

# Unlocking digital barriers keeping customers safe & warm

Kent County Council

Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance

January 2024

SGN



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## 1 Description

Project title	Unlocking digital barriers keeping customers safe & warm
Funding GDN(s)	SGN
New/Updated (indicate as appropriate)	New
For Collaborative VCMA Projects:	
Date of PEA submission:	January 2024
Project contact name:	Kerry Potter
Project contact number/email:	<a href="mailto:Kerry.potter@sgn.co.uk">Kerry.potter@sgn.co.uk</a>
Total cost (£k)	£201,015
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	£61,015

## 2 Problem statement

The evolution of technology and subsequently the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, has led to quick changes in the way many services are being delivered and how information and support is shared. The Digital Exclusion in Kent 2021 report highlights profiles that are at risk of digital exclusion in Kent, it explains that the most deprived communities are much more unlikely to keep up with developments in technology, as well as older people in rural locations. These customer groups are also those who are more likely to need support and advice to manage essential household finances with the biggest costs being their utilities. Without the appropriate support to access advice, information and services online, these groups will be disproportionately affected and most likely to be living in a cold home.

In 2022, there were an estimated 3.26 million households living in fuel poverty in England, based on the LILEE metric (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2023). This is an increase from 3.1 million in 2021 and doesn't take into consideration the cost-of-living crisis that has hit households throughout the winter of 2022-23 and beyond. National Energy Action state the figure as 6.7 million UK household since October 2022, using the 10% of income measure. It is recognised that nearly half of low-income households are still living in hard to heat homes, and the rate of improvements was well below what is needed to lift people out of fuel poverty by a target date of 2030.

Living in a cold home has significant and demonstrable direct and indirect health impacts. There is strong evidence that shows it is associated with poor health outcomes and an increased risk of morbidity and mortality for all age groups (Public Health England). The Marmot Review into the health impacts of cold homes and fuel poverty found a strong association between cold temperatures and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Fuel poverty and living in a cold home has been linked to excess winter deaths. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 40% of excess winter deaths are caused by living in a cold home and the Hills review estimates that some 10% of excess winter deaths are directly attributable to fuel poverty (Hills, 2012). In the year 2021-2022, excess Winter deaths in the Southeast (excluding COVID-19) increased from 390 to 1,500 (ONS, 2023).

A study (Kent Analytics, 2023) found that Kent had an estimated 64,093 households in fuel poverty in 2021, which equates to 9.7% of all households. This is shown in the table below. Thanet had the highest number and proportion of households that were fuel poor (8,413 households, 12.8%). The lowest fuel poverty rate was in Tonbridge & Malling where 7.3% of households were estimated as fuel poor. The lowest number of fuel poor households was in Dartford (3,560). Six Kent districts saw the number of fuel poor households increase since the previous year. The biggest number and percentage increase was within Sevenoaks district where 298 more households were in fuel poverty than the year before, an increase of 7.7%. Kent Analytics, Kent County Council

4 Canterbury saw the largest reduction in the number of fuel poor households. There were 438 fewer fuel poor households in Canterbury in 2021, a reduction of 6.1%.

Households living in rented accommodation were more likely to be in fuel poverty than owner occupier households. 24.7% of households in privately rented accommodation in England were fuel poor in 2021 and 17.0% of households in social rented accommodation. 8.7% of households in owner occupied dwellings were in fuel poverty in 2021.

