Village Agents Evaluation

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Abstract

Village Agents are employed part-time within a specific locality to address a range of social issues. They do this by becoming an integrated, trusted and approachable member of the community who is able to provide a link between local people, the authorities and services who can provide support. As unmet or unidentified issues arise, the Village Agent empowers the community to enable them to address these issues themselves. This evaluation set out to explore the mechanisms behind the Village Agent role, the impact of their role and cost-effectiveness of the role.

The findings indicate that the Village Agent is a cost-effect approach in addressing a range of social issues as well as providing a number of unintended outcomes for stakeholders. Potential barriers of the Village Agent programme are discussed and recommendations on how to overcome these are provided.

Background

South Staffordshire Council has been working closely with a range of partners to deliver a locality-based approach to meeting the needs of the local community. In partnership with a Local Strategic Partnership including; the local Primary Care Trust, Police, Fire and Rescue Service, Staffordshire County Council and Housing Plus, South Staffordshire Council have developed a locality model based across five geographical areas in the South Staffordshire district in order to:

- Maximise cross partnership working,
- Sharing of resources and intelligence,
- Apply a model to enable local delivery of services to be focused and targeted around need.

South Staffordshire Council (SSC) has produced data profiles for each of the five localities within the District since 2008 to identify support needs. In addition, SSC consult with Local Strategic Partners, Parish, District and County members and the members of the public to agree the needs of each locality. These data profiles are instrumental in evidencing the need to employ Village Agents in a specific locality, across the District of South Staffordshire.

The Village Agents are managed by The Community Council, a charity that seeks to support communities throughout Staffordshire with a particular emphasis on isolated individuals within rural communities. The aim of the Village Agent programme is to help regenerate a specified area, sustain existing resources and explore ways to address real issues.

A Village agent is employed part-time, approximately 10 hours per week to work within local communities to tackle highlighted issues using, wherever possible, community groups. The role of the South Staffordshire Village Agent is to liaise with district and parish councillors, to support community groups and to deliver projects designed to address the needs of the community and bring communities together. In the absence of any suitable local groups, the Village Agent seeks to create groups that can play a part in improving the community to overcome highlighted issues. Funding for the Village Agents has come from a number of funding streams including South Staffordshire Local Strategic Partnership, South Staffordshire Council, Seisdon Clinical Commissioning Group (formerly Seisdon Practice Based Commissioning Group), Housing Plus and a joint PCT County Council Innovation Fund.

Within Staffordshire, each Village agent has a specific focus in their locality, which has been developed and directed by intelligence from the Locality Data profiles. Therefore, each Village Agent has a specific focus such as health or older people as well as addressing community cohesion. However, as all Village Agents are based within a rural community, they all share common roles that can be summarised as follows:

- Development of sustainable local community groups who can encourage long-term participation in community based activities.
- Development of targeted programmes, where gaps in provision have been identified based around the needs identified through local data and intelligence.
- Maximising the use of local community volunteer training opportunities to increase the skills and knowledge of local community leaders.
- Facilitation / development of communication networks between the local community and the service providers.
- Improving access to services within the locality.
- Promotion and awareness raising of local opportunities and local information.

Procedure

To assess the impact of the Village Agent programme, the author employed 'Realist Evaluation' (Pawson & Tilley, 1997[1]) which aims to identify 'what works, for whom in what circumstances and why'. This evaluation explores the mechanisms involved, adopting a 'ground-up' approach to address what the programme intends to do and how it does it, including both the implicit as well as explicit aims through qualitative analysis. This is combined with a review of all available quantitative data, used to identify what outcomes have been achieved. This evaluation also set out to identify the benefits and barriers experienced and to suggest improvements.

This evaluation involved three approaches:
1. A retrospective review of work carried out by the Village Agents over three months to provide an estimate as to the amount of contact time each Village agent had with the community.
2. The author employed semi-structured interviews with commissioners (n = 2), service providers (n = 2), stakeholders (n =1) and a focus group with the Village Agents (n = 6). Qualitative data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.
3. A data mining exercise was conducted on all available data for Locality Three and Locality Five to develop two case studies detailing types of activities carried out, funding obtained and to further assess the number of people the Village Agent has liaised with as part of their role.

Rationale

The rationale behind this evaluation was to provide evidence of the benefits of the Village agent role, identify any learning and in the long term support the development of a performance management framework for contracting purposes. In addition, as some funding streams are coming to an end the purpose of the evaluation is to provide commissioners with feedback on their investment and to provide the evidence base to secure a more sustainable funding source.

