

LINKAGE PLUS PROJECT

VILLAGE AGENTS

GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

in partnership with

GLOUCESTERSHIRE RURAL COMMUNITY COUNCIL

OVERALL EVALUATION REPORT

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Gloucestershire County Council, in partnership with the Gloucester Rural Community Council, has successfully set up the Village Agent Project Pilot which covers 162 parishes in some of the most isolated areas of the county. 30 village agents work within clusters of communities which have limited or no access to services locally. The following report focuses on and evaluates how the role of the Village Agent has developed over the lifespan of the project and the learning outcomes achieved.

The report identifies how the project has more than effectively met the targets set at the beginning of the pilot and achieved the desired outcomes. It has also expanded the project to incorporate wider areas and more people over 50 as Village Agents find their usefulness has been greatly beneficial to those they have already helped. The project initially covered 96 parishes and now covers 162 and is expanding. The Village Agents are also directly responsible for an extra £6,015 in benefit claims per week. In terms of evaluating the Village Agent project and the work of Village Agents this figure equates to £312,780 in extra benefits coming into Gloucestershire.

Village Agents have improved the lives of older people in Gloucestershire by putting them in touch with a range of services; being a link between themselves and the council and other service providers on behalf of the older person; by seeing older people as not simply service users in health and social care arena; by raising the profile of older people and reducing isolation; offering one to one support; and being part of a holistic service delivery and part of an extensive network system. The impact Village Agents have had on the lives of older people in Gloucestershire can be measured by the 5-25% improvement in customer satisfaction levels on accessing and obtaining practical help and information.

To keep the report concise there are instances where the reader is directed to previous documents relating to this project which provide more detailed information, namely the Baseline Report (June 2007) and the Interim Reports (August 2007, December 2007, March 2008, and August 2008).

1. Introduction

Gloucestershire is one of the eight pilot areas selected by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) as it is a rural county with a dispersed population and a higher proportion of people aged 50+ than the national average. Rural isolation for those over 50 years of age, and a finding from rurality commissioned research (GCC) which found that 83% of older people preferred to approach someone within their own community for help and advice, provided the impetus for the Village Agent project led by Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) working in partnership with the Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC). The key features at the start of the Village Agent project were

- The development of the concept of a Village Agent being a locally based person who is able “to provide face to face information and support which enables older people to make informed choices about their future needs”.
- The identification of c.96 target parishes by a mapping exercise using indices of Multiple Deprivation and a gap analysis aimed at avoiding duplication or overlap with similar services.
- The grouping of these c.96 parishes into 29/30 clusters within three Primary Care Trust areas (West Gloucestershire, Cotswold and Vale and Cheltenham and Tewkesbury). At the end of the evaluating period these three PCT’s had been replaced by one PCT. Each of the clusters contains a 50+ population of between 331 and 1125 people.
- The appointment and training of a designated Village Agent for each cluster who will be paid a small retainer to work ten hours per week in the community for the period of the pilot project.

The five key objectives for the Village Agent pilot were:

- To recruit and train 30 Village Agents to work with identified rural communities in Gloucestershire to provide high quality information and support and promote access to a wide range of services.
- To test the principles of the Village Agent working within each community in order to identify models which can be sustained by the community in the longer-term.
- To work with statutory and voluntary organisations within the county to build and provide improved access to a knowledge-base of frequently asked questions in response to customer need.
- To develop a training programme relating to access to information and services which can be cascaded within communities as appropriate. This was developed in conjunction with Village Agent training.
- To develop a series of publicity materials which can be used by communities to promote access to information and services.

