

Evidencing the impact of the Village Agents in South Staffordshire

1. Preface

This pamphlet tells the story of the impact Village Agents are making in one district, South Staffordshire. This document coincides with the need of stakeholders to:

- Use scarce resources more efficiently.
- Obtain better outcomes and impact.
- Encourage the resilience of vulnerable individuals in order to reduce costly service interventions.
- Build sustainable, well-connected and resilient communities.
- Strengthen local democracy and elected members' community leadership role.

This report shows how Village Agents support these imperatives by:

- Building active, confident, connected and self-reliant communities.
- Reducing costly service interventions through preventative approaches.
- Strengthening local democracy.
- Maximising the scarce resources available.
- Obtaining better outcomes and impacts.

Case studies have been prepared to illustrate the impact the Village Agents are having. A brief overview of each study is included in section 6. The full case studies included at Appendix 1 go into detail and show the key benefits to the community and partners:

- A. Developing a successful community hub in a rural area
- B. Promoting health and well-being through preventative approaches.
- C. Supporting people to gain skills and get jobs.
- D. Maximising the use of community assets.
- E. Helping commissioners design better services.
- F. Supporting community-led regeneration and self-activity.

This report builds on a previous evaluation by the Staffordshire University¹, which concluded that the Village Agents provide a cost effective way to address social issues in rural areas.

2. Why Village Agents?

In South Staffordshire the first Village Agent was introduced in Featherstone to help the community develop its own capacity to make positive change. This work took place within the context of Featherstone Pride. This was a Locality Working initiative sponsored by the Local Strategic Partnership to mobilise partners to align their resources to help tackle key issues within the village.

The success of this (See case study F) has meant that Village Agents now cover all five Locality Working areas in the district and they have a wider remit. They work in the context of South Staffordshire's Locality Working model which stresses:

- Maximisation of cross partnership working.
- Sharing of resources and intelligence.
- Identifying local needs and gaps in services.
- Focussed and targeted responses.
- Alignment of commissioning processes.
- Promoting community self-activity.

A service level agreement has been developed by South Staffordshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Partnership Trust, South Staffordshire Housing Association and the Seisdon and South East Staffordshire Clinical Commissioning Group.

This allows for both generic community development activity and locality-based priorities. Amongst the issues highlighted are health and well-being, employment and skills, transport, estate-based regeneration projects, obesity and anti-social behaviour.

3. What do Village Agents do?

The Village Agents fulfil a community development role. They are independent of any organisation, although they work in the context of the local partnership environment. Agents help communities and individuals develop their own solutions and also help service providers be more effective.

They have a key role sitting at the centre of a network of individuals and organisations. They act as an “honest broker” and a “bridge builder”, promoting dialogue and trust.

The role also supports effective partnership working and the efficient use of resources. For example, Agents promote joined-up working and they help define local issues which have not been picked up on the Locality Working “radar”. They can also help carry out more effective community engagement or research on behalf of partners.

The precise type of intervention chosen by the Agent depends on local need and the stage at which individuals and groups find themselves. This may include:

- Making contacts within the community.
- Understanding what the key local issues really are, and the local dynamics.
- Establishing what resources and assets are available within the community.
- Strengthening relationships and networks.
- Becoming a well-informed and trusted resource working at the grassroots.
- Building confidence and capacity so that individuals and community groups can make sustained improvements to their lives and their community.
- Supporting the creation of community-based activities.
- Signposting people to services, and volunteering opportunities.
- Providing specialist information about services or resources.
- Acting as a catalyst to help kick start initiatives.
- Acting as a broker and an advocate with service providers.
- Providing a resource which can be commissioned to undertake research or deliver a discrete project.

4. The importance of networks

There is growing recognition amongst community development practitioners, commissioners, service providers and in the wider partnership environment, of the importance of strong personal networks.

A resident who is well linked in to the community tends to enjoy better access to services, better health and well-being and feels part of a stronger community. They can access information and support, and can also find an opportunity to add their skills into the mix. Similarly, communities which look outwards and connect into the wider environment are better able to access information and resources and to influence decision-making.

Effective networking is therefore central to the Village Agents' work, as is the Agents' role in maintaining and growing strong local networks. Local residents who were consulted in the course of this study clearly value this networking role :

(The Agent is) amazing – she listens, helps, finds stuff out, has a high profile in the village. She seems to help link (things) together.

The Agent has been brilliant, he has got us involved in everything. He has shown us what we are capable of... We have even been asked to speak in other villages about our experience. It's been great and a real eye-opener."

"I feel (that the Agent) has enhanced Community life – particularly being invaluable to us in setting up the internet café which has become an important community scheme."

"(The Agent) keeps us up to date with things and events connected with the village and she makes herself available to discuss anything we may have problems with or comments on."

"(The Agent) is aware of many things which our community would otherwise be unaware of and is of great support to our community."

The Village Agent therefore lies at the centre of a complex web of relationships and information. Over time they build up an unparalleled picture of the key issues and the people and other resources which may be part of the solution. In social networking terms they are "nodes" through which information and personal interaction take place. They are also "mavens", a trusted source of specialist knowledge and support.

They can also help partners improve the quality of the information they hold about what is going on in the community. The Agents have been pro-active in helping develop the content of South Staffordshire's Good Life website and the County Council's Purple Pages.

The Agents' networks also allow them to identify vulnerable or isolated individuals, as well as help community groups achieve their aims. The Agent is better able to understand the strengths already within the community and the issues which need to improve. Often the resident's views about the issues and the likely solution differ markedly from partners who are "looking in from the outside", so they can help partners understand the real issues.

As the Agents build up their knowledge they create a mental map and gather the “collective memory” about the key issues - what has happened, what works and who made it work.