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[1] Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage.

Case studies

Due to the diverse roles and work carried out by the Village Agents, monthly reports submitted by the Village Agents to the Community Council are currently unstructured. This leads to difficulty when extracting evidence for effectiveness of the Village Agent role. To overcome this, a data mining exercise took place on all available data to create two case studies. The first comprising of an established, generic Village Agent role who has been in post for over three years (Locality Three) and a newly placed, Older Person Village Agent (Locality Five).

Locality Three: Featherstone, Generic Village Agent (GH)
Date range: 2008, 2010 and 2011 (2009 unavailable)

Locality three was the first to gain a Village Agent (VA) in South Staffordshire and this VA is one of the most experienced across South Staffordshire. The data mining exercise indicates that the VA has had a large and diverse impact on the community within Featherstone, ranging from development and support of new community groups, a youth forum and promoting community pride to the culmination of a celebration of talent event for the local community: 'Featherstone's Got Talent'. The actions carried out by the VA have been reviewed and grouped under headings relevant to potential funding bodies.

Community cohesion and engagement
GH coordinated the Village's Inter parish Games team, the first for many years which encouraged active participation in team events from community members. Through development of such activities, the community began to work together leading to community newsletter, setting up groups such as a young enterprise scheme, an 'over 50's club', 'Loose Women, a line dancing club, First Aid training and many more.

Providing linkage
GH was instrumental in recovering the relationship between a local school and The Parish Council, which apparently, for many years had lacked communication. GH also supported a local health organisation by disseminating health questionnaires and promoting participation within the community.

Health
In addition to First Aid training and supporting participation in health surveys, GH has set up a number of projects that encourage an active lifestyle. GH developed an adult 'Dancercise class' at the local which has been well attended. The BMX-bike track has been renovated, dance sessions for the Youth Forum and American Football/Cheerleading/Street dance events.

Better environment & Community Pride
The Youth Forum was involved in two 'tidy up days' which involved painting school gates and graffiti removal. GH acquired sponsorship from B&Q who donated over a thousand plants to be planted around the village.

Community Development
GH established a 'community café' steering group, their aim being to provide a community cafe covering sustainable living in the area, bringing generations together and reducing crime. Soon afterwards a venue was established, manned by volunteers and funds obtained to secure equipment.

Opportunities for Youth
GH has supported the development of a Youth forum, working closely with the Young People to develop a key action plan for them to develop opportunities for themselves within the parish including a summer programme, street dance sessions and regular youth forum meetings and trips.

Opportunities for Older people
GH has supported the local Senior citizens group, empowering them to access funds and develop activities of their own. Future developments of the group are planned to include an intergenerational project with the recently formed Youth Forum to aid community cohesion and the provision of local tea dances and line dancing.

Opportunities for Families
GH developed many different activities for families and the community, such as a Community Arts day and family focused sessions such as Parent drop in classes, Support groups, Women wellbeing groups, outreach library provision and the development of a Local Children's Centre.

Engaging with members of the community

The author requested the Village Agents monitor the number of individuals that they *actively engaged in support as part of their role* in addition to attendance figures to meetings and events. Table one and two detail the types of activities, meetings and individuals that the Village Agent has actively engaged with as part of their role. During September 2011 and December 2011, the Village Agent engaged with an average of 157 individuals per month. Table one demonstrates that contact time is divided between members of the community and statutory organisations which serves to provide a bridge between the two; this is discussed in more detail within the 'mechanisms' of the VA role.

Table 1: Number of individuals the VA engaged with at events in September and October

Featherstone: September2011		October 2011	
Event/Meeting	n	Event/Meeting	n
Work Café Steering group	8	Caddick Farm Steering group	6
Featherstone Parish Council	12	Gt Wyrley Funding bid	19
Caddick Farm residents group	8	Young people's locality event	20
Caddick Farm green spaces	5	Equality and Diversity training	20
Wyrley's Way Forward group	9	Parish Clerks meeting	16
G4S meeting re work cafe support	2	Loose Women and Youth Forum	8
Featherstone Youth Forum	10	Wyrley's Way Forward	2
Gt Wyrley Games nights	25	Digital TV check – Featherstone	4
Featherstone Work Café	24	Gt Wyrley Games nights	5
Caddick Farm Clean up	25	BMX bike track working party	15
BMX bike track working party	15	Halloween disco	30
Featherstone Youth Club	90	Gt Wyrley chairman's lunch	7
		Prison visit	6
September total	**233**	**October Total**	**158**