	Fuel poverty 2020	Fuel poverty 2021	% households in fuel poverty 2020	% households in fuel poverty 2021	Change since 2020	% change since 2020
Ashford	4,527	4,708	8.7%	8.6%	181	4.0%
Canterbury	7,164	6,726	10.9%	10.3%	-438	-6.1%
Dartford	3,644	3,560	8.4%	7.6%	-84	-2.3%
Dover	5,929	5,939	11.3%	11.5%	10	0.2%
Folkestone & Hythe	5,539	5,645	10.8%	11.5%	106	1.9%
Gravesham	4,601	4,344	10.5%	10.2%	-257	-5.6%
Maidstone	5,877	5,855	8.5%	8.1%	-22	-0.4%
Sevenoaks	3,882	4,180	7.6%	8.4%	298	7.7%
Swale	6,085	6,042	10.1%	9.8%	-43	-0.7%
Thanet	8,247	8,413	12.8%	13.3%	166	2.0%
Tonbridge & Malling	4,051	4,017	7.8%	7.3%	-34	-0.8%
Tunbridge Wells	4,555	4,664	8.9%	9.5%	109	2.4%
<b>Kent</b>	<b>64,101</b>	<b>64,093</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	<b>9.7%</b>	<b>-8</b>	<b>0.0%</b>
Medway	11,840	10,765	10.3%	9.5%	-1,075	-9.1%
Kent & Medway	75,941	74,858	9.8%	9.7%	-1,083	-1.4%
South East	331,687	327,063	8.6%	8.4%	-4,624	-1.4%
England	3,158,206	3,162,752	13.2%	13.1%	4,546	0.1%

Source: BEIS

Presented by: Kent Analytics, Kent County Council

Chart 2 shows the proportion of households in Kent local authorities in fuel poverty compared to the national and regional average. The data is ranked from highest to lowest fuel poverty rates. The chart shows that all authorities in Kent had a lower proportion of fuel poverty than the national average except Thanet, and three local authorities had a lower proportion than the regional average.

Table 1: Fuel poverty in Kent (Kent Analytics, 2023)

Since 2021, digital inclusion and capabilities support has been provided by Kent County Council's Digital Kent service. Digital Kent is part of the Helping Hands scheme and Financial Hardship programme, the Digital Kent service has been created as a response to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic. The aim of the programme is to support people in, or at risk of, financial hardship following the pandemic, and more recently, during the cost-of-living crisis.

The delivery of Digital Kent so far has taken a tailored and holistic approach, allowing individuals to receive support that benefits them. In addition to digital access, this work has many wider benefits such as educational and employment outcomes. Health is a key additional outcome that has been apparent through a partnership project with the NHS. It is recognised that if individuals cannot access new technology available through health services they will be disproportionately affected.

Numerous studies identify the link between fuel poverty and the subsequently resulting cold homes and their impact on health, mental health in the short, and in the long-term. Supporting individuals with energy support, in partnership with the local authority, can help them to have warmer homes, impacting health outcomes for respiratory conditions, circulatory conditions, long-term conditions and dementia, older people (Institute of Health Equity, 2022).

The support service has seen unprecedented demand, following the pandemic and most recently, due to the pressure of the cost of living and energy crises. This winter, the service is forecast to see a greater number of people in financial hardship, with increased numbers of Kent residents facing energy debt, and barriers that limit the most vulnerable to access support services that could support them to maintain a safe and warm home.

### 3 Scope and objectives

This partnership builds upon the existing Kent County Council (KCC) project which was formed to tackle digital exclusion by ensuring individuals have the access and the skills to be able to utilise digital tools that enable them to benefit from energy services and information. By coming together, the partnership will build capacity and skills in the service to ensure that energy safeguarding services are included in the provision of support provided to vulnerable households.

The core service brings together a number of community-based services including;

- **Connectivity Access Scheme** – providing internet connectivity solutions for eligible residents
- **Device Recycling Scheme** - recycling scheme for residents, businesses, charities, and other organisations to dispose of their unwanted IT equipment and assets easily, safely, securely and in a way that minimises the impact on the environment
- **Hardware Access Scheme** – gifting laptops to eligible residents
- **Digital Champions Network** - one of the largest networks of digital champion volunteers from organisations, businesses and the community to support our ambition to charge up the digital skills of our communities across Kent
- **Digital Hubs** - spaces where residents can go to get digital support and learn new digital skills from a Digital Champions
- **Digital Support Skills** - another route for residents to access digital support and skills with the help of digital champions
- **Onward referral network** - Our work does not stop with digital inclusion, service is designed to be holistic support for people in need. Digital Kent is part of ReferKent, a Kent-wide referral service for the benefit of people in need. Additionally, Household Support Fund is allocated through the Programme and where required the resident is referred to the council's social services network and/or to the voluntary sector, as appropriate