They also act as a connector between individuals and wider networks. They also strengthen linkages and shared commitment by drawing in individuals, groups and organisations which are more loosely connected.

*“I encouraged six groups from Featherstone and Shareshill to attend the Community Voices events. As a result, Featherstone 4 Seasons Group was formed to enable the joining-up of the smaller groups in Featherstone so they can work together to support each other. They are becoming a leading community group in Featherstone supporting wider community activity rather than their individual aims/peer groups only. This group is now developing projects and activities that will address South Staffordshire Council’s Locality 3 issues including unemployment, NEETS and youth activities; and they have secured South Staffordshire Council Community Large Grants to help with this.” **Village Agent***

Many partner agencies also have significant staff turnover and have been subject to periodic reorganisations. When new staff come into post the Agent is a valuable resource to help new staff develop their own networks and their understanding of the local dynamic.

Similarly, active community / voluntary sector groups can take a dip or even fold when one or two key activists move away or have to withdraw due to ill-health. The Agent can play a key sustainability role in helping to grow and refresh these groups.

5. Supporting the democratic process

A key strength of the Village Agent is that they are not aligned with any agency or individual, they are an independent force for change. They do, however work in a political environment as elected Members are also at the heart of the community. They exercise community leadership and have a representative role and also act as an advocate for individuals and communities.

When the Village Agent and the local Members work closely together they are a potent force to understand issues and to get things done. Amongst the difficulties that local members have is the workload they carry, not just at the local level but also within the councils at Parish, District and County levels. The Agent can therefore provide a further resource to help achieve change.

“The Village Agent can be a really useful resource to help bring the community together and move issues forward. The Agent can spend time with people building a consensus and then roll their sleeves up to help make things happen. We need to encourage people to take responsibility and see what they can achieve together – that’s what it’s all about.

I see the Agent’s role as complementary to mine and it works best when we keep each other up to date on what’s going on.” (Councillor Kath Perry)

The Agents also actively publicise the Local Community Fund which County Councillors' have to support community-based activity, and provide support to groups bidding for this and other resources.

The Parish Plan group in Great Wyrley was struggling to make headway due to a complex combination of issues. The plan was 75% complete, but enthusiasm was waning. The Village Agent helped to reconcile different views and his intervention helped to reinvigorate the group to finish the Plan and to get it adopted by the Parish Council. The group has now reconstituted as Wyrley Way Forward and, with the Village Agent's support, is actively pursuing its key priorities. A new community café has been created with pump riming financial support from Councillor Perry's Local Community Fund. The Agent has also been able to plug the group into specialist support so it can comply with food hygiene and health and safety regulations. The next stage is to develop the café by accessing funding to upgrade the kitchen and provide more volunteer-led activities including the encouragement of healthy eating options.

*Money has been allocated towards a project to be based at South Staffordshire Housing Association's Riverside development in Penkrige. The elderly people there will soon have access to computers. The Village Agent at the time helped the group with setting up, assisted with their governance and advised how to approach their County Councillor to request funding via the Local Community Fund. They were successful with the bid and now as the Village Agent in the locality I have met with their group leader and the Supported Living Co-ordinator and we have a launch date planned along with two digital volunteers willing to support the new learners. **Village Agent***

The Village Agent can also form a bridge between the community and service providers.

"I have worked very closely with the Village Agent on a project to develop some of our derelict land into a community garden. This is work in progress but the Agent has been a great help in the early stages. As a service provider we are now looking to step back a little to allow the Agent to work with the community to take an active role in developing this new initiative." (Carol Wood, Engagement Officer, South Staffordshire Housing Association)

In summary, a wide range of benefits arise from both the Village Agent role and stronger community networks created. These are explored further at section 5 below and in the detailed case studies at Appendix 1.

6. What impact have the Agents had?

Given the breadth of the role it is not feasible to explore every aspect of the Agents' work. The approach taken is to provide case studies illustrating the range of activity and the impacts now being seen.

Due to the timescales necessary to build trust and community capacity it is not possible to capture the full impact of every initiative at this point. Many are still works in progress and will only bear fruit in the medium term.

Furthermore a key aspect of the Agents' success is that multiple benefits tend to arise from their actions and one successful intervention often leads to further gains.

Case studies

- A. Developing a successful community hub in a rural area
- B. Promoting health and well-being through preventative approaches
- C. Supporting people to gain skills and get jobs.
- D. Maximising the use of community assets.
- E. Helping commissioners design better services.
- F. Supporting community-led regeneration and self-activity.

A. Developing a successful community hub in a rural area

A church had been refurbished to improve access for the community which needed to be encouraged make best use of the facilities. The Agent proved the need for an Internet Café, helped obtain a grant for equipment and recruited volunteers to assist the learners.

The Café has become a village hub providing a range of activities and access to services. Over 50 residents come in for coffee, biscuits and a chat each week. A range of other activities are now delivered from the hub including a walking club, play activities for children and social activities. Volunteers put in lots of hard working encouraging social events, such as folk evenings, concerts and evening get-togethers.

B. Promoting the health and well-being through preventative approaches.

South Staffordshire has an ageing population and it is a very rural area. Many people are at risk of social isolation. Service providers find it difficult to identify people until a crisis point at which point it becomes very costly to intervene. One Village Agent has a specific remit to identify and engage with potentially vulnerable or isolated individuals.

The Agent promotes the well-being of vulnerable people by:

- Identifying individuals at risk.
- Acting on referrals from GP practices, and social care staff.
- Providing tailored information and support.
- Encouraging people to engage in social and leisure activities.
- Identifying financial pressures, providing initial advice and signposting specialist support.
- Promoting fuel efficiency.
- Promoting the uptake of mobility aids, home adaptations and fire alarms.
- Being an advocate and a broker with service providers.
- Identifying gaps in provision and improving service consultation.
- Promoting digital inclusion by supporting community groups and residents in sheltered housing gain access to computers.

