

# Gloucestershire

LinkAge Plus

## Village Agents

Village Agents are local people, employed part-time, who become a trusted community member and resource. Working in rural areas, they network extensively with Parish Councilors, Community Nurses, Police Community Support Officers, social group organisers, transport providers, religious groups etc. They build trust with older people and have been successful in providing access to a range of services from home safety, to benefit advice, and energy efficiency. Agents identify unmet need within their community and respond by initiating and supporting new social and healthy activities.

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# Village Agents

## Objective

- Older people in Gloucestershire villages and particularly those who are older, frail and vulnerable, feel more secure, feel more cared for and have a better quality of life.
- Older people have easy access to a wide range of information that will enable them to make informed decisions about their own well-being.
- Older people are in receipt of any services or assistance that can help them remain independent in their own homes and enable them to feel part of a supportive enabling community.
- Older people are engaged to enable them to influence both development of the Village Agent role and future service provision.

## Activity

There are 30 Village Agents. The number of parishes covered by each Agent depends on demographics, physical topography etc. Current Agents cover from two to eight parishes with an average population of approx 1,500 over 60s. Village Agents and these are supported by:

- training programmes;
- publicity material;
- Adult Helpdesk, (an holistic telephone referral service for social care);
- occupational therapy and health technology;
- mobile telephone;
- lap top with mobile internet access;
- one to one support and opportunities to share good practice.

They are supported by Gloucestershire County Council, Adult Helpdesk and Gloucestershire Rural Community Council and community building expertise from partners Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC). Their extensive networking activity, and the trust they build with local people, leads to effective 'referrals'. They respond to these with home visits when necessary, and provide high quality information, enabling direct access to a wide range of services via an electronic referral system. They informally carry out a series of practical checks related to safety in the home (e.g. smoke alarms, falls prevention), benefit entitlement and energy efficiency for example, followed up where necessary by experts providing specialist information, advice and services.

## Achievements against objectives

During 2007, Village Agents have:

- made over 20,000 contacts with customers;

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- dealt with 2684 enquiries including 192 referrals to DWP;
  - made 136 fire and safety contacts;
  - made 151 referrals to home improvement agencies.

This has resulted not only in installing many preventative measures, and increased awards of state benefits, but also introductions to social and healthy activity groups, thereby reducing social isolation.

## Wider achievements

Older people who were previously reluctant to contact statutory organisations have obtained increased confidence through good experiences of receiving services and have a better awareness of preventative measures relating to continuing independence. Social networks are supported and promoted resulting in better community cohesion. Initiatives and information relating to any aspects of life can be directly targeted to the intended recipients through the Agents extensive local knowledge and network. Village Agents are aware of and can identify the vulnerable members of the community in an emergency situation. Council, health, statutory and voluntary services are viewed more positively as public awareness is increased. County wide agencies involved with services for older people have a better knowledge of each other's provision and are assisted in making contact with previously hard to reach groups.

## Resources

The initial start up funding provided by LinkAge Plus was approximately £850,000. This included costs associated with a pilot project such as an evaluation, carried out by InLoGov at Birmingham University. The 30 Village Agents are now a mainstream council service and the allocated budget is £320,000 p.a. provided jointly from social care and PCT budgets.

### Start-up costs:

- Project Manager and Assistant.
- Village Agent Manager – training, on going support.
- Current Agents are paid for 10 hours per week.
- Recruitment – advertisements and selection days.
- IT equipment – mobile telephone, lap top, mobile internet access, printer.
- Publicity material – business cards, posters etc.
- Launch, publicity and networking events.
- Web based, secure, electronic referral system, information portal and Agent networking area.

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## Ongoing costs

- Manager and assistant with overall county perspective.
- Village Agent Manager – training, on going support.
- Village Agents – salary costs and mileage allowance.
- Meeting, networking and events.
- Recruitment.
- IT equipment – replacement and maintenance programme.
- Replacement publicity material.
- Maintenance and update of website.

## Key lesson learned

- The simple electronic referral system which was developed as part of the project was welcomed by statutory and voluntary agencies, and facilitated joint working resulting in holistic service and information provision.
- Older people are more likely to source information and access services from someone they know and trust, thereby promoting and supporting longer term independence.
- Village Agents promote a positive two way consultation link to Council and other services.
- Small actions can have a large effect on promoting well being and reducing social isolation.
- Effective networking and face to face contact is of paramount importance.

## Further information

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Ref to website: [http://www.grcc.org.uk/our\\_work/village\\_agents](http://www.grcc.org.uk/our_work/village_agents)

## Related documents

See website above.