The series of achievable outcomes from the Village Agent project in Gloucestershire therefore are:

- 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

Monitoring and Evaluation

In measuring the success of the Village Agent project and the impact Village Agents have had on those over 50 in the parishes where they are based, targets were set around contacts made to the Adult Helpdesk, enquiries dealt with by energy efficiency, contacts made by Village Agents with customers, Village Agents promoting volunteering within their cluster of parishes, the number of Gateway referrals to DWP, the increase in Benefit Applications, the increase in referrals to energy schemes, and the number of contacts with Fire and Safety, and the number of enquiries and Gateway referrals to the Home Improvement Agencies. The targets for these areas will be discussed in much more detail in section 3 of the report. The Village Agent project uses a standardised enquiry form to monitor the queries received. The form has been designed to identify monitoring information such as the demographic characteristics of people accessing the service and the resulting actions.

In addition to the monitoring tools mentioned above, satisfaction surveys were sent out in Winter 2006/2007 and in Spring 2008 and focus groups were conducted in Spring 2007 and Spring 2008. Three further focus groups were conducted during January 2008 with key service providers. The results of both the satisfaction surveys, ELSA satisfaction surveys 2002-3 and 2004-5, and the focus groups will be detailed and explored in section 3 of this report. For more detailed information on sample selection for both satisfaction surveys, focus group questions and structure, and a copy of the Gateway form, refer to the Baseline Report (June 2007), and the Interim Reports (August 2007, December 2007, March 2008, and August 2008).

2. Baseline Report

The Baseline Report (June 2007) provided information of the local parish clusters covered by the village agents, the first satisfaction survey, the first focus groups and data from the targets detailed above. The report revealed that there were no figures at that time for benefit applications or energy scheme referrals and that the original 500 Village Agent contacts for each three months to the Adult Helpdesk to gather information relating to services or to refer a client as unachievable and unrealistic. In April 2006, for instance, there were 69 contacts from the individual parish clusters and in April 2007 there have been 83 contacts, an increase of 20%. How this situation has improved will be explored in the following section.

For the satisfaction survey conducted in winter 2007/8 there was a response rate of 65% (626 returned questionnaires). The two most popular age groups for completing the questionnaire were 60-69 (33.8%) and 70-79 (29.5%) and women (61.3 %) were more likely than men (38.7%) to complete the survey. When the data from all the individual parish clusters has been aggregated, the results reveal a number of broad patterns and trends. These trends and themes are also apparent in the majority of parish clusters (see individual parish cluster reports) but with slight variations; for instance, sometimes a parish cluster may identify housing as a main concern, whereas for another it may be public transport. Indeed, sometimes the overall response within a parish cluster is fairly negative to most of the statements but for another it can be very positive. The aggregated results reveal that a number of statements, which received a positive response

from the parish clusters, have produced an overall positive level of agreement¹. The statements: *I like the neighbourhood where I live; I am confident my neighbours are willing to provide me with help if I need it; I live in a friendly community; I feel safe and secure in my own home; the local health service meets all my healthcare needs; and my neighbourhood is clean and tidy*, all elicit a level of agreement which ranges between 70-95%. Attitudes towards the police were usually ambivalent when asked to comment on *I think that the police do a good job where I live*. Suitable housing and public transport were the two statements likely to result in low levels of agreement. For the statement *public transport enables me to get where I want to without using a car*, the level of disagreement is a very high 73.8%, with 41.1% of those responding negatively choosing the attitudinally stronger ‘disagree strongly’. Negative attitudes towards public transport were raised many times in focus groups too.

The well-being statements tended to not only produce high, and in some instances, very high, positive responses, they also show the results for the Gloucestershire study are more positive than the two ELSA studies. Gloucestershire is also a much smaller sample than the two ELSA studies so this also highlights the high concentration of positive attitudes towards their own well-being. This is well illustrated by the statement, *I feel that life is full of opportunities*, as 42.6% of respondents from Gloucestershire select the ‘often’ category, but for the ELSA waves, the ‘sometimes’ category is the most popular.