All Village Agents have a remit to respond to people suffering isolation or poor health. They also encourage the wider population to adopt healthier lifestyles. Examples include:

- Supporting walking clubs and one off initiatives.

- Supporting community groups to bid for funding to put on activities and courses, such as Cook and Eat projects where men who have been widowed can access cooking lessons.
- Encouraging people to engage in social and leisure activities.
- Signposting healthy eating initiatives, Carer's groups, Alzheimer's Cafes, alcohol advice services, etc.

C. Supporting people to gain skills and get jobs.

The Council established the need to work with partners and volunteers to develop local Work Clubs. Village Agents have been an important resource helping the Work Clubs become established and embedded within the local community.

In Featherstone, for example, the Work Club is now firmly rooted in the community and has helped at least 6 residents to obtain jobs with local employers.

Run with the support of enthusiastic volunteers it provides a friendly face and access to IT which many people lack. A tailored package of support includes advice on upgrading and developing skills and qualifications, CV writing, interview techniques, mentoring and financial advice.

D. Maximising the use of community assets.

In Wheaton Aston residents were concerned about a former park which had become an eyesore and a focus for vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

The Village Agent supported a community-based working party to decide what to do about it. The Agent was able to help the village decide that a Natural Play Area was most appropriate and a grant for £50,000 was obtained to develop it.

The park now provides a valuable public amenity, particularly for the young mums and under 5's in the village.

E. Helping commissioners design better services.

South Staffordshire Council set up a Rural Transport Partnership to address difficulties many people have in getting out and about and the consequent social isolation.

Using their roots within the community the Village Agent was able to identify local residents and engage them in a discussion about what would work for them.

A number of initiatives followed which led to improvements in rural transport including enhanced Sunday buses, a new link to Telford, a taxi bus and helped prove the case for South Staffordshire Connects, a dial-a-ride service which now covers the whole district.

Staffordshire County Council commissioned the Village Agents to help them understand the reasons why parents within targeted neighbourhoods were failing to engage with Children Centres.

The Agents were able to identify families not using centres and, acting as a trusted intermediary, establish why this was and to report their conclusions. This work has yielded valuable insight into the situation and will assist the commissioner in addressing the issues.

F. Supporting community-led regeneration and self-activity.

Featherstone Pride was started in 2007 as the pilot project to explore how locality working could tackle key issues in the community. To make sustainable progress on issues such as anti-social behaviour and environmental improvement the community needed to develop ownership and the skills needed to create their own solutions.

The South Staffordshire Partnership arranged for a Village Agent to be introduced to the community. The Agent was able to act as a broker and enabler for the community and to build bridges between the individuals, community groups and partners.

This led to a very wide range of community led initiatives including the Featherstone *Youth 4 Change* Forum, summer holiday play schemes, cultural activities such as Featherstone has Talent, intergenerational working, initiatives to tackle drug and alcohol abuse. New activities for younger children was developed through the *Loose Women* community group who work very closely with the Youth Forum and other partners.

As a result respect was won and trust and bridges built. The environment improved and the youth gained a voice which was taken seriously. Relations between the generations improved markedly. That improvement has been sustained over a five year timeframe.

7. **What are the benefits for current stakeholders?**

The case studies show the impact that good quality support can have in delivering positive change for individuals and communities. They also illustrate a very wide range of benefits for other stakeholders including:

a) Building active, confident, connected and self-reliant communities:

- Acting as a connector of people and networks.
- Developing confidence and community capacity.
- Building trust between people and organisations.
- Helping communities to take ownership of issues and develop their own solutions.
- Encouraging events which utilise public open space and other community-owned assets to bring people together.
- Encouraging people to join in and take part.
- Building up a sense of belonging and community cohesion.
- Facilitating community resilience.

b) Reducing costly service interventions through preventative approaches by:

- Tackling social isolation and helping people participate in community life.
- Providing information, advice and guidance.
- Signposting services and community activities.

- Acting as a trusted intermediary to encouraging people to access services and social, leisure and health related opportunities.
- Helping to tackle worklessness.
- Promoting digital inclusion.

c) Strengthening local democracy by:

- Building trust between people and organisations.
- Promoting consensus and collaboration.
- Improving communication.
- Concentrating on the positive opportunities not the “deficit model”.
- Keeping elected Members informed.
- Working with elected Members to hold the collective memory about the key issues, activities and who’s who.
- Encouraging voice and empowerment.
- Acting as a catalyst and another pair of hands to get things moving.

d) Maximising the scarce resources available.

- Encouraging the use of preventative services to deliver longer term savings.
- Helping to collect and circulate information.
- Helping partners enrich their understanding of local issues and service quality.
- Helping commissioners develop services which are better tailored to people and communities.
- Improving the targeting of resources towards those most in need.
- Helping partners avoid duplication.
- Identifying gaps.
- Identifying and bringing into use skills which lie unrecognised within the community.
- Helping communities gain access to grants and specialist resources.
- Promoting better use of community assets and the sustainability of community buildings.

e) Obtaining better outcomes and impact.

- Helping residents identify the important issues which need to be addressed.
- Making consultation more effective by engaging with the grassroots.
- Involving residents be part of the solution.
- Helping people influence partners’ approaches and service design.
- Helping partner agencies and communities work better together to deliver the impact they want to see.
- Signposting services and encouraging people to engage with services and take up community-based activities.
- Acting as a catalyst and another pair of hands to get things moving.

8. Is there potential for further development?

Village Agents are perfectly placed to engage individuals and communities to help develop further initiatives which build community capacity and social capital. This should continue to be their core business.

