

## Wales & West Utilities Vulnerability & Carbon Monoxide Allowance (VCMA)

### Project Eligibility Assessment (PEA)

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*Supporting Wales' most vulnerable families via improved  
wellbeing, financial security and safety at home*

*Home-Start Cymru (HSC)*

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## **Eligibility criteria for company specific projects (other than condemned essential gas appliance repair and replacement)**

In order to qualify as a VCMA Project, a project must:

- a) have a positive, or a forecasted positive, Social Return on Investment (SROI) including for the gas consumers funding the VCMA Project;
- b) either:
  - i. provide support to consumers in Vulnerable Situations and relate to energy safeguarding, or
  - ii. provide awareness of the dangers of CO, or
  - iii. reduce the risk of harm caused by CO;
- c) have defined outcomes and the associated actions to achieve these;
- d) go beyond activities that are funded through other price control mechanism(s) or required through licence obligations; and
- e) not be delivered through other external funding sources directly accessed by a GDN, including through other government (national, devolved or local) funding.<sup>1</sup>

## **Eligibility criteria for company specific essential gas appliance servicing, repair, and replacement**

In order to qualify as a VCMA Project, unsafe pipework and essential gas appliance<sup>2</sup> servicing, repair or replacement must meet the following criteria:

- a) a GDN has to isolate and condemn unsafe pipework or an essential gas appliance following a supply interruption or as part of its emergency service role;
- b) the household cannot afford to service, repair or replace unsafe pipework or the essential gas appliance; and
- c) sufficient funding is not available from other sources (including national, devolved or local government funding) to fund the unsafe pipework or the essential gas appliance servicing, repair or replacement.

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<sup>1</sup> If part, but not full, funding is available through an external funding source for an eligible project, VCMA funding can be used for the remaining amount.

<sup>2</sup> Essential gas appliances are gas fuelled heating systems (including gas boilers and gas fires), and gas cookers.

## Information required for the registration of VCMA projects

Information required	Description
Project title	Supporting Wales' most vulnerable families via improved wellbeing, financial security and safety at home.
Funding GDN(s)	Wales & West Utilities
New/ Updated PEA	New
Date of PEA submission	23 December 2024
VCMA Project contact name, email and number	Rachele Verdini Rachele.Verdini@wwutilities.co.uk
Total VCMA funding required (£k)	£49,747
Problem(s)	<p><a href="#">Home-Start Cymru (HSC)</a> seeks to support some of Wales' most vulnerable families living in poverty and facing the challenges of poor health and wellbeing.</p> <p>Children need a safe, secure, comfortable and warm home to thrive. Almost one third of children in Wales live in poverty, the highest of any UK devolved nation. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has identified child poverty as "the biggest issue affecting children in Wales, and tackling it effectively is the Welsh Government's biggest task." The true impact of child poverty is likely to be even more severe, as many families are struggling financially due to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, with those with young children under 5 years old being among the hardest hit. Research from the Bevan Foundation found that around half of children in Wales were concerned about their family's ability to pay the bills, nearly 1 in 4 children worried about being cold, and 1 in 8 worried about going hungry.</p> <p>Low household income is a major driver of fuel poverty. It is estimated that up to 98% of lower-income households in Wales live in fuel poverty, with 41% believed to be in severe fuel poverty (Welsh Government, 2022). However, these figures do not account for recent increases in fuel prices, which have pushed many families to the brink of financial hardship. Families with children represent around half of all fuel-poor households and are less likely to have the financial resilience needed to cope with rising costs. Poor housing conditions, which often correlate with lower energy</p>

## Criteria

	<p>efficiency, exacerbate the issue. Lone-parent families are particularly vulnerable, with over 26% of them experiencing fuel poverty. The stress of living on the poverty line creates a highly stressful home environment, which places strain on family relationships and is closely linked to poor mental health.</p> <p>Children are one of the most vulnerable groups impacted by living in a cold home. Research indicates that poverty has a profound impact on the physiological development of the human brain. Infants living in fuel poor households have a 30% increased risk of hospital admission and are at higher risk of developing chronic health issues including respiratory problems such as asthma. Additionally,</p> <p>Fuel poverty has also been recognised as a key risk factor for increased CO exposures in the home, with 42% of UK households not having a CO alarm. One study exploring the characteristics of children with acute CO poisoning highlights that all subjects were of economically disadvantaged households.</p> <p>Home-Start Cymru (HSC) is an independent Welsh charity with over 20 years' experience providing free, non-judgmental, and accessible social welfare, rights-based information, and guidance services to families in need across Wales. HSC's mission is to deliver early intervention and preventative services that help families overcome complex challenges, such as mental health struggles, financial insecurity and social isolation. HSC's integrated service model focuses on preventing crises, addressing root causes, and ensuring that families receive the help they need before their challenges escalate. HSC's staff and 180 community-based volunteers provide holistic, person-centred support both in families' homes and through various accessible channels, including virtual support and drop-in centres. This integrated approach allows them to meet the unique needs of each family, empowering them to improve their wellbeing, financial situation resilience and quality of life.</p>
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## Criteria