Through the partnership we will be introducing the Energy Safeguarding service with the aim of 'no one left behind' in mind, this project aims to utilise existing projects and schemes to enable Kent residents to access digital services, but with the aim of supporting with energy safeguarding services.

- **Priority Services Register(s)** - helping residents to register for Priority Services Register (PSR) by demonstrating how to sign up via online registration forms
- **Energy Advice** – demonstrating how online tools can be used to compare energy prices and highlighting useful websites and information around energy efficiency. Where a households would like dedicated energy efficiency to support a referral onto a dedicated energy advice service
- **Energy Crisis funding** – to provide residents in energy crisis with energy vouchers and additional support provided by the government's households support fund and referrals to voluntary organisations through our Kent referrals system
- **Carbon Monoxide awareness** – provide the Digital Kent team with the skills to identify carbon monoxide exposure and resources to provide households with a carbon monoxide alarm where they're required

The partnership is accessible via either self-referral or via the existing **referral network** accessed through professional referrals (e.g., social workers, charity workers, GPs).

**The objectives of the scheme are as follows:**

- To provide 5,000 individuals with advice and support to enable them to access digital tools and provide support with energy needs where required. This will include supporting individuals to register for PSR, complete an energy crisis assessment and access other energy support services. (PSR, energy crisis assessment and CO safety)
- Enable individuals to access energy efficiency and net-zero information by providing them with the skills, devices, and connectivity they need to access these services
- Provide holistic support by referring eligible individuals to other schemes within KCC and external organisations.

## 4 Why the project is being funded through the VCMA

This project is proposed for funding through the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA) as it aims to target an excluded group who are vulnerable. Many individuals in financial difficulties will struggle to maintain a warm home. Whilst there are schemes and services available to try and mitigate this need, many exist online. It is crucial to recognise that many individuals, particularly those in vulnerable groups, may not be able to access the services, tools and information available to help them with heating their home. This project aims to tackle this need by providing individuals with the skills, technology, and confidence to access online services.

The project delivers against SGNs Vulnerability Strategy, by providing targeted support to households most at risk of living in fuel poverty based upon their personal circumstances (financially vulnerable & culturally and digitally excluded groups) and geographical location.

This partnership service goes above and beyond our core responsibilities as a Gas Distribution Network and is eligible under the VCMA funding criteria as it will provide energy crisis support, access to energy efficiency and CO advice, empowering vulnerable households to use energy safely, efficiently, and affordably.

This partnership aligns to the SGN commitment to deliver support services customers aligned to our four strategic pillars:

1. Services Beyond the Meter
2. Supporting Priority Customer Groups
3. Fuel Poverty & Energy Affordability
4. Carbon Monoxide Awareness

This project aligns to strategic pillars 2 (3 and 4).

## 5 Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

### 5.1 NHS

The project team are currently working in partnership with the NHS to deliver an integrated project. This support is designed to enable residents in becoming more equipped and skilled at using digital technology more confidently, resulting in being less digitally excluded and isolated.

The project is designed to support the GP practices by offering digitally excluded patients in need, free, recycled laptops and digital skills and support sessions. It aims to increase uptake of Council services and reduce pressure on GP Practices by “channel shifting” up to 30% of digital consultations in GP Practices, which are for non-medical needs, using the digital platform ReferKent. This project also aims to deliver connectivity solutions to referred patients currently without access to the internet. The Digital Inclusion & Capabilities – Integrated Project will provide digital skills and support sessions to patients referred by their GP, providing them with the skills to access the non-medical care and support they may require as opposed to visiting their GP. This is an innovative strategic partnership between Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board, Kent County Council and Medway Council to target inequalities for Kent and Medway residents.

