment tool and methodology we have carried out an in-depth assessment of the financial and wellbeing outcomes associated with this project, and we forecast a positive net SROI of £6.82.

5-year reporting figures		
Economic	Total cost	£207,800.00
	Total gross present value	£1,624,772.65
	NPV	£1,416,972.65
	SROI	£6.82

10 VCMA Project start and end date

The project will run from February 2023 to January 2025 (24 months).

11 Geographic area

Areas served by SGN in North Oxfordshire and West Northamptonshire.

The keys areas are

- Banbury
- Kidlington
- Bicester
- Brackley, and the surrounding areas.

12 Approval

Rob Gray - Director of Stakeholder Relations and Communications