	<p>HSC target their support to vulnerable families that often involve young or single parents and young children (under 1). In 2022/2023 alone, HSC supported 1,250 families and 99% of those supported said HSC had made a difference to their family, 76% of families reported better management of household finances, 79% experienced reduced stress and increased resilience, and 82% saw improvements in their overall wellbeing. A high proportion of the families supported by</p> <p>HSC has now devised a pilot service model, as proposed below, which addresses family needs as identified via their extensive experience of supporting families across Wales. Once piloted, this service model has the potential to be scaled up to support vulnerable families pan-Wales.</p>
<p>Scope and Objectives</p>	<p>This project pilot aims to alleviate financial hardship of families supported across Wales, addressing the health and wellbeing risks of fuel poverty, raising awareness of carbon monoxide, and improving parental mental health and family wellbeing.</p> <p>The project objectives are to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improve financial resilience, through 1:1 face-to face support, increased awareness of financial support available, and increased budgeting skills.</li> <li>2. Raise awareness of CO safety amongst low-income families.</li> <li>3. Improve parental and child mental health and wellbeing.</li> <li>4. Raise awareness of the support available to increase prevention and early intervention support.</li> <li>5. Deliver an evaluation service model for HSC, with evidence, insight and best practice to scale-up pan-Wales from 2026 onwards.</li> </ol> <p>All services will be offered bilingually in Welsh and English.</p> <p>HSC will work closely with local authorities, statutory services, and community-based organisations, such as the Discretionary</p>

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	<p>Assistance Fund or Strengthening Families Teams, as well as primary care professionals like GPs and health visitors. Additionally, they will engage with antenatal clinics, schools, libraries, and third-sector organisations like Foodbanks, the Mind network, Citizens Advice Bureaus, and financial support services like StepChange. This will help HSC in identifying families in need while also ensuring they receive holistic support.</p> <p>Upon referral, families will undergo an initial needs-led assessment to identify challenges and actions, developing a Family Support Action Plan with target outcomes for the family to work toward during the intervention.</p> <p>A specific data system will be aligned with this project alongside HSC's caseload management system and Charity Log to ensure that HSC captures appropriate data to demonstrate project outcomes. All families will also receive a post-support survey, asking for their feedback.</p>
<p>Outcomes, associated actions, and success criteria</p>	<p>The project outcomes will be the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 340 families (782 individuals) reached with CO safety and PSR information</li> <li>• 340 families reached with income maximisation information (Welfare Benefits)</li> <li>• 340 families reached with income maximisation information (tariff switching)</li> <li>• 340 families reached with income maximisation information (Energy Funding, e.g. Warm Home Discount)</li> <li>• 340 families reached with energy efficiency information (behavioural)</li> <li>• Approx. 100 volunteers trained and upskilled to support the changing needs of vulnerable families.</li> <li>• 100 families (230 individuals) signed up to the PSR</li> <li>• 100 CO monitors distributed</li> </ul> <p>Over the course of the project, the above will be achieved through a holistic approach by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Producing training resources for HSC staff and volunteers in key areas such as fuel poverty and energy efficiency, household</li> </ul>

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	<p>budgeting, fuel debt management, CO awareness, Net Zero, and signposting to third-party services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offering comprehensive, staff-led 1-to-1 support for families at risk of financial crisis, including assistance with budgeting, debt management, and benefits.</li> <li>• Delivering volunteer-led 1-to-1 emotional support to combat isolation and poor mental health (in both English and Welsh).</li> <li>• Providing accessible information to families on CO safety and third-party support services (e.g., the Priority Services Register), along with distributing CO detectors.</li> <li>• Developing awareness-raising resources for Wales &amp; West Utilities staff to refer vulnerable families to HSC's services.</li> </ul> <p>Project progress will be monitored closely via monthly touchpoints, quarterly reporting meetings and a stage gate review meeting at the halfway point of project delivery.</p>
Project Partners and third parties involved	<p>While HSC will be the delivery organisation for this pilot project, they will leverage collaborative partnerships with local authorities, healthcare professionals, corporates and third-sector organisations across Wales. Some of the informal partnerships will include organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureau, Save the Children, Barnardo's, Shelter Cymru, and Mind. HSC also maintains strong relationships with the four independent Home-Starts in Wales, to share best practice and collaborate to maximise outcomes for families.</p>
Potential for new learning	<p>The pilot nature of this project brings focus to a range of new learning that will be used to steer future work. By exploring ways in which to best support families that are living in poverty, the project has the potential to not only develop a holistic service that could be scaled up to the whole of Wales, but also inform support practices that fall under the Priority Service Register with potential further implications for the approach used by our engineers when interacting with those families.</p>

## Criteria

	With in-depth quantitative and qualitative data being collected as part of the project, there will be clear evidence of outcomes, which allows for key new learning to be disseminated as part of VCMA annual and showcase reports as well as future VCMA Partners Network events.
Scale of VCMA Project and SROI calculations, including NPV	<p>We have taken the forecasted numbers expected by HSC and calculated the following SROI over the delivery period using the latest GDN shared SROI model and rulebook:</p> <p>Total Gross Present Value = £820,935.63          Net Present Value = £772,577.41          SROI per £1 spent = £15.98</p>
VCMA Project start and end date	January 2025 – March 2026
Geographical area	Wales