## 5.2 Digital Champions Network

The Digital Champions Network is another example of stakeholder support. This scheme has attracted over 590 champions, one of the biggest of its kind in the UK. The ethos behind this network identified that there are many individuals and professionals who regularly assist residents who may be digitally excluded. We wanted to provide these individuals with a toolkit of schemes, development, and free CPD to enhance the digital support on offer in the community. In addition, our campaign to recruit Digital Champions encouraged more people to support others on their digital journey. By engaging champions from different backgrounds, areas, and organisations we've been able to bring skills to a wider audience, supporting individuals who may not have come forward to obtain digital skills before. In addition, the wider skillsets of our Digital Champions help us to reach individuals we may not have been able to support, for example those with English as a second language can be digitally excluded, our network speaks over 40 different languages, enabling us to support this cohort.

As part of this project, we would disseminate information and training on energy efficiency and support services, to enable champions to support individuals in their community with this advice. Once a champion is part of the network, they are able to access a range of tools that help them to support residents. Part of this toolkit includes specific training sessions to upskill the champions, enabling better support in the community. For the purposes of this project, champions in the network will be invited to specific workshops which will explain digital tools that can support with energy needs, for example, how to register for the PSR. The network will also be notified of schemes and support that residents can be referred for as part of this project and others run by the digital inclusion and capabilities team.

By enabling champions to have the appropriate skillset and information on energy support, they will support this project by widening the accessibility of guidance in communities. By sharing this information with this cohort, we are also supporting the sustainability of this project's outcomes, as it ensures more individuals have the appropriate information on energy advice and safeguarding.

## 5.3 District and Borough Councils

Throughout the schemes Kent County Council runs to support vulnerable groups, they engage with colleagues in district and borough councils to ensure residents are aware of the support available. An example of how this can be achieved is through the social tariff campaign, this was delivered via funding and marketing to district councils enabling them to print and send out letters to those who were likely to be eligible for these schemes. This proved engagement method, can be utilised within this project to ensure that we continue to provide a more targeted and effective approach to reaching marginalised and eligible groups. As with the champions network, KCC will continue to effective information exchanges including key messages on energy efficiency and support available as part of this project with their district and borough colleagues.

As well as engaging with District and Borough Councils to identify vulnerable customers, this partnership helps to advice on the appropriate locations for delivering support. Some of the 1 to 1 and group support delivered through this project will be accessed by residents through Digital Hubs. These will be placed in community locations supported by district and borough councils.

Utilising this partnership with councils at a local level enables better access to those most vulnerable in communities. A project run last year with Gravesham Borough Council and Citizens Advice North & West Kent delivered a targeted digital skills programme. The initiative was a collaborative project working with the Grand, the Gurdwara and St Aidan's Church, all based in Gravesend. The project helped people to access digital devices, the internet and free digital skills training and support to help them become digitally confident and improve their lives. It also supported young people develop their skills for the job market. A total of 157 individuals were supported through this programme.

Another example of partnership working that has been achieved is a project run with Folkestone and Hythe District Council. This delivered a tailored version of the Hardware Access Scheme which focused on providing devices to those who wanted to start their own business as the area saw a need in this area. Alongside the

device, they were given digital skills support to do this. This not only has a positive impact on the individual, but also supports in providing the community with more local businesses, growing the local economy.

Through the delivery of this project, we will continue utilising existing partnerships to ensure our approach to supporting vulnerable clients is tailored in order to ensure the best outcomes possible.

## 5.4 SGN Stakeholder feedback

Throughout GD2 our dedicated Vulnerable Steering Group has helped us shape our vulnerability strategy and our priorities to ensure that we meet our Business Plan commitments to support vulnerable customers, those most in need of support to maintain a safe and warm home. It is with guidance and support from our dedicated Vulnerable Steering Group that SGN have a clear approach to delivering support to vulnerable customers, ensuring that we're using relevant data to prioritise targeting priority customer groups and working in geographic areas most likely to be living in cold and unhealthy homes.