Table 2: Number of individuals the VA engaged with at events in November and December

Featherstone: November 2011		December 2011	
Event/Meeting	n	Event/Meeting	n
Caddick Farm Steering group	14	Ageing Well	9
Ageing Well	12	Essington Playgroup	4
Governors Whitgreave	15	Community Café steering group	16
Neighbourhood Watch	17	Great Wyrley Web site	1
Work Club	2	Great Wyrley Games nights	36
Locality Forum	21	**December Total**	**66**
Community Café steering group	17		
Localities – 'driving the way forward'	13		
Wyrley's Way Forward	4		
Assisted at IT training Deansfield House	7		
Great Wyrley Games nights	37		
Featherstone Work Café	15		
November total	**174**		

Funding

Tables three to five below detail the successful bids that the Village Agent was awarded and areas that these apply. These figures were obtained from a 2008 annual report (table 3) and monthly reports between January 2010 (table 4) and December 2011 (table 5). During 2010-2011, fifty-four bids requesting £362,951 (of which one bid was £305,000 to develop the community centre) were submitted by the Village Agent. Of these, 31 were successful and a total of £27,090 was awarded to Featherstone during these two years alone.

Table 3: Funding obtained for activities during 2008

Featherstone: January 2008 – December 2008		
Area	Activities	Amount
Better environment	Coordination, including Village Clean-up day, Promotional Material, Equipment, graffiti removal, litter pickers	£4,000
Community development	Container of Equipment	£1,350
Community engagement	Citizens Advise Bureau	£1,000
Opportunities for Youth	Development of Youth Forum	£6,100
Opportunities for Older People	Senior citizen outings, Advertisement for Senior citizen Line Dancing Class	£1,100
Health/ Opportunities for Youth	American Football/Cheerleading, Street Dance	£4,500
Safer Community	First responders blue light training	£1,000
Total		**£19,050**

Table 4: Funding obtained for activities during 2010

Featherstone: January 2010 – December 2010

Area	Activities	Amount
Community Development	Community aid,	£1,000
Community engagement	Featherstone Festival, Play day, 'Loose Women'	£4,100
Health	Boxing coaching, 'Loose Women', Bike Track regeneration, Sports equipment, Sports coaching, Line Dance, Olympic Athlete	£11,520
Opportunities for Families	Mothers & toddlers Music group, play equipment, arts grant	£1,670
Opportunities for Youth	Start Youth Forum, Young Enterprise	£2,700
Safer Community	SIA Door training, First Aid training	£300
Total		**£21,290**

Table 5: Funding obtained for activities during 2011

Featherstone: January 2011 – December 2011

Area	Activities	Amount
Better Environment	Tuck shop, Work café, Projector for Work Café,	£2,900
Community Development	Community website	£500
Community engagement	Community aid, community newsletter, fireworks for fundraising event	£900
Opportunities for Youth/Health	Re-covering Skate park floor	£1,000
Safer Community	Domestic Violence Peer mentoring programme	£500
Total		**£5,800**

Locality Five: Wombourne, Older Persons Village Agent (JW)
Date range: March 2011 – December 2011

The VA in Locality 5 is one of the newer roles to the VA team within South Staffordshire. This case study details the actions conducted within the initial months of the Village Agent project. As discussed within the mechanisms, the Village Agent role requires a minimum of 12 months to establish themselves within the community and to develop trust before further stages can take place. The monthly reports demonstrate that during these initial months there are a number of benefits provided by the VA role.

Contact with individuals members of the community

Following a meeting with the author, Village Agents began recording number of interactions with the community to provide an indicator of impact. Tables six to eight provide a summary of the events attended and the approximate number of people the VA engaged with in Locality Five. The average number of individuals supported per month was 214, despite being within the early stages of the Village Agent role.

