

# Community Energy Advice Partnership

Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance

February 2025

SGN



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## 1 Description

Project title	Community Energy Advice Partnership
Funding GDN(s)	SGN
New/Updated (indicate as appropriate)	New
Date of PEA submission:	December 2024
Project contact name:	Janet Duggan
Project contact email:	janet.duggan@sgn.co.uk
Total cost (£k)	£349,998
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	£349,998

## 2 Problem statement

According to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ), the number of households who are required to spend more than 10% of their income (after housing costs) on domestic energy rose in 2023 to 36.4% (8.91 million), up from 27.4% in 2022 (6.66 million). Lower income households are more likely to respond to higher energy prices by cutting energy use below safe levels. Some will find themselves in the situation where energy will become unaffordable, resulting in self-disconnection or unmanageable energy debt.

Typical energy bills under the January to March 2024 price cap were almost 60% higher than in winter 2021/22 and with a further 10% increase from October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, and another increase in January 2025 energy costs remain unaffordable for many.

Nationally, Citizen's Advice helped over 220,000 people with crisis support in 2023 – their highest figure to date, this trend has continued throughout 2024. They are reporting a marked increase in people presenting with complex problems, and multiple debts so when someone presents with energy issues, such as affordability, billing, and customer service, they also need support in other areas.

Furthermore, while community energy is burgeoning across the country there are still many areas that are underserved or beyond the reach of the current network of groups. Customers need accessible impartial energy advice delivered locally and tailored to community needs as without there is greater risk of leaving portions of society behind both geographically and demographically.

There are several customer groups who are more at risk of living in a cold and unhealthy home, these are also the most likely to be left behind in the energy transition. As well as low-income households, detailed below are key customer groups that are more likely to need tailored engagement to help them maintain a safe and warm home including;

### Care Leavers

Nationally, there has been an [8% increase](#) in the number of children in care in the last 5 years. According to the Department for Education, in 2022/23, there were 48,050 care leavers in England now aged 17 to 21, of which 64% were male. For example, in [Kent](#) in 2022 there were over 2,000 young people aging out of local authority care programmes.

Care leavers are identified as having significantly worse long term life outcomes in comparisons to their peers, including increased chances of homelessness and significantly increased likelihood of problem debt. The Debt Advice Foundation cites that insufficient guidance for this group is a key factor in these poorer outcomes.

### Traveller community

The traveller community in the UK have been shown to experience some of the highest levels of discrimination and poverty of any ethnic group, and are significantly more likely to suffer from [mental health problems and to](#)

[reach adulthood without learning to read](#). There are currently at least 9,000 people living in the SGN south regions who identify as a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma community, with [concentrations across mid Kent](#).

Due to the high levels of mental health issues and illiteracy – and a reluctance to engage with local authorities and advice organisations – this group is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of energy poverty. Illiteracy and mistrust are particular barriers to these groups engaging with their energy companies, or learning the skills required to tackle high bills or improve their domestic energy efficiency.

### Other Vulnerable Consumers

As well as the two demographics identified above there are numerous other factors that can lead to consumers being at risk of fuel poverty. These include but are not limited to; low income, older age, households with young children, disabilities and long-term illness, single parents, and private rental tenure.

Many vulnerable consumers are entitled to benefits that they are not [claiming](#). In 2024, total unclaimed benefits were estimated at £22.7bn. With the reduction in availability of the winter fuel allowance at the end of 2024 there are increasing numbers of [older people](#) at risk of fuel poverty and associated vulnerabilities. Many of these people may be experiencing fuel poverty for the first time and may not know what support is available or have the skills to complete complex online applications. [Disabilities can increase the vulnerability](#) of some people to high energy costs and inefficient energy use. While support is available, access and maximisation of this support may be lacking. The rental sector largely caters for people with lower incomes but also creates the split incentive of the renter paying for energy use but the landlord being responsible for energy efficiency upgrades. While there are now targets for landlords to increase EPC to C by 2030 the costs of upgrades will be likely [reflected in rents](#).

## 3 Scope and objectives

By working in partnership, SGN and Community Energy Pathways (CEP) will deliver community-led energy advice programmes that will help households struggling to maintain a safe and warm home, with a focus on supporting marginalised communities with an increased focus on care leavers, traveller communities and other vulnerable customers in underserved areas.