SGNs stakeholder endorsed strategy prioritised key Priority Customer Groups that require tailored support services to those who are culturally and or digitally excluded, and financially vulnerable.

During our Stakeholder engagement sessions over 2021-2023, stakeholders valued greater collaboration with other regional utility networks and local authorities.

# 6 Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria

## 6.1 Outcomes

The Digital Kent partnership aims to deliver the following outcomes for Kent residents;

- Improved digital literacy by supporting residents to address digital barriers by managing financial and skills gaps
- Improved skills to identify and support eligible households into energy schemes including the PSR, energy efficiency advice, energy crisis support and carbon monoxide awareness
- Households are supported with energy safeguarding services and served feel more confident to maintain a safe and warm home
- Households served achieve outcomes that improve health, employment, education, financial and wellbeing

To provide 5,000 individuals with advice and support to enable them to access digital tools and provide support with energy needs where required.

## 6.2 Success Criteria

The partnership aims to support 5,000 residents to improve their digital inclusion and greater access to energy safeguarding services this will be delivered through the following support provisions:

5,000 clients provided with 1 to 1 in depth support with their utility needs, this support will include the following, where applicable:

- Income maximisation – provision of support to help customers maximise their income, e.g. benefits checks, fuel debt clearance or help with utility bill discounts
- Tariff switching and time of use tariff awareness – provision of support and advice to customers on particular tariffs, e.g. help to understand their tariff or bills better
- Energy efficiency improvements - helping customers to install or secure funding for energy saving improvements in their homes (e.g. LED lightbulbs, draught proofing, insulation, water saving devices)
- Heating upgrades - improved heating system including the boiler replacement scheme
- Behavioural change - support to help customers make behavioural changes such as better use of timers, programmers and controls and more efficient use of appliances
- Energy advice – provide customers with advice on energy tariffs, government grants, benefits and energy efficiency schemes



- CO awareness conversations – providing customers with the knowledge to help keep themselves and their household safe from CO poisoning. CO alarms provided where need identified
- Referral to appropriate support organisations for specific issues and liaison between customer and third-party organisations on to arrange for further support (e.g. befriending, Social Services, safe home visit from the fire service)
- Help to register eligible households onto the Priority Services Register
- Other individualised support to meet targeted needs of specific vulnerable customers

100 information workshops which include information on energy safeguarding services, the workshops will cover:

- An overview of online tools that can support with energy
- Information on PSR and how to register
- Online safety
- Where to get further support for digital and energy needs (including energy vouchers)

Individuals supported through this partnership will also benefit from wider schemes delivered within the Digital Inclusion Project, this aims to assist them further with digital access and energy support. These provisions include:

- Supply of devices
- Connectivity solutions
- Skills support
- Information and support workshops

## 7 Project partners and third parties involved

- Kent County Council – local authority who will be the delivery partners of this project. Kent County Council currently delivers a number of schemes and projects to support residents who are digitally excluded through the Digital Inclusion and Capabilities programme (also known as Digital Kent)
- NHS – The NHS currently fund its own project delivered by KCCs Digital Inclusion and capabilities Programme. This aims to tackle digital inclusion, specifically targeting skills and knowledge around healthcare services such as using the NHS app. Whilst this project is separate, this partnership will enable us to provide a holistic support approach to beneficiaries, providing them additional skills support
- Medway Council – A unitary authority within Kent, as they operate their own support for residents in their area, we will work with them to ensure individuals can benefit where appropriate from schemes that are applicable to their area
- GreensafeIT - GreensafeIT are an IT asset disposal company who are our primary supplier for the device recycling scheme. They are one of the market leaders in the recycling field, being carbon neutral and having a zero-landfill policy
- Circular Computing - Circular Computing are KCCs Digital Inclusion and Capabilities Service's supplier of remanufactured laptops which are gifted to digitally excluded residents. They are the UK's first BSI kitemarked laptop remanufacturer and are carbon neutral; meaning we can confidently support our residents without impacting the environment
- Softcat PLC - Softcat are our service provider, helping us to find suppliers and providers, build relationships with these partners and deliver schemes and projects to a high standard
- British Telecom - One of the world's leading communications services companies. They support the Connectivity Access Scheme delivered by KCC by providing Wi-Fi vouchers
- SGN – regional gas network, providing funding for energy advice, energy crisis funding via fuel vouchers, and access carbon monoxide awareness training and carbon monoxide alarms
- UK Power Networks – regional electricity distribution network, providing access to the Priority Services Register and funding for 2000 beneficiaries of the project