Table 6: Number of individuals the VA engaged with during August and September 2011

Wombourne: August 2011	n	September 2011	n
Event/Meeting	n	Event/Meeting	n
Rodbaston BKV event	150	Wombourne Fire Station.	40
Womboure Hand in Hand	15	Met with District Cllr re Christmas Party for the lonely at Christmas. Discussed provision of IT lessons.	2
Derby & Joan Club - transport issues	45	Kinver Old People's Welfare	35
Kinver Volunteer Centre	5	Swindon Over 60's Club	20
Kinver Library	3	Tuesday Club at Wombourne Library	45
		Wombourne Hand in Hand discussion about transport	8
August total	218	**September Total**	150

Table 7: Number of individuals the VA engaged with during October and November 2011

Wombourne: October 2011	n	November 2011	n
Event/Meeting	n	Event/Meeting	n
Housing Delivery Plan - vulnerable people	5	South Staffs Housing- IT and Job Club.	3
Assisted Technology meeting	2	Alzheimer's Society research - residents, CAB, Councillors etc	236
Adult Care Team re provision of Dementia Care and Meals on Wheels.	3	Meals on wheels service - discuss with residents	15
Meals on wheels service research – residents & Adult Care Team	20	Tuesday Day Care Club –	8
Hand in Hand	10	Christmas Home Alone Meals	8
Stroke Club	20	Attended Community Voice Event.	40
Wombourne Library	5	South Staffs Partnership - web page	2
Meeting with resident in Wombourne	1	S=Staffs Mental Health – client support	2
Assistance for Wombourne Resident	1	CASS - dementia care	5
Swindon older peoples Welfare	25	Wombourne Job Club.	40
		Mental Health and clients re volunteering	3
		Dial a ride service discussion	5
October total	92	**November Total**	367

Table 8: Number of individuals the VA engaged with Dec 2011, monthly average and total.

Wombourne: December 2011	n		n
Event/meeting	n		
Job Club Wombourne	10		
Wombourne Day Centre	9		
Discussion re Day Centre attendance	3		n
JIGTY Action Group,	9	Average per month	214
December Total	31	**August – December Total**	858

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Funding

Within the first nine months in post, the Village Agent had successfully bid for £1100 and at the time of writing, was awaiting confirmation on a bid from the Alzheimer's Society Well Being fund for £10,000:
- Carer's Break Fund – £200
- Overnight fund - £300
- Age UK bus - £600

Referrals

The monthly reports lacked detail concerning number of referrals, those that provided sufficient detail have been included. Table nine highlights that the VA made at least 20 referrals between April and December 2011, demonstrating that referrals take place as soon as the VA is in post.

Table 9: Summary of Referrals taken within Locality Five

Month	Locality Five Referrals: *March 2011 – December 2011*	
April	CASS referral - elderly resident & primary carer for relative in her own home. Carers Break Fund, and Overnight Fund, voluntary car scheme, optician visiting her in own home.	Opportunities for families
May	Wombourne Silver Surfer event on Age UK Bus – referral of ten people interested in attending IT lessons.	Opportunities for older people
June	Organised for resident with dementia to knit squares for giving to Hand in Hand for sending out to charity.	Opportunities for older people
August	Womboure Hand in Hand -took referrals for Fire Service and Social Services.	Safer Community
	Derby & Joan Club – referrals for IT classes	Opportunities for older people
	Referrals to Fire Service and Social services taken	Safer Community
	Received referral Social Services regarding elderly gentleman and lack of social facilities – provided support.	Opportunities for older people
	Referral - Digital transfer for elderly resident living alone.	Social Isolation
September	Referrals taken for Fire Alarm Testing.	Safer Community
	Kinver Old People's Welfare - took referrals	Health
	Referral from another VA - Info on Health Nett and CASS provided.	Health
October	Referrals being made and positive feedback on results from residents.	Unknown
November	Christmas Home Alone Meal; several residents referrals made to SO.	Social Isolation
	Contact made by SStaffs Mental Health team re one of their clients	Health
	Tuesday Day Care Club –resident receiving extra support following a referral	Opportunities for older people
	Request from Social Services Adult Care Team for assistance on housebound residents regarding isolated individuals	Social Isolation
December	Day Centre - took two referrals	Opportunities for older people
	Referral for stair lift to Social Services.	Opportunities for older people
	Referral for potentially isolated individual who may have "dropped off the radar" because of non-attendance to groups made to Social Work Team	Social Isolation
	Referrals to Fire Service for Fire checks	Safer Community

Retrospective analysis of all Village Agents

While the case studies provide a glimpse into the benefits of the Village Agent role from their first year to when they are fully established, it was not feasible to carry out this procedure across all the localities due to difficulty in extracting data from the monthly reports. In order to obtain an estimated figure of the contact Village Agents have with the community, the author requested the Village Agents monitor their activities for one month and backdate their records for two months.