3. Interim Monitoring Reports

A. Achievements and Learning Outcomes – A Brief Overview

To demonstrate the success of the Village Agent scheme the following section briefly illustrates the achievements and learning outcomes of the project with examples taken from Gateway data, case studies, Village Agent diaries, focus groups, and key service providers. Where direct quotations have been used sources have not been identified.

Currently, a Village Agent may cover between two and eight parishes with an average population of approximately 1,500 of older people over 50 years of age. Figures for 2007 illustrate that Village Agents made:

- Over 20,000 contacts with older people
- Dealt with 2684 enquires including 192 referrals to DWP
- Made 136 fire and safety referrals
- Made 151 referrals to Home Improvement Agencies

Indeed, the data collected from January 2007 to June 2008 reveals that in terms of making 1,500 contacts with older people every three months, resulting in a total of 9,000 contacts for the period, Village Agents made a total 31,244 contacts. Figures for referrals to the DWP and Fire and Safety are listed below and also illustrate Village Agents performing better than their targets.

	Target	Projected Target	Result Achieved
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¹ The level of agreement is calculated by combining the scores for the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ categories. The level of disagreement is calculated by adding the ‘disagree’ and ‘disagree strongly’ categories.

Contacts with older people	1,500 every three months	9,000	31,244
Referrals to DWP	30 every three months	190	309
Referrals to Fire and Safety	30 every three months	180	197

These figures will be discussed in greater detail later in this section particularly how they relate to the success criteria and targets set at the beginning of the project.

Learning Outcomes

Brief illustrations of how successfully the key learning outcomes of the project have been met are illustrated by evidence and comments from customers, Village Agent diaries, case studies, and key service providers.

- **Support for older people should not be confined to Health and Social Care**

“A Village Agent makes telephone calls to Care and Repair and Warm and Well about a client, aged 80 years, concerning her gas boiler which had broken down a few weeks earlier, and she could not afford to pay an engineer to look at it. The client had no other form of heating or hot water. Further conversations between Village Agent and relevant services obtained an agreement that urgent action would be taken to ensure the client had heating and hot water.”

- **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.**

“The electronic referral system as been a door –opening process for the more isolated and often the more vulnerable older person and a means to sign posting to available services. There has always been partnership working with other organisations statutory and voluntary sectors but now the system and Village Agents have provided us with a more formal framework to work with.”

- **Older people are more likely to source information and access services from someone they know and trust, thereby promoting and supporting longer term independence.**

“As a service provider I feel that prior to Village Agents older people were reluctant to access our services and Village Agents have been passing worthwhile referrals. It seems evident that older people felt happy dealing with someone they were familiar with rather than the official person. I now make home visits with Village Agents because it helps to re-assure the older person because the Village Agent is a face older people now trust.”

- **Village Agents promote a positive two way consultation link to council and other services.**

Derek Lucas Transport Procurement and Operations Manager

We are passionate about making sure there are bus services out there for rural communities and Village agents can help..... We feed information thorough the Village Agents about what we are thinking of changing and they feed back to us from the people they represent about how we can improve the bus services.

- **Small actions can have a large effect on promoting well being and reducing social isolation.**

“I took Mrs H along to the local Friendship Group which is a thriving social club, meeting fortnightly it provides various activities and good home-cooked food. Mrs H had become increasingly depressed having been virtually housebound. Since her first visit, she has become a regular member of this and another group and this social inclusion has been of enormous benefit to her.”

- **Effective networking and face to face contact is of paramount importance.**

“As time went on, many other smaller issues came to light, by involving the British Legion they are now looking into having a stair-lift fitted and purchasing an electric scooter. I have obtained a Blue Badge and contacted a local gardening scheme to help maintain the garden. The Council are now sorting out the drains. After building some trust I was able to discuss her bills and make an appointment with the local CAB. This was only the tip of the iceberg.”

The above snapshot of the varied achievements of Village Agents reflect the learning outcomes that have developed throughout the monitoring process. This report will build on this snapshot through its evaluation of the monitoring data to show how these learning outcomes have become established.