However, the Agents are also a cost-effective resource to help commissioners and service providers design quality services and to encourage people to engage with those services. Further thought can be given to how best to do this through signposting, developing projects or by embedding the opportunities into other things which are already happening.

Whilst there is a real danger of Village Agents being asked to be all things to all people and so losing their focus, there are a number of possibilities for enhancing the impact including:

- Development of community and well-being hubs and the use of personal care budgets.
- Promoting healthy lifestyles.
- Helping partners engage local people in national or countywide campaigns, such as the forthcoming Time to Change initiative around mental well-being.
- Helping commissioners design initiatives around healthy lifestyles and Adult and Community learning in a way which will engage people more readily.
- Supporting partners' preventative work through the "Well-being offer" and especially positive mental health. The linkages between the Agents' work and the 5 positive steps to mental well-being ⁱⁱ are striking. Better signposting to existing support could also be achieved.
- Engaging people at risk of exclusion and encouraging engagement with programmes link them to the community and help develop their skills.
- Linking one partner's core services to others, providing synergies and progression for individuals – e.g. linking key families accessing Children Centres or NEETS to IT training, Work Clubs and healthy lifestyles.
- Promoting good neighbours schemes.
- Helping partners use participatory budgeting to engage potential service users.
- More coherent links with Patient Involvement Groups.

In addition, from its inception the Village Agent concept has been linked to the delivery of local community priorities – especially Parish Plans. In this context the Localism Act is highly relevant and Agents may be able to support local members and communities in developing timely and credible responses to:

- Community Right to Challenge
- Community Right to Bid
- Neighbourhood Planning
- Community Right to Build

If the hours worked by the Village Agents could be extended and an appropriate level of supervision can be maintained the Agents would be able to increase the impact they have significantly. This would also enable better collection of statistics and qualitative data demonstrating impact.

9. Can the benefits in this report be quantified in monetary terms?

There is a very high level of interest, particularly amongst commissioner and funders in quantifying impact and associating monetary values to outcomes.

To illustrate this point **JoinedupConsulting** has taken some of the outcomes and impacts arising from the case studies and has associated some very basic metrics to illustrate the scale of monetary benefits which can be attributed.

The art of measuring impact and social or public value is in its infancy and is not an easy exercise. It is also a time consuming exercise beyond the scope of this particular work.

Nationally available metrics have been used, but it is important to acknowledge that the specific costs and benefits in published studies are dependent on the scoping / boundaries of the study, the quality of the data, and the assumptions made, as well as the local context. Others become out of date as time passes. This means that it is unwise to totally rely on the figures quoted and apply them unthinkingly.

At this stage, many potential benefits can only be illustrated through proxy indicators and many of the benefits have been quantified as inputs to the process (hours of attendance) rather than measures of impact.

This work does not, therefore, purport to be a full Cost-Benefit Analysis so the figures quoted in below should be considered as indicative. Further information about the benchmarks and methodology used by **JoinedupConsulting** is available on application. Having said that, by taking a conservative view of the figures quoted it is possible to illustrate the level of benefits currently accruing in South Staffordshire through the work of the Village Agents.

Est. cost of 2 people per year following the care pathway below	£18,476
1 fall causing a hip fracture	£28,665
6 cases of anti-social behaviour avoided	£4,200
5 people volunteering in a community hub and a work club for one year	£65,157
Free room hire in a community hub or work club for one year	£2,592
6 families involved in consistent outdoor play	£22,986
20 people accessing free ICT lessons	£500
6 people into work in Featherstone JSA savings for 1 year	£46,800
6 people into employment reduces GP consultation rates and medical costs	£3,000
External grants raised for Featherstone 2008 and 2010/11	£46,140
Rural transport investment accessed	£12,800
External grant raised for Broadholes Lane project	£50,000
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	£301,316
Current annual cost of <u>all 5 Village Agents</u> at 15 hours per week plus on-costs.	£94,000

It will be noted that none of the above benefits accrue directly to the Community Council of Staffordshire, but instead benefit the wider partnership environment.

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Appendix 1- Case Studies

- a. Developing a successful community hub in a rural area
- b. Promoting health and well-being through preventative approaches.
- c. Supporting people to gain skills and get jobs.
- d. Maximising the use of community assets.
- e. Helping commissioners design better services.
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A. Developing a successful community hub in a rural area

Context

Wheaton Aston is a very rural community. The rector of St Mary's Church recognised the need to open the church to the community on weekdays. He persuaded the church council to take out the pews and provide a flexible space for community use. Once the money had been raised to refurbish the church there was a need to develop new activities to encourage the community to make best use of the facilities.

Role of the Village Agent

The Agent spotted that it was soon to be “silver surfers” week and, taking the initiative, she arranged for Age UK to bring their IT bus to the village. This proved so popular with both young and old that Age UK agreed to lend laptops for the villagers to use on a weekly basis in the church. The Agent and a volunteer obtained a grant to provide the equipment to create an Internet Café. The Village Agent advertised for volunteers to assist the learners and the sessions were delivered by the Agent and four volunteer Digital Champions.

Impact

The Internet Café proved to be very popular. Over 40 residents signed up and an additional session was created to meet the demand. The volunteers enjoyed using their skills and making a difference in the community. Some younger people also volunteered and were able to use the experience to enhance their CV's, and they all now have employment.

The Café allows people to keep in touch with family through e-mail and skyping. Some families have since bought personal IT equipment for their relatives so they can stay in touch. The Internet Café provides better access to personal health and well-being advice, health service and money advice information. It also gives access to government sites for the renewal of passports, the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) and car tax.

The Café has empowered local people to steer its development into a broad-based village hub providing a range of activities and access to services. Over 50 residents



come in for coffee, biscuits and a chat each week and there are always computers and digital champions on hand for those who want to learn more.