The Village Agents monitored face-to-face interaction, responding to emails, telephone calls, attending meetings, signposting and referrals. Due to the diverse roles of each Village Agent and length of time in post, comparison between localities has not been made.

Individual support
While this method is reliant upon self-report, the findings reflect that of the case studies. Table ten shows that the Village Agents have a great deal of contact time with the community, much of which is 'face-to-face' contact with individuals and attending community meetings. On average, the Village Agents are supporting 158 individuals per month as part of their role.

Referrals
The data mining exercise identified that Village Agents carry out an average of 51 signposts or referrals per month

Meetings, emails and telephone calls
It is clear from table ten that the Village Agent is highly active in their role, attending an average of 19 meetings per month, dealing with an average of 164 phone emails and 96 phone calls indicate that the Village Agent is carrying out their role well beyond the allocated ten hours per week.

Hours worked
The Village agents report to work an average of 62 hours per month (15.5 hours per week) which demonstrates that they are working longer hours than allocated. Considering the average amount of activity per month, it is reasonable to assume that this is an underestimate. This should be taken into account when considering both the cost-effectiveness of the role and contracted hours.

Table 10: Average monthly activity for Village Agents

	Meetings/ events attended	No. of Attendees	Face-to-face	Telephone calls	Emails	Signposts/ referrals	Hours worked
May 2011	21	381	188	99	147	55	71
June 2011	15	277	135	106	175	52	57
July 2011	20	407	151	85	171	48	59
Monthly Average	**19**	**355**	**158**	**96**	**164**	**51**	**62**

Qualitative findings

In order to explore the mechanisms behind the Village Agent role and identify '*what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why*', the author employed a 'ground-up', exploratory approach to data collection. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, addressing the *role of the Village Agent*, *the mechanisms involved*, the *context* in which the role is effective, the *characteristics of the Village Agent*, *benefits*, *barriers* and *recommendations*.

Sample
This involved semi-structured interviews with commissioners (n = 2), service providers (n = 2), stakeholders (n =1) and a focus group with the Village Agents (n = 6).

Analysis
Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the qualitative data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

The role of a Village Agent (VA)

According to the sample, the purpose of the Village Agent (VA) is to:
- address an identified issue by exploring the needs of a community,
- to empower members to put ideas forward,
- and support them to make changes to their own community.

This may support to set up forums, groups, obtain funding, establish contacts or simply encouragement with the ultimate goal of reaching self-sustainability. The common goal for all Village Agents is to achieve this self-sustainability through the promotion of a cohesive environment within the community.

In order to achieve these goals, the VA needs to build rapport and develop trust from members of the community. The VA does this by attending meetings, meeting with and provides the community a point of contact that can signpost, refer and guide individuals who may otherwise have no support. During this process, the VA also provides several other functions. The VA acts as a 'bridge' or 'provides linkage' between the community and local authorities by overcoming bureaucracy and mistrust which otherwise act as barriers to communication. The VA provides the community and individuals with a voice, helping their issues to be heard. The VA also enables the local authorities and parish councils to carry out consultancy with the VA and to disseminate information about actions carried out to the community to improve relations.

PC1: "With someone like [VA], we have that link, she helps them see that they are doing it. She identifies the issue and provides the solutions"

SP1: "I like the expression that the Village Agent is tailor made. They respond to what that particular community is focused upon"

> *VA2: "we are the bridge to what people are saying out there, what they are thinking out there...what's wrong in their lives and we can making sure that the authorities know about that so when they are making their planning...they can actually talk to somebody who is talking to the people"*

SP1: "There has to be recognition from somewhere that there is evidence of need, a reason to be there"

Direction

Before putting a Village Agent in place, an identifiable need must be present to provide direction. In the first instance, this may be though the locality profile; through the Parish Council; complaints to local authorities or a ground swell of public opinion. While this provides the Village Agent direction, they do not enter their role with a structured set of political objectives to achieve, as this would otherwise prevent the community identifying their own needs. However, some Village Agents do have clear target groups or issues they are expected to focus upon such as socially isolated people, older people, health or transport.