The report will also go on to show how the project has met its series of achievable outcomes for older people in Gloucestershire put forward at the start of the project.

B. Monitoring the Role of the Village Agent

Village Agents are supported by Gloucester County Council, the Adult Help Desk and Gloucestershire Rural Community Council.

Initially, Village Agents covered 96 parishes and by January 2008 this number had increased to 162. The increase in parishes was largely a response to individual Village Agent requests. Many Village Agents were beginning to feel they had reached capacity in their original clusters, had networked with the majority of relevant people and were eager to cover more areas. However, there is capacity issue to address here as to whether or not Village Agents would be continued to be seen as a trusted and approachable person within the community if they are geographically spread too thinly. How successfully the targets have been met, however, would indicate this has not become an issue for Village Agents.

The Village Agent project has been monitored using both quantitative and qualitative data, recording how Village Agents have worked within their parish clusters to be a link between available services and older people. The quantitative data consisted of a number of excel data bases recording the number of varied sign postings and contacts made by Village Agents, and two questionnaires (the latter to be discussed in section 4). The qualitative data consisted of a series of case studies, written by Village Agents and older people themselves, and a series of diaries written by Village Agents reflecting their day to day contact with older people and a range of service providers. Focus groups were also conducted but they will be discussed in more detail in Section 5. Both the case studies and the diaries provided the information to record the ‘real-life’ contact Village Agents made with older people, to achieve the outcomes stipulated at the start of the project.

Four interim reports² are available giving details on how the performance criteria of the project have been met. The focus of this report will be to give an overall evaluation of the Village Agents Project, with a focus on the learning outcomes.

C. Defining and Developing the Role of the Village Agent

Each Village Agent is paid for 10 hours work per week and it will become evident throughout this evaluation report that many Village Agents took their role conscientiously and in so doing worked far outside their 10 hours remit. The Village Agents who have performed their role most effectively have been confident in their approach with both older persons and service providers and are very motivated to work with people. They also have good networking skills which are put to good use as Village Agents. As Project Manager of the Linkage Plus project in Gloucestershire, Rosie Callinan provided much enthusiasm and determination for the scheme to succeed and is attributable for many of its achievements.

During the initial life span of the LinkAge Plus project the role of the Village Agent has continued to develop so that a Village Agent is:

- A person who becomes a trusted member of the community
- Who then goes on to provide high quality information
- Who facilitates access to services
- Who carries out a series of practical checks
- Who facilitates community building
- Who identifies unmet needs

² Monitoring Interims Reports 1 – 4 on meeting performance criteria available

The Village Agent is now a trusted and familiar link between the providers of services and the older person. As part of the success criteria of the project, Village Agents have been responsible for increasing the number of older people making benefit applications, increasing referrals to energy efficiency schemes, increasing referrals to fire and safety and promoting volunteering.

Access to Services

One of the main roles of the Village Agent is to put older people in touch with a range of services.

Older people have continued to be directed to a number of services through a Gateway referral form. The Gateway referral form has been revised during the project and is now accessible to Village Agents electronically. The Village Agent completes a Gateway referral form via a secure log in procedure. The form then contains details of the older person and gives an outline of their particular needs. The referral form is then sent electronically to partner agencies. The relevant partner agency responds and redefines the needs of the older person and then provides this service. The gateway referral form has proved to be an excellent and simple system, which has continued to work extremely well in putting older people in touch with services. The Gateway form has provided a formalised way of working with a range of service providers, which service providers see as way of enhancing partnership working and providing a holistic service delivery.

The Gateway referral form provides the Village Agent and other service providers with a record of an older person's details and the services they have been directed to.

As a result of the Gateway referral system **40% of queries** to Village Agents have been sent to partner agencies for service requests, the remaining 60% are dealt with by the Agents as first point of contact.