## Referral Networks;

- NHS Kent and Medway – Integrated Programme – Digital Kent is supported by NHS Kent & Medway (ICB) to support GP practices and their NHS patients tackling digital inequalities
- Folkestone Community Works – match-funded by European Structural and Investment Fund to support local residents and entrepreneurs with digital skills
- Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council – offering digital support and skills workshops for local residents
- Libraries, Registration & Archives – for setting up digital hubs in their locality for the benefit of their residents

## 8 Potential for new learning

### Monitoring and evaluation

Evaluation will be completed throughout an individual's engagement with the project, this enables monitoring of their development and the long-term, impact of the support.

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

- Quantitative and qualitative service user outcomes for service users
- Service user before-and-after-support surveys and follow-up calls
- Feedback, indicators, outputs, and outcomes reported on monthly / quarterly

### Learning

KCC, through Digital Kent, have been delivering schemes and support to improve digital inclusion through a number of schemes. These schemes include; Hardware Access, Device Recycling, Skills and Engagement, and Connectivity Access. From this experience, the schemes have evolved and improved to ensure they are achieving the best outcomes for residents. There have also been several wider areas identified that digital inclusion can support.

Through partnership working, one of the skills gaps identified that has a wider public benefit was the need to support individuals with digital health services. Kent County Council is now working with the NHS to provide skills support in GP surgeries to help with things like using the NHS app, ordering prescriptions online and booking or attending GP appointments virtually.

## 9 Scale of VCMA Project and SROI Calculations, including NPV

### Social Value Measurement

We worked with leading social impact research consultancy SIA Partners to carry out an assessment of the financial and wellbeing outcomes applicable to our services for vulnerable customers incorporated in this partnership using the DNO methodology/rulebook with additional proxies developed for GDN activity. Carrying out an in-depth assessment of the predicted outcomes we forecast a positive net social return in investment (SROI) of £4.66. This is based on a conservative view of the outcomes associated with this project due to the challenges of quantifying outcomes when working with harder to reach communities.

<b>Total cost</b>	£61,015
<b>Total gross present value</b>	£345,497
<b>Net Present Value (NPV)</b>	£284,482.39
<b>SROI</b>	£4.66

## **10 VCMA Project start and end date**

The project will run from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024

## **11 Geographic area**

Kent

## **12 Internal governance and project management evidence**

SGN has worked alongside Kent County Council and UK Power Networks to co-design this partnership and ensure that its ambition contributes to the delivery of our Vulnerability Strategy, the guidance from our Vulnerable Customer Steering Group and adheres to the updated VCMA governance criteria.

The SROI has been externally assessed by SIA Partners using the DNO / GDN common rulebook. As detailed above SIA partners have reviewed the current partnership scope which has been forecast at adding an additional £4.66 for each £1 invested, this will be monitored closely to ensure we adhere to the VCMA governance criteria.

To support the partnership to deliver the success criteria outcomes as detailed, Kent County Council will meet monthly and quarterly to review outcomes, learn, share best practices, and address any delivery issues.

The PEA has been reviewed and approved by the business lead Kerry Potter and the Director of Customer Services Maureen McIntosh.