VA6: "Getting to individuals that really need the help...foot patrol basically...trying to get help and direct service to people who need it"

Build Trust

Once the Village Agent is in place, they must first build trust within the community. Members of the community expect interventions brought in by the local authority to be short-lived and the Village Agent needs to overcome this initial negative reaction from the community, Parish Council or other agencies. This involves face-to-face contact, providing support, guidance, signposting and referrals and acting as a point of contact. This support starts small and takes at least twelve months before the Village Agent is established and able to tackle the initial highlighted issues.

SP2: "The Village Agent brings the doers of the community together"

Identify issues

During this first year, the Village Agent is able to listen to the community and either qualify the initial identified need or establish underlying issues experienced by the community that were missed. They interface with different levels of the community and build contacts with organisations that can offer support to address these issues. They act as a 'linkage' between the community and authorities to communicate issues, source funding and suggest direction as to where funding is most needed.

PC1: "[VA] identifies the issues and provides the solutions"

Empower

The VA provides 'grass root empowerment', building capacity within the community so that they are able to identify and address their own issues, allowing them to function independently. The Village Agent promotes community cohesion and community pride and 'gets members of the community working together and active in their own community'. Ideally, the Village Agent is provided with enough time to work with a number of Villages, allowing them to create a bridge between several communities who can then work together and support each other.

SP1: "Grass root empowerment, it's the people in the community really beginning to recognise that they can influence & shape their own environment"

Self-sustain

The role of a Village Agent was compared to that of a catalyst. The aim of the programme is to create change to a community while at the end of the process, the catalyst itself remains unchanged. Once the community has been empowered to be self-sustainable, the Village Agent can then be placed in another village while the Community Council provide support as and when needed. Unlike short-term interventions, the Village Agent leaves behind a legacy, which can continue without the Village Agent.

SP1: "I think the VA is like a catalyst...a catalyst is unchanged after a reaction...things start to happen and the VA can withdraw and then move on"

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Context

A key finding is that the Village Agent programme takes a ground-up, individualistic approach requiring each VA to adapt to the needs of the Village. South Staffordshire partnership and The Community Council acknowledge that not every Village needs a Village Agent. As previously stated, there must first be some form of direction or identified need before the Village Agent is allocated. When designing the Village Agent role, the number of hours and size of the locality is important to consider, as 'face-to-face' contact is important in the development of trust. If the area is too large, then there is a risk of spreading the Village Agent too thinly:

VA4: "Every group is different, every village within 2 miles of each other is different and the people are different....so the [VA] roles are different"

> VA3: "Ten hours in locality five, when you see the distance of the area from top to bottom it's an awfully big area to cover…when you have eight councils with meetings then your time as a VA can be taken by the Parish council meetings"

SP2: "If they don't want cohesiveness, then the VA isn't the best tool, but it doesn't happen very often"

In terms of longevity, there was consensus that the VA needs to be in place for a minimum of three to four years:
- Year 1 – Develop trust and confidence in Village Agent,
- Year 2 – Set up groups and develop confidence to work together,
- Year 3 – Empowerment of community
- Year 4 – Self-sustain and exit

SP1: "It is longer term than just banging a VA in for 6 months"
SP2: Yeah, It's not a magic bullet"

After this period, the Village Agent is able to move onto another Village whilst the Community Council provides support as and when needed to the previous locations.

Characteristics of the VA

There was consensus that the type of personality of the Village agent is key to the programme's success. Furthermore, that the Village Agent role is not something that can be 'trained' towards nor can it be adopted with ease. The key characteristics described by participants have been presented in table eleven.

PC1: "It's very much a personality job, wrong personality; wrong village and it won't work…with the right personality you can get people involved…it's not something you can teach"

Table 11: Key words used to describe the characteristics of the Village Agent and their role

Key words to describe personality			Key words to describe role		
Approachable	Trustworthy	Listener	Cut through bureaucracy	Honest broker	Understand who is who
Flexible	Driven	Energetic	Provide linkage	Develop trust	Understand community
Talented and versatile	Enthusiastic	Team-worker	Empower and provide voice	Point of contact	Consultancy
Adaptable	Communicator with the public	Personable	Identify problems, provide solutions	Inbetweener and bridge	Validation

VA7: "When we introduce ourselves as part of the community council, they see us as part of the government. They don't realise we are on their side."

VA1: I just say I work for a charity, then what we are called

Developing Trust

Rural-based interventions put in place by official bodies tend to be pilot projects or, due to the nature of funding, may carry goals that can be met in a short time. This leads to mistrust of new interventions as the community expect this support to be short-lived. As the VA is employed by the Community Council, which is a charity, the VA does not represent a statutory body with structured goals. This allows them to address needs raised by members of the community to develop trust.