Once a month the hub hosts a walking club and about 15 members set off from the church led by two volunteers who are Southf Staffordshire accredited walk leaders. The children and young mums have been thought about with their fun Messy Play sessions. Other volunteers put in lots of hard working encouraging social events, such as folk evenings, concerts and evening get-togethers.

The hub also provides community information and leaflets about what's on and a community book swap.



- *The first person to gain an IT certificate was Nina Houghton, who is 91 and had never used a computer in her life. She is now able to keep in touch with friends and family using e-mail. Says Mrs Houghton "it is fear that hold people back as we were born in such a different age. But I would say definitely have a go".*
- *Jackie Ingram, who joined the group after her husband Terry died in November 2010, was not a member of the church, but has found the class and the fellowship very helpful,.*
- *Church Warden, Kath Doyle said: "there are 8 million people in the UK who don't use the Internet, and are missing out on all sorts of benefits and conveniences as a result. Wheaton Aston doesn't have a library and there are very few shops so the use of information, shopping opportunities and the ability to keep in touch with family and friends online could transform the lives of people in this rural village."*
- *A local self-employed business man who had not had the opportunity to master ICT has also been able to develop his skills to better support his business.*

(Thanks to the Staffordshire Newsletter for permission to use the quotes above.)

Benefits to partners

A wide range of benefits accrue to individuals, the community and to partner agencies:

- A new community hub offering a wide range of social and leisure activities.
- Encouraged use of community facilities, helping with their sustainability.
- Encouraged uptake of on-line services whilst tackling digital exclusion.
- Improved access to information, including healthy lifestyles and health services.
- Use of ICT to stay in touch with family and friends.
- Increased volunteering rates, qualifications and stronger CVs.
- Increased levels of self-confidence and self-reliance.
- Identification and usage of latent skills within the community.
- Promotion of exercise and walking.
- Intergenerational activities.

B. Promoting health and well-being through preventative approaches.

Context

South Staffordshire has an ageing population and it is a very rural area. Many people are at risk of social isolation or do not engage with services effectively. Service providers can also find it difficult to identify people until they present at a crisis point triggering costly interventions.

The Village Agent role

The Village Agent in one of the localities has a specific role to work with people at risk, but all Agents have a remit to encourage healthy lifestyles and general well-being.

The Agent networks with people who can identify vulnerable or isolated individuals. Having met the person, the Agent builds trust and identifies the issues they face. Agencies often focus on specific functions or do not have the time or the skills to identify the person's wider needs. The Agent is able to dedicate the time to do this and tailor the support to the person.

The Agent is also in a unique position to identify gaps in services and difficulties in handover between agencies, as well as helping make consultation more effective.

Impact

The Village Agent therefore helps promote well-being by:

- Identifying and assessing the needs of vulnerable people.
- Acting on referrals from GP practices, and social care staff.
- Providing tailored information and support.
- Signposting services and leisure and social opportunities.
- Encouraging isolated people to reconnect by signposting daytime activities.
- Being an advocate and a broker with service providers.
- Identifying gaps in provision and improving service consultation.
- Understanding and advising on transport difficulties.
- Signposting mobility aids and home adaptations, such as handrails, walk-in showers, etc.
- Arranging for specialists, such as occupational therapists, to visit to assess need.
- Arranging fire checks and the provision of smoke alarms
- Brokering voluntary interventions such as befriending services.
- Identifying financial pressures and fuel poverty, providing initial advice and signposting specialist support.
- Follow through after the initial contact in order to assess what has changed and to chase up outstanding issues.
- Encouraging people to access healthy lifestyle activities.

All Village Agents have a remit to respond to people suffering isolation or poor health. They also encourage the wider population to adopt healthier lifestyles. Examples include:

- Supporting walking clubs and one off initiatives.

- Supporting community groups to bid for funding to put on activities and courses, such as Cook and Eat projects where widowers can access cooking lessons and everyone can learn about new wholesome and healthy recipes.
- Encouraging people to engage in social and leisure activities.
- Signposting healthy eating initiatives.
- Signposting alcohol advice services.
- Distributing leaflets about healthy living activities to GP Practices and community venues targeting those that might benefit most.
- Individual referrals of older people to local keep fit and yoga exercise classes held in village halls, walking groups, swimming classes at Leisure Centres and encouraging attendance at the local groups providing social and armchair exercise classes and Home Alone Christmas meal events.

- *A referral was received in respect of an 88 year-old lady with significant mobility issues. By working with the church the Agent could encourage her to attend their coffee mornings. He was also able to involve the wider family in taking more responsibility by providing transport to allow the lady to access other social opportunities. As word has got around within the community, the Agent received a further six referrals in this very sparsely populated part of the district.*
- *An 86-year-old man living near Pattingham was referred. Although being reasonably fit he had mobility problems and had no family close by. He was living in a draughty house and the Agent was able to provide energy advice and help obtain a discount on the fuel bill. A benefits check was also arranged to ensure the right level of pension credit, attendance allowance and disablement benefit was being paid. A referral was also made to the Fire Service for a Home Fire Safety check.*
- *A referral was received from a Parish Council for a 57 year old man suffering from a circulatory health condition living in a van in a car park. He had lost his job, his marriage had broken down and he had become homeless. The weather was icy. The pub landlord was giving him breakfast but he had no means of cooking or keeping warm. The Agent was able to identify and highlight the immediate danger facing this vulnerable resident. There was confusion about which authority should be responsible for assessing his situation. Following liaison with a wide range of agencies the Agent was able to help the individual navigate the system and obtain temporary accommodation pending a permanent solution being found.*

Benefits to partners

Significant benefits accrue to both the individual resident and to partner agencies:

- Improved physical and mental health and well-being of the individual.
- Better access to information, advice and services, close to home.
- An early intervention leading to a preventative approach reduces personal stress and saves partners money by reducing:
 - Accidents in the home.
 - Attendance at GP practices.
 - Need for hospital admissions.