Type of Support Required by Older People

One of the key learning out comes that has come out of monitoring the Village Agent project is that support for older people should not be confined to the Health and Social Care arena.

It is often the little things, which make a big difference.

“After gaining the trust of the older person, I was able to discuss with her the amount of tax she was paying on her small widow's pension. I investigated further and thought she still had some unused Personal Allowance. I rang the tax office on her behalf and they changed her tax code immediately and reduced the amount of tax attached to her widow's pension. After sending letters to the tax office asking for a reassessment of tax paid in the previous tax year ***** was delighted to receive quite a large cheque for overpayment of tax. As a result of the correct tax code her monthly widow's pension has also increased.”

A Two Way Process

As their roles have developed Village Agents have highlighted the need for each Village Agent to be confident and motivated in developing their networking skills with the ability to see a learning process over time. The Village Agent has confidently facilitated a two way consultation link between themselves and the Council and other service providers on behalf of the older person. The following example is part of a case study written by a Village Agent demonstrating her role in becoming the crucial link in getting a series of services in place so a person at the end of their life can maintain their dignity and quality of life.

“I received a call from the District Nurse explaining that they had a patient who had just been discharged from hospital who urgently needed a table top freezer in which to store frozen meals and they wondered if I could expedite a grant in order to purchase this item as the funds to buy the item as the person concerned did not have the necessary funds available. They explained that the lady was a palliative care patient and therefore the matter was urgent. I was presented with a delicate situation. I told the District Nurse I would see what I could do. I immediately rang the local benefit office and explained the situation and they said they would pull some strings and get back to me. Within half an hour this benefit Office rang me back to tell me that one of their officers would be calling on the family in the morning to sort out this particular issue and obviously any others. I immediately rang the District Nurse and relayed this message on to the surgery and they were very relieved that the matter had been actioned so quickly.”

The Village Agent then goes on to reflect on her position in this particular case study and her role as a Village Agent.

“I am recounting this story because it touches so many areas. My immediate reaction is one of compassion for all the family. But after acknowledging this and taking a step back it reveals how vitally important the role the Village Agent can be. In this instance the Village Agent (me) was the pivotal force from which all information and support can flow. Because the District Nurses knew of my existence and the role the Village Agent undertakes they were able to contact me and I in turn was able to then contact the Benefit Office and so within a space of a day the client’s needs were immediately taken care off. I think that is excellent and as such reflects the value of the role of the Village Agent.”

This particular case study was chosen because it is a prime example of how the role of a Village Agent has developed to promote a positive two way consultation link to council and other services. But more importantly it highlights how a Village Agent has built up the confidence and motivation in developing networking skills to be such a crucial point of contact. The case study also identifies the importance other service providers place on the role of Village Agents

Raising the Profile of Older People and Reducing Isolation

The role of the Village Agent has been instrumental in raising the profile of older people within Gloucestershire. Not just raising the profile of older people, however, but placing an importance on older people and encouraging a positive role for older people in the community.

A quote from a service provider :

“One of the fantastic things the Village Agent is doing is improving the visibility of older people. So now in terms of service provision it’s not just about we have got a pension service or a fire service offering smoke alarms which are available to you – but you are important enough to us to bring these services to your doorstep and that level of accessibility for older people especially in isolated communities is fantastic.”

An older person in Gloucestershire said of the role and influence of Village Agents:

“Village Agents have shown there is a concern for the welfare of older people.”

A large number of older people Village Agents make contact with are socially isolated.

Holistic Service Delivery

Village Agents have become trusted community members and in doing so have worked alongside numerous service providers. Village Agents not only guide and refer older people to services they also receive referrals. Between them Village Agents have an extensive network system comprising of Parish Councillors, Community Nurses, Police Community Support Officers, Social Group organisers, transport providers, religious groups.

A Village Agent will informally assess and advise and this informal assessment is usually followed up by an identified service provider offering expert advice.