Signposting/referrals

In order to establish trust, the VA spends a large proportion of their time liaising with members of the community to identify individual needs. As evidenced in table one, supported by the focus groups and the data mining exercise, these often lead to signposting and referrals to organisations. Therefore, the VA develops a wealth of knowledge about local a range of statutory and voluntary services.

PC1: "They are incredibly talented and versatile people, I don't think the VA is a role that we can all role with and pick up"

Bridging the gap

Once trust is established, the Village Agent acts as an 'inbetweener' 'bridge', or 'link' between the authorities and the community which facilitates two-way communication. Members of the community are able to have their voice heard and authorities are able to obtain public opinion.

SH1: "It is getting an understanding of the needs by looking at the data but to then to get to the bottom of it and see it is a true reflection"

Validation and consultancy

Once in post, the VA can validate whether the initial issue highlighted by monitoring is accurate or identify if something has been missed. They can then establish ways of addressing these new or validated issues. Furthermore, the VA is able to provide brief consultancy to statutory bodies as and when required or facilitate wider consultancy. These processes are otherwise highly costly and time-consuming activities which can be repeated for as long as the VA is in post.

SH2: "[VA] went in and built up capacity who are now incredibly active in their own communities"

Addressing 'real' underlying issues

While the Village Agent is initially guided by an expressed need, whether it is official statistics or a swell of public opinion, the Village Agent spends a considerable amount of time listening to members of the community to identify the underlying issues, which may have otherwise been missed. They can then empower the community to address and overcome these issues.

VA1: "we provide a link to rural areas and signpost them and help them to help themselves"

Improving community cohesion and self-sustainability

The concept of the VA programme is to identify the 'real' cause behind the identified issues and establish issues that may have been missed. The community is then empowered to work together to identify their own solutions to these issues and through this community cohesion, a self-sustainable intervention is formed.

Barriers and ways to overcome them

Initial mistrust

The VAs are initially met with mistrust. This may be from members of the community, local members or local voluntary or community groups who carry an expectancy that the VA are a 'paid busy body' from the council who will only be around for a short time. The VA is faced with the challenge of overcoming mistrust.

VA3: "One person says "how long are you here for then, when will you be going?" They though I was a paid busy body…do my work and go away again…knew I wouldn't be around long enough to sustain it"

Shooting the messenger

As the VA provides a voice for the community and the council on raised issues, when a solution cannot be found the VAs reported that they might receive the blame for this failing.

How to overcome: The newly appointed VA needs to be prepared for these barriers by receiving guidance from VAs who have successfully overcome these barriers as well as guidance from management.

VA2: "Other agencies let us down but it looks like we can't do it"
VA6: shoot the messenger

Co-dependency

During the project, it is possible for the community to become dependent on the VA and for the VA to become dependent on the community. Any 'ownership' of community groups and forums can create difficulty when time comes for the VA to exit for both parties.

Establishing an end-point

The VA may continue to discover underlying issues or may receive requests for support by the community-led groups creating difficulty in identifying a suitable end-point. The purpose of the VA is to establish self-sustainability, which can be marred by co-dependency.

SC2: "The VA role is a bit like surrogacy…there is a point where you got to hand over the baby and it is a difficult thing to do"

How to overcome: Informal supervision by management is essential in preventing co-dependency and identifying an exit strategy. Using the mechanisms identified in this report, management can establish what stage the VA, as well as the community, are currently and provide support when needed.

SC2: "The community shouldn't be dependent on the VA, after the model, given the time, the community should be in a position to help itself a lot more than it did to start with"

Measuring impact

The mechanics of the VA programme do not lend themselves to standard procedures of evaluation. Funded projects tend to have preconceived goals and deadlines. In the VA programme, the initial guidance requires validation by the VA and therefore, any preconceived goals may be void. Furthermore, the ground-up approach means the outcomes of the programme are never the same and this makes advertisement and evidencing of the VA difficult.

How to overcome: The mechanisms and benefits described in this report should form the expected benefits of the VA programme as opposed to pre-determined objectives. As an example, validation and consultancy is possible to evidence by comparing previous costs of such procedures in similar settings.