- Hospital rehabilitation/intermediate care episodes.
- Need for reablement services.
- Need for community care and home visits.
- Promotion of healthy lifestyles and social networking.

C. Supporting people to gain skills and get jobs.

Context

South Staffordshire has a high level of employment and its residents as a whole have an above average level of qualifications. However, there are communities which have significant numbers unemployed people, many with low skills levels.

There are no Job Centres within the district and the distances involved and access to public transport can cause problems. Increasingly job opportunities and wider services assume access to a computer, but many people on a low income cannot afford this.

Consequently, the Council decided to work with partners and volunteers to develop 7 local Work Clubs based in community buildings across the district. The clubs involve volunteers, housing providers and employers and they support residents in a relaxed, informal local setting. People can chat over a coffee, look for jobs using the internet and newspapers or take part in more formal training sessions and gain free qualifications.

The role of the Village Agent

Village Agents have been an important resource helping the Work Clubs become established and embedded within the local community.

The Agent is able to provide an additional pair of hands to respond to the local need, sometimes with a light touch by helping with publicity, signposting and encouraging residents to access the club. Alternatively a more hands-on approach may involve helping to run sessions, providing information, advice and guidance, helping people master computers and by mentoring individuals.

Impact

Featherstone was an early adopter of the concept, particularly as a large extension to local prison was about to begin. A local councillor, Bob Cope, was particularly keen to ensure that residents had the best chance to access these opportunities. The creation of a work club at the Community Centre was an urgent priority.

Whilst Councillor Cope was keen to put a significant amount of time into the project, his workload was especially high. By working closely with the Village Agent, the time commitment required could be shared and they jointly chaired the steering group to set up the club. The Agent also was ideally placed to get the word out into the community, to identify and secure outside speakers and find other ways of supporting the club.

The package on offer includes:

- How to job search effectively and where to look.
- CV skills and cover letters.
- Interview technique.
- Mock interviews.
- Careers advice.
- IT, numeracy and literacy skills.

- Volunteering, work experience placement.
 - Mentoring.
 - Access to qualifications.
 - Support if there are particular barriers to overcome.
 - Fun team building exercises.
 - Advice on self-employment.
 - Financial advice.
 - Talks from local businesses and employers about their areas of work.
- A local resident, who had been made redundant, got involved and used his advanced ICT skills to set up equipment and to train people attending the club. Whilst not actively seeking work himself, he benefited from using his expertise in a worthwhile way, as well as the social interaction involved.
 - A job fair was organised with a particular focus on the new prison and as a result 3 residents were able to obtain jobs there. Since that time approximately 60 people have been assisted by the job club and are now in employment as far afield as Walsall and the new Amazon centre in Rugeley.
 - Featherstone residents are now be in a stronger position to access new jobs which are expected to arrive within the wider locality in the next 12 months, including the Four Ashes incinerator and the i54 development.
 - In the first three quarters of 2012/2013 across all work clubs in the district 35 residents entered training, 12 accessed work experience and volunteering opportunities and 34 found employment.
- *“(The work placement) gave me the confidence boost that I needed and allowed me to refresh my existing skills and to learn some new ones. At the end of the day I achieved what I set out to as I now have a job ... the placements really do work and it makes a huge difference when it's on your CV.” (Samantha Frampton, local resident)*
 - *“I got to know about the Work Club and started to go down to look for a job myself. Then I began to help out regularly. Many people were nervous about coming in as it looked formal, but when they saw a friendly face they were more at ease. If it wasn't for the job club I wouldn't have got a job at the prison – I wouldn't have known about it and I wouldn't have been prepared to put my application in. The Job Club even helped me get a grant for an interview suit and I haven't looked back since. I am much better off in work now and I know of at least 6 people who have also now got jobs. Because of this I have encouraged my friends to actively start looking for work themselves. Things have changed in Featherstone, there's more hope now. People used to say “we never get anything here”, but now they are more aware of the schemes available and who to speak to.” (Emma Billingham, Featherstone resident)*

Benefits to partners

A wide range of benefits accrue to individuals, local businesses and to partner agencies:

- Resident's skills improved and/or helped into employment.
- Improved access to information and services.
- Increased levels of self-confidence and self-reliance.

- Improved levels of health and well-being.
- Tackling digital exclusion.
- Development of volunteering opportunities.
- Identification and use of latent skills available within the community.
- Developers and employers work more closely with the local community to promote job opportunities.
- Better use of the community centre

D. Maximising the use of community assets.

Context

In Wheaton Aston residents were concerned about a former park in Broadholes Lane which had become an eyesore and a focus for vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

At the same time the village was in the process of developing a community-led Village Plan and South Staffordshire Council was consulting residents as part of its My Place, My Say programme.

The role of the Village Agent

The Village Agent identified the opportunity to work the Broadholes Lane issue into these wider exercises, helping avoid “consultation overload”. A community-based working party was set up, supported by the Agent, to assess the options and to act as a focus for action planning.

There were a wide variety of views within the village about how the land could be best used. By focusing her effort on this important issue the Agent was able to help the village decide which solution attracted the most support.