The holistic approach taken by Village Agents can be seen in the tremendous role they played during the flooding in the Gloucestershire area in 2007. They made sure older people had clean water or access to clean water; arranged for bowsers to be delivered and replenished; delivered milk, bread and other staple goods; and gave out the council emergency helpline number. Indeed, the interesting account of how one Village Agent was able to help older people in the areas she covered can be found in the appendix attached. In discussing the help provided by Village Agents, a representative of the Fire Service in a Partners focus group said ‘Village Agents were the glue that kept things running smoothly.’

The Persistence in and the Value of One-to-One Support

Often it has been the persistence of the Village Agent that has ensured that the needs of the older person are met. The continuation of one-to-one support by Village Agents has made a real difference in the lives of older people.

Many of the case studies and diaries reveal this level of persistence from Village Agents to make it their concern to follow up referrals they have made on the behalf of an older person. Often it is this type of persistence which has increased a holistic service delivery and has increased the visibility of older people. This is not to say that these services would not have been delivered but there is a visible person working independently for the interests of the older person.

One service provider said :

“Village Agents are now ringing us up to make sure we are delivering our services to their particular older person. Have you done this for so and so and if there any up date on Mrs B’s.....?”

D. The Overall Performance of Village Agents

To achieve the five outcomes presented at the start of project, Village Agents had to meet certain success criteria. The performance criteria were altered during the monitoring period; these changes were made as a result of the capacity to collate data. The following is a list of the final success criteria and how Village Agents achieved their performance targets.

Criteria 1. 1,500 contacts with older people every three months commencing January 2007 – June 2008

	Jan-Mar 2007	Apr-Jun 2007	Jul-Sept 2007	Oct-Dec 2007	Jan-Mar 2008	Apr-Jun 2008	Total
Target	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500	9,000
Achieved	4,618	4,889	4,843	5,219	5,434	6,241	31,244
% over target	208%	226%	226%	248%	262%	316%	247%

The figures show that the number of contacts made by Village Agents in signposting and enabling older people to have greater access to a range of services far exceeded the criteria. The criteria were set at 1,500 contacts every three months and, as the figures show, the contacts have steadily increased over the lifetime of the project. The amount of contacts with Village Agents has also enabled older people to make informed decisions about their own well being which is a priority of Outcome 1. It also emphasises the importance of networking to the success of the scheme.

Criteria 2. 30 referrals to DWP January – March 2007 and then a further 45 referrals every 3 months - April 2007 – June 2008

	Jan-Mar 2007	Apr-Jun 2007	Jul-Sept 2007	Oct-Dec 2007	Jan-Mar 2008	Apr-Jun 2008	Total
Target	30	45	45	45	45	45	255
Achieved	38	46	56	45	49	75	309
% Increase over target	27%	2%	24%	0%	9%	67%	21%

Again these figures show the number of referrals to the Department of Work and Pensions in regard to benefit claims have exceeded the stated criteria. These referrals have also enabled older people to make informed decisions about their own well-being. Any increase in benefits as a result of these referrals would have increased an older person's quality of life.

"It's taken the worry out of it for me. I don't wake up in the morning and think we really ought to do something about that but I can't afford to. I now don't worry, I really don't".

Criteria 3. 30 referrals to Fire and Safety every three months January 2007 – June 2008

	Jan-Mar 2007	Apr-Jun 2007	Jul-Sept 2007	Oct-Dec 2007	Jan-Mar 2008	Apr-Jun 2008	Total
Target	30	30	30	30	30	30	180
Achieved	26	38	32	40	27	34	197
% Increase over target	0%	27%	6%	33%	0%	13%	9%

The number of contacts made with Fire and Safety concerned the fitting of smoke alarms in older people’s homes. These contacts would also have been about fire safety within the home. The number of contacts with Fire and Safety often exceeded the stated criteria. However, for the first quarter in 2007 and 2008 the number was below the set criteria. There was no obvious reason for this decline. However, from the discussion with service providers on how Village Agents were working towards promoting partnership work, the partners within Fire and Safety had nothing but praise for Village Agents in increasing the visibility of older people and making it easier for fire and safety officers to go into the older person’s house to discuss fire and safety issues and fit smoke alarms.