SP1: "Right at the beginning, it is difficult to say what the outcomes will be…we cannot go in during the first 3 months and know what to do "

VA4: "Once you've established groups and made contacts, then the funding runs out…then the process has to start all over again with a new person"

PC1: "You don't get the right people for the job unless there is stability for this job. You need to help them eat, you don't want them leaving because they don't have enough hours…give them more villages and a full time job."

VA5: "I'm getting dragged in to be a lobbyist with parish Council, residencies, local businesses, it was not what I expected to be doing"

PC1: "A lot of my colleagues still don't understand it…they will ask if [VA] can do things that aren't [VA]s job"

Contracted hours
Currently different VAs have hours ranging from between 10 and 20 hours. This has developed due to the incremental accessing of funding a VA in each locality. While a range of benefits have been identified from the previous ten hour contracts, the self-report figures suggest that the VA are working five hours extra on average and the qualitative findings indicate that the VA is working over 20 hours per week. When asked of the value and hours they felt their VA was allocated, the perception was of a full-time position:

> *PC1: "10 hours doesn't strike me as a lot but that is what it is….[VA] certainly did more than 10 hours by a mile…I would hazard a guess it was somewhere near 30, by the amount of people that mentioned her to me, she must have been doing more."*

Length of project
When provided with a choice of longevity over time, there was consensus that longevity is preferred. In essence, the VA would rather a four year, ten-hour contract as opposed to a two year, twenty-hour contract. This reflects the finding that the programme takes a minimum of three to four years before it can become self-sustainable. There is a need for a recognised mainstream approach to the VA role as opposed to six-month short-term contracts. The risks of short-term contracts are:
- a higher rate of VA turnover,
- widening of gap between community and statutory partners ,
- further mistrust towards statutory bodies,
- failure to evidence impact of VA

Therefore, the method of funding should aim to ensure that the VA is in post for a contracted period of at least three years.

Stress value to accrue funds
There was a view that the providers and current commissioners of the programme should highlight the value and benefits of the role wider and to other potential commissioners. Furthermore, organisations that were benefiting from the VA role were not financially supporting its continuing existence. In addition to the option of funding a contract term, external organisation could contribute to a 'Village Agent' pot of funds for small tasks such as consultancy to ensure continuation of the role.

Type of contract
Considering the quantitative and qualitative evidence, it is recommended that a VA covering two villages require a minimum of a three-year contract, twenty hours per week. Considering the importance of the personality of the VA, an ideal scenario is that funds are allocated for a VA to cover a number of villages in a full-time position to reduce staff turnover.

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Summary

This evaluation set out to explore the mechanisms of the Village Agent role and subsequent benefits of the programme. The Village Agent programme has demonstrated a range of far reaching benefits for the communities within which they are placed, these include:
- Developing or improving social cohesion,
- Identifying 'real', underlying issues experienced by the community,
- Empowering the community to address these issues,
- Developing self-sustainable programmes.

In addition, the Village Agent provides a number of benefits for stakeholders, including:
- Actively engaging and supporting approximately 150 individuals per month,
- Providing a bridge between statutory organisations and the public,
- Providing a link between organisations,
- Signposting and referrals to organisations,
- Validation and consultancy,
- And obtaining funding to address:
  - Health
  - Environment
  - Community Development
  - Opportunities for Young People
  - Opportunities for Older People
  - Safer community

Recommendations
- The 'ground-up', individualistic approach of the Village Agent role needs to be considered when setting intended outcomes of the project. As part of the mechanism is to explore underlying issues, the outcomes need to be generic and/or flexible.
- When seeking funding or selling the Village Agent role, the additional benefits described above should be stressed as well as the intended outcomes.
- The mechanisms identified and overall findings indicate that the Village Agent needs to be post for a minimum of three years
- There is a strong indication that Village Agents are working well beyond the contracted ten hours with self-report data suggesting this is closer to 15.5 hours per week. Considering the importance of the personality of the VA and requirement of trust, an ideal scenario is that funds are allocated for a VA to cover two villages with a twenty-hour contract. This will serve to reduce staff turnover, which is currently a risk factor.
- Further evaluation is required to test the mechanisms and overall findings of this report using a pre-test, post-test design.

Conclusion

Considering the wide range of benefits highlighted in this report and the amount of funding acquired as demonstrated in the case studies, there is strong indication that the Village Agent programme is cost-effective. Further projects are recommended with measures in place prior to placement and a follow-up to further explore the impact of the Village Agent role and validate the mechanisms identified.