The consultation approach was in depth and included:

- Use of a specialist bus (which attracted around 80 people in one day),
- Knocking on doors to engage individual residents.
- Meeting with play groups, nursery and the school children.
- Preparing posters, assisting in getting volunteers, writing news bulletins, attending regular update progress meetings,
- Preparing surveys, taking surveys around and collating results for final payment claim from the Lottery.
- Liaising/updating the Parish and District Council,

Impact

- Based on the consultation evidence, a gap in play provision for the under 10s was defined and the favoured option was to create a new natural play area.
- The Village Agent was able to assist the group deal with a series of setbacks and undertake bespoke consultation to influence the potential funder.
- This led to a successful bid for a BIG lottery grant of £50,000.
- By having a Village Agent who could act as a broker, improve communications and provide skilled input to help maintain direction, the village has been able to turn a derelict area of land into a very useful and sustainable community asset.
- The play area is due to open in April 2013.

Benefits to partners

Specific benefits accruing to individuals, the community and partner agencies include:

- Increased amenity value of open public space.
- Reduced vandalism and anti-social behaviour.
- Opportunities for healthy play activities, exercise and parent-toddler interaction.
- A meeting place for young mums, reducing isolation in a very rural community.
- Involvement of volunteers / Parish Council in the development and on-going sustainability of the facility.

E. Helping commissioners design better services.

Context

South Staffordshire Council set up a Rural Transport Partnership to address public concerns about the difficulty of people have in getting out and about.

The partnership faced a number of difficulties in doing this. It needed better local intelligence about the quality of existing services. It also needed to understand exactly where local people wanted to travel and how best these needs might be met.

Role of the Village Agent

Using their roots within the community the Village Agent was able to identify local residents and engage them in a discussion about what would work for them.

The Agent was also able audit the availability of bus information and to travel the buses to engage passengers in a discussion about service quality and options for improvement.

Impact

A number of initiatives followed which led to improvements in rural transport.

- The frequency of Sunday buses was enhanced to an hourly service on a pilot basis to assess the level of need. The increase in the number of passengers was sufficient to persuade the County Council to build this enhancement into its mainstream service.
- A pilot taxi bus service was introduced to link up smaller hamlets to the main villages and again the Village Agent role was vital in helping to design the route and to ensure that information leaflet was fit for purpose and distributed widely. This pilot service provided valuable evidence of need, particularly amongst residents with mobility problems.
- This information helps prove the case for the successful introduction of a district-wide dial-a-ride service, [South Staffordshire Connect](#).
- The partnership also was able to purchase extra hours from the Agent to enable a better understanding to be developed about the state of local Voluntary Car schemes and to develop ideas for a support package to help underpin these valuable schemes.
- Finally, the Agent was able to establish that a significant number of people wanted to shop and access services in Telford. Previously the received wisdom that better links to Penkridge and Stafford were needed. The agent was able to consult residents and establish the best day for this service to be provided in order that it didn't clash with

other community activities. This led to a time-limited service on a Saturday which averaged 162 passenger trips per month over a 15 month period. Unfortunately, resource constraints meant that the service couldn't be mainstreamed, but the need within the community was evidenced very clearly.

- *“A group of ladies returning to Bishops Wood on the Telford service commented that it's lovely, just right timings and very glad it's stopping in the village. Two young people travelling to see friends are impressed and will use it again!”* **Village Agent**
- *“One elderly isolated Lapley resident is delighted, she says it stops just where she wants it to, drivers are wonderful, everyone is really friendly and it's a great day out. She has met a resident from Bishops Wood who also thinks it's great and they have a good chat. She is also looking forward to using the new taxi bus ...”* **Village Agent**
- *“I felt I had to write to say what a wonderful experience I have had with the service of the Village Buzz today... Alan was the driver and was so helpful, courteous but also totally efficient. In addition, I asked if my husband who is terminally ill and wheelchair bound, could use the service All I need to do is let them know in advance. What a refreshing change. (Standard) buses will not accept my husband on their buses as they restrict battery wheelchairs. As I need a hip replacement, it would be absolutely impossible for me to push a manual wheelchair and also his battery wheelchair gives him so much more independence ... Since the cessation of tokens, my husband has been unable to use any of the free transport, so you can imagine how this new rural bus will make a difference.”* **Village Buzz passenger – Shareshill**
- *“(These) additional journeys on service 76 highlight how partnerships can work. Penkrigde and Coven will enjoy the benefit of a regular hourly bus service on Sundays, whilst additional buses are being introduced in other villages.”* **Keith Myatt, Arriva buses**

Benefits to partners

A wide range of benefits accrue to individuals, local businesses, bus companies and partners:

- Bespoke user involvement in the design of the services.
- Improved usage of rural bus services
- More effective use of commissioning resources, targeted towards need.
- Improved options for people without their own transport.
- Reduced rural isolation for individuals.
- Improved access to local services, shops, GP surgeries and health centres.
- Improved use of community facilities, helping with their sustainability.
- Greater independence for older / younger people and young families

[F. Supporting community-led regeneration and self-activity.](#)

Context f

South Staffordshire contains many very diverse communities, each facing its own set of challenges. Featherstone Pride was started in 2007 as the pilot project to explore how locality working could deliver:

- Improved quality of life and wellbeing.

- Cleaner, greener and safer environment.
- Higher aspirations and skills levels within the community.

The role of the Village Agent

To make sustainable progress on issues such as anti-social behaviour and environmental improvement the community needed to develop ownership and the skills needed to create their own solutions.

The South Staffordshire Partnership arranged for a Village Agent to be introduced to the community .The key focus of the Agent was to:

- Get to know people and the issues within the community.
- Encourage people to work together and look outside for ideas and support.
- Work with both young and older people to develop a broad range of activities.
- Break down intergenerational barriers and those between the “old” and “new” parts of the village.
- Encourage residents to access educational, cultural and artistic activities.
- Position the Community Centre as the hub of the entire village.
- Develop the capacity of the community to do things for themselves.

Impact – Youth

Previously the youth were banned from the Community Centre and there was widespread vandalism of the centre, which led to the fitting of barbed wire to stop people climbing on the roof.