Community Energy Pathways (CEP) has experience in developing and mentoring community energy groups across the South and Southeast of England and operates its own teams of local energy champions. In 2024, CEP supported and mentored 40 groups and reached 13,000 people at risk of being left behind by the net zero transition by delivering energy advice across a whole range of topics from local energy efficiency schemes, energy bill advocacy, and safe behavioural change to income maximisation and scam awareness.

The partnership aims to build capacity into an extensive service, delivering advice to vulnerable consumers through diverse methods, including home visits, a free to call telephone advice line, face to face appointments and presentations/stalls at community events and the premises of local service providers.

CEP have established relationships with community and voluntary organisations as well as local authorities to reach vulnerable households. In addition, this project will strengthen existing relationships, alongside developing new ones, to ensure a robust pipeline of referrals into the energy advice service from voluntary organisations, local authorities and housing associations within SGN's Southern England network.

To ensure that support reaches underrepresented groups the partnership will develop tailored engagement which includes delivering energy cafés and advice sessions at local community events.

The partnership will provide a tailored level of support to vulnerable households delivered through a mix of community volunteers and trained employed advisors, the services include;

- Frontline worker training for new Energy Champions so that they can identify and deliver energy advisory services for vulnerable households addressing their immediate and future energy needs

- Comprehensive energy advice service sharing personalised tips on saving energy, using and optimising heating systems, billing or metering concerns, CO alarms and safety advice, registration to the PSR and where required this will be delivered through a community energy home visit delivered by our in-house specialist team
- In community workshops and energy advisory services at warm hubs, community centres, faith centres, libraries, schools and food banks
- Customer assessment and onward referrals into energy efficiency schemes - local, regional and national heating and insulation grants
- Energy advocacy service – where required the team will conduct “three-party” calls, between a client, the team, and a third party such as an energy supplier or a relevant person of support like a friend or family member
- Emergency Crisis funds will be available and managed through Charis Shop.

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

This project meets the Vulnerability and Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA) eligibility criteria as it provides direct support to vulnerable households who would benefit from dedicated energy safeguarding support and or who are struggling to maintain a safe and warm home.

The project delivers against SGNs Vulnerability Strategy, by providing targeted support to households living in fuel poverty based upon their personal circumstances.

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 support to those people in some of the priority groups and in the regional communities most at risk, providing information on using 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 pillar 3 with outcomes in 2 and 4.

## 5 Evidence of stakeholder/customer support

### 5.1 Community Energy Pathways

Community energy enables local residents to organise themselves into groups to take positive, direct action on climate change, keep their homes safe and warm, reduce their carbon footprint, and prepare for a more sustainable future. Community energy groups often start out as local volunteers with a shared interest in decarbonising their homes and neighbourhoods and a realisation that energy efficiency measures will save residents money.

CEP has pioneered the idea and practice of helping these groups of local volunteers to form community energy enterprises which can develop local energy advice programmes and other energy services. We then train volunteers as energy champions, but the crucial step is creating funded roles. This is when momentum really builds, and systematic energy advice event programmes can be introduced.

CEP's experience in establishing, training and mentoring multiple groups is unique. We are currently supporting over 40 groups. Our 19 staff are dedicated to the mission of putting a community energy group at the heart of every community. In 2022, we won the top industry award as community energy 'Organisation of the Year'.

## 5.2 Stakeholder feedback – Hampshire County Council

Community Energy Pathways has been working in partnership with Hampshire County Council since 2021 and has established a burgeoning community energy network in the county made up of seven established groups and several more fledgling groups. CEP has played a crucial role in the progress of HCC's climate change strategy and has a strong relationship with the organisation. Chitra Nadarajah, Head of Climate Change and Environmental Strategy has said:

*"We believe that SGN and Community Energy Pathways should work together as we believe that community energy groups are an invaluable source of trusted energy efficiency and safeguarding advice. Community Energy Pathways is already active in Hampshire and the groups that it assists will help SGN to target support to vulnerable households, to cross refer complex cases to other organisations and to develop an advice service in areas which are perhaps currently underserved."*

## 5.3 Case Study – Energy issue that the organisation has managed

We have direct experience of supporting vulnerable customers with our own trained energy advisors and have also helped to train over 80 new advisors in 2024. One advisor, working with Energise Sussex Coast community energy had this experience:

*Kerry (pensionable age, early onset of dementia) came into our regular outreach session at the Hailsham Food Bank with concerns about high energy bills. I spoke to her about her energy usage and financial situation, and it became clear that her energy usage was abnormally high, and she was accruing a large debt because of this.*

*As Kerry finds interacting with her energy provider, British Gas, difficult, I contacted them on her behalf to arrange an engineer's appointment. To make sure that Kerry's situation was explained to the engineer fully, I asked for them to telephone me whilst at Kerry's property. It turned out that Kerry's smart meter was faulty, and this had caused it to report the abnormally high energy usage. We are now supporting Kerry through the process of clearing the £2000 debt which had been caused by the faulty meter.*

*Kerry told me that it was a weight off her mind knowing that she was being supported through this.*

## 5.4 SGNs Vulnerability Steering Group

Our Vulnerability Steering Group has helped us shape our vulnerability strategy and our priorities for GD2 from strategy into delivery. It is with their guidance we develop key initiatives to support our most vulnerable customers, those most in need of help to maintain a safe and warm home.

With a data driven approach to identify communities most likely to suffer detriment from living in a cold and unhealthy home, it was identified that we should prioritise programmes that people most likely to suffer detriment by living in a cold and unhealthy home. In 2024 our strategic steering group reiterated the vital impact we could have by coordinating our activities with others to identify and support those most in need, those most impacted by the cost of living and energy cost crisis.

In 2025, our VSG were keen to ensure that our investment was targeted to those most in need, especially those who were marginalised, under-served and those we 'most need to reach'.



## 6 Outcomes, associated actions and success criteria

### 6.1 Outcomes

Through the partnership SGN and Community Energy Pathways will aim to deliver tailored energy safeguarding support to vulnerable households by:

- Increasing the scope and scale of community-led energy advice
- Develop new pathways for vulnerable groups to access quality advice on; energy efficiency, behaviour change, accessing grants, income maximisation, scam awareness, and benefits and energy debt in a community context
- Create a referral pathway for the CEP network to provide debt case work
- Strengthen the working relationship between CEP's advice delivery partners, and use these relationships to reach vulnerable customers across a wide geography
- Create and deliver training sessions which will upskill members and groups within the sector
- Develop relationships with local authorities and existing support organisations to maximise the project's ability to reach and support vulnerable groups who may normally be excluded from the advice process
- Create and deliver an advice programme and associated materials to best support the specific needs of care leavers
- Create and deliver an advice programme and associated materials to best support the specific needs of members of the traveller community
- Increase awareness and sign-up rates to the Priority Services Register to ensure vulnerable households are best supported
- Increase awareness of the dangers of Carbon Monoxide, and increase the number of people with working CO alarms
- Provide emergency support for the most vulnerable through distributing fuel vouchers and warm home packs
- Increase consumer confidence and independence, ensuring that vulnerable people are empowered through new knowledge and skills.

### 6.2 Success Criteria

Support 3,500 households with energy efficiency, behaviour change, and energy safeguarding advice, including advice and signposting for further support on; who to call in an emergency for problems with utilities, smart meters, energy tariff information, locking cooker valves and what to do if in energy debt.

Over the one-year partnership our ambition is to;

- Train 10 volunteers or staff to NEA level 3 with an additional full-day in-person training session on how to effectively deliver energy advice to vulnerable consumers
- Train and provide on-going support for 4 community energy organisation led advice services including with ongoing training opportunities, advice information resources (such as leaflets and flyers), and mentoring to improve service delivery

Traveller communities and care leavers:

- Design and run an outreach campaign using social media and local authority targeted mailing data to reach 3,000 care leavers with light touch energy advice and an invitation to learn more
- Deliver 24 online workshops to provide 300 young people leaving the care system with in-depth energy advice, income maximisation and specially designed training to understand their current and future energy use
- Deliver 30 surgeries in community venues to provide 300 members of the traveller community with bespoke advice tailored to their specific needs including energy efficiency advice and income maximisation advice (and addressing their accessibility needs and their exclusion from more standard advice processes)

- Develop information resources specifically focused on our two key target groups (care leavers and travellers) including information on income maximisation, fuel debt relief, scam awareness, comparing and switching supplier, understanding smart meters, understanding energy bills, accessing grants, accessing further support, PSR and CO awareness

Other vulnerable consumers:

- Organise and deliver 70 community events / workshops in venues including warm hubs, libraries, civic centres, faith centres, hospitals, schools, and children's centres reaching 1,450 people with energy advice, including on income maximisation, fuel debt relief, scam awareness, comparing and switching supplier, understanding smart meters, understanding energy bills, accessing grants, accessing further support, PSR and CO awareness
- Attend 140 third party community events (foodbanks, warm spaces, repair cafes, church groups, and other community groups) reaching 1,450 people with energy advice including on income maximisation, fuel debt relief, scam awareness, comparing and switching supplier, understanding smart meters, understanding energy bills, accessing grants, accessing further support, PSR and CO awareness
- Follow up 220 initial advice sessions with energy home visits for vulnerable households to identify opportunities to
  - increase energy efficiency via behaviour change and/or access to small measures for 220 households
  - assess eligibility for energy efficiency grant schemes for 220 households
  - address energy debt and any welfare concerns for 75 households
  - offer bespoke advice on metering options (including smart meters) for 110 households
  - raise awareness of energy related scams for 220 households
  - provide onward referrals and recommendations for 110 households
- Provide telephone-based follow-up services to 150 households, with on average of 2 call appointments to address energy concerns and provide specialist casework on income maximisation, benefits and fuel debt, and grant application support
- Provide 3,500 households with carbon monoxide safety advice and 300 carbon monoxide alarms gifted to households in need
- Provide 3,500 households with information of the Priority Services Register and support 450 eligible households to register
- Provide 250 households with fuel vouchers through the Charis platform
- Provide 250 households with winter warm packs through Energy Efficiency - Winter Warm Packs.

## 7 Project partners and third parties involved

Community Energy Pathways (CEP) - Delivery and coordination of the service

SGN – Lead gas network providing funding and support to the delivery team including the Safe and Warm Partnership network

Supporting Organisations:

- Kent County Council
- Buckinghamshire County Council
- East Sussex County Council
- Hertfordshire County Council
- Energise Sussex Coast
- Social Enterprise Kent
- Bucks Community Energy
- Milton Keynes Community Energy



## 8 Potential for new learning

### Monitoring and evaluation

This partnership has been co-designed by CEP and SGN, building capacity by providing access to key services including free impartial energy advice and safeguarding support.

As we continue to evolve the partnership and progress with the delivery, the following activities will be in place to monitor and evaluate project progress and impacts:

- Quantitative and qualitative service user outcomes
- Service user follow-up calls for those receiving a home visit – 50% of home visit recipients to complete
- Feedback questionnaires to attendees of community events to understand impact of advice given and any actions taken
- Each month we will review the progress of the support service against the detailed success criteria in section 6.2 and work through challenges and opportunities where required, including the review of individual and organisational partnership case studies.

### Learning

The development of the model to build up a new service in five different geographic and demographic contexts for this project will be a valuable learning experience. The ability to replicate this in other underserved areas will be a crucial learning for CEP.

CEP will use the learning from this project to:

- Support the over 40 groups we currently mentor to embed energy advice services in their community offering
- Reach more underserved areas on the map with energy advice services
- Embed safeguarding and warm homes training into the CEP training model enabling more champions to provide this depth of advice
- Develop case management processes and tools for community groups to allow better outcomes for service users.

SGN will share the outcomes via stakeholder mechanisms including the SGN Safe and Warm partnership network the GDN Vulnerability Working Group as well as via the VCMA Annual Showcase and VCMA Annual Report.

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

We and the other Gas Distribution Networks worked with leading social impact research consultancy SIRIO Strategies on the development of the Industry Standard Social Value Framework and supporting GDN Rulebook. We have used that GDN Rulebook to carry out an assessment of the financial and wellbeing outcomes applicable to our services for vulnerable customers incorporated in this partnership. From this assessment we forecast a positive net Social Return on Investment of £9.13.

### Social Value Measurement

<b>Total cost*</b>	£349,998
<b>Total gross present value</b>	£3,544,876.77
<b>Net Present Value (NPV)</b>	£3,194,878.77
<b>SROI</b>	£9.13

*\*Accounting for inflationary factors over the term of the project.*

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

The project will run from April 2025 to March 2026

## **11 Geographic area**

SGN's Southern network

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

SGN has worked alongside Community Energy Pathways 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 internally assessed by SGN using the GDN rulebook as part of the Industry Standard Social Value Framework, the current partnership scope has been forecast at adding an additional £9.13 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, the partners will review progress monthly and quarterly to 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.