- The Agent was able to act as a bridge to engage youth and to build respect. A core group of 11 young people actively engaged, and the Agent secured funds for a teambuilding weekend in the Peak District. Out of this came the Youth for Change Forum and a plan of action based on the young people’s interests and needs
- The Forum consulted within the village and a package of summer holiday activities was designed. A grant of £3,000 was accessed and a range of family-based activities commissioned. This gave the confidence for a series of initiatives led by the young people, including sports, Wii-fit, street dance and musical activities.
- As a result respect was won and trust and bridges built. The environment improved and the youth gained a voice which was taken seriously. The barbed wire came down and the vandalism problem subsided. Relations between the generations improved markedly and discos for young people were arranged at the Community Centre, run by the young people. In time the youth accessed a further £4,500 to purchase their own equipment.
- The young people also defined alcohol misuse, drug taking and domestic violence as issues they wanted to do something about. DVDs were created using role play and these were used in school and a peer-mentoring project.
- By taking responsibility and showing the Parish Council their commitment the Youth Forum created a new dynamic for positive change and trust.
- Today the Youth Forum is still active, led by a new cohort of young people.

Impact – the Loose Women

A group of women started to meet socially over coffee at the Primary School and worked to improve their numeracy and literacy. The headteacher suggested that the

Agent work with them to encourage them to address the issue which most concerned them – the lack of activities for children aged 6-12. A start up grant from South Staffordshire Housing Association (SSHA) was accessed and further funding enabled weekly activities at the school and the community centre.

The Agent's wider partnership links allowed him to get professional support for the group from the Staffordshire Council of Voluntary Youth Services (SCVYS).

- Between 15-35 children attended and this rate has remained constant over time
- Youth for Change Forum members also help supervise the activities and this has meant that some of the younger children have now graduated on to the Youth Forum.
- The *Loose Women* were recognised with an award at the 2011 Southern Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership Awards.
- *“These women are an inspiration to groups of other mums. If you have an idea there's no reason why you can't pursue it. They thought 'I've got a bit more in me. What can I do next?' It's a very successful group that everybody's heard of...” (Jackie Ilic, SSHA Neighbourhood Involvement Officer)*
- *“The Loose Women have gone on with such confidence, surprising themselves that they can make a difference and that others are interested in supporting them.... They've gained qualifications through the project which can lead to work opportunities that fit around their children. By taking responsibility they've seen a whole new life open up for them ...” (Village Agent)*
- *“It's made a great difference (for the kids). It's kept the older ones off the streets and there's been a drop in anti-social behaviour. They love it. They realise that someone's doing something for them and they respond positively. Teenagers stop and say 'hello' when they'd never bothered before. And we've had loads of donations this year to help keep us going...I feel a real sense of achievement knowing that we're helping people and giving that bit back to the community... Everyone seems to know us now. Parents are so grateful for what we've done and when we go into meetings and introduce ourselves we feel very proud.” (Loose Women group member)ⁱⁱⁱ*
- *“Being involved in the Loose Women has changed me for the better. It's changed my life really. It's rewarding to feel that I am giving back to the community and I find that I can use my experience to pick up on the kid's problems and help to guide them.” (Loose Women group member)*

Impact – Featherstone's Got Talent

The Youth Forum and the Loose Women were inspired by the Britain's Got Talent TV show and discussed whether they could do something locally. The idea grew from a dance event to a much broader-based arts festival.

The Village Agent supported the groups in developing the concept and in accessing the resources including a wide range of grants, sound equipment, marketing materials and a professional judging panel.

- *“A full house of 260 people squeezed into the Community Centre to watch the first-ever 'Featherstone's Got Talent' show...Wolverhampton-born singer Beverley Knight, awarded an MBE for her work for charity, attended for free. A role model for children, she watched all 18 acts, which included singers, dancers and variety acts before handing out prizes to the winners.*

- *Beverley said: “A lot of these children will have stories similar to mine as they are from the same place, so I feel an affinity with them. To get on stage in front of someone they see on television takes a lot and I’ve been so impressed.”^{iv}*
- *“You can definitely see the difference that Featherstone Pride has had within the village. There used to be graffiti all over the shops and paint on the main road but that’s all gone now. There used to be serious problems with drugs and anti-social behaviour but these problems are now very much reduced. The Agent has been able to build trust between people and residents have been able to see many things happening for the better. More people enjoy the community facilities and are involved in making a difference rather than complaining. The Village Agent has been a vital catalyst to make this happen and has helped ensure that progress has been maintained. The success of the Featherstone community events prompted the setting up of a committee in Shareshill who organised the Queens Diamond Jubilee open air concert and firework display, 800 people turned up to enjoy the talents of local performers and a memorial night was had by all”.*
Councillor Bob Cope

.Benefits to partners

- The community has much more self-confidence and is better connected to the wider partnership environment.
- The community has developed its own solutions and has continued to grow in confidence and its own capacity.
- The Parish Council has raised its profile as a community leader.
- Levels of ASB and drug taking have dropped markedly and the village now requires less intensive support from partners.
- Connections between residents have been strengthened.
- The viability of the Community Centre has been strengthened and it has been opened up for wider use, including youth work and the job club.
- A wider range of community based activities are available, leading to a greater sense of well-being amongst those involved.
- The concept of community-based regeneration has now been applied to other areas of the district, including the Caddick Farm estate in Great Wyrley.

ⁱ Masterson, D. (2012) *Village Agents Evaluation*, Staffordshire University

ⁱⁱ Connect, Be active, Keep Learning, Give to Others and Take notice <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/improve-mental-wellbeing.aspx#Evidence>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ssha.co.uk/case-studies/little-can-make-great-difference>

^{iv} <http://www.expressandstar.com/news/2008/12/08/community-centres-got-talent/>