Criteria 4. 39 referrals to Home Improvement Agencies for 1st quarter January – March 2007 and then a further 45 referrals for each quarter April 2007 – June 2008

	Jan – Mar 2007	Apr-Jun 2007	Jul-Sept 2007	Oct-Dec 2007	Jan-Mar 2008	Apr-Jun 2008	Total
Target	39	45	45	45	45	45	264
Achieved	42	41	41	27	29	48	228
% Increase over target	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%

The total number of referrals to Home Improvement Agencies amounted to 228. The number of referrals over two quarters fell below the set criteria. There was again no given reason for this decline although the Village Agents had probably reached everyone who would have qualified for any home improvements within their parishes. This argument is supported when in the next quarter the number of contacts increased with an increase in parishes covered by Village Agents.

4. Comparative Data – Satisfaction Surveys and ELSA

The following tables show the responses to the set of questions originally asked at the beginning of the Village Agent project and the responses to the same set of questions at the end of the project. Those figures highlighted in bold indicate the most popular category in both questionnaires.

Figures presented as frequencies and percentages showing the responses to first set of questionnaires comparing with second set of questionnaires in 2008

<i>It is easy to get information about pensions or other benefits when I need it</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total
1 st questionnaire	60 10.0%	213 35.5%	215 35.9%	100 16.7%	11 1.8%	599 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	77 14.8%	284 54.9%	89 17.2%	59 11.4%	7 1.3%	517 99.9%
<i>I can get information which enables me to make choices about public services</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total
1 st questionnaire	55 9.3%	223 37.6%	203 34.2%	95 16.0%	17 2.9%	593 100%
2 nd questionnaire	53 10.6%	256 51.6%	122 24.5%	61 12.2%	4 0.8%	496 100%
<i>Public services enable older people to live at home for as long as they wish to</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total
1 st questionnaire	41 6.8%	192 31.7%	232 38.3%	110 18.1%	31 5.1%	606 100%
2 nd questionnaire	55 10.6%	224 43.4%	138 26.7%	75 14.5%	14 2.7%	516 100%
<i>I know how to get help in my home when I need to</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total
1 st questionnaire	55 9.1%	257 42.6%	153 25.4%	119 19.7%	19 3.0%	603 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	80 15.7%	297 58.3%	77 15.1%	50 9.8%	5 0.98%	509 100%
<i>I know how to find out about opportunities for paid work if I want to</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Total
1 st questionnaire	41 7.4%	173 31.3%	232 42.0%	88 15.9%	19 3.4%	553 100%
2 nd questionnaire	48 11.1%	151 35.1%	177 41.2%	46 10.7%	7 1.63%	429 100%

The responses above are as a result of two questionnaires put to older people at the beginning and at the end of the Village Agent Project. Further information from the first questionnaire can be found in the Baseline Report. The tables show a comparison between the responses given at the start of the project by a selected sample of older people and those responses given by those selected for the second set. The sample of older people responding to the second wave of questionnaires was a different sample group to the first and it included a bigger response from an older range of people as Village Agents were and are in contact with older, more isolated members of the community. The two categories with the biggest response are 70-79 (31.6%) and 80-89 (32.5%). For the first questionnaire the bigger response came from 60-69 and 70-79 age groups. There is also a smaller sample size for this questionnaire with 569 questionnaires returned in comparison with 626 for the first. 38.7% of men replied to the survey and 62.7% of women, which is broadly similar to the first survey.

Results for the second questionnaire show some interesting patterns compared with the first questionnaires. There is a significant increase in the number of older people agreeing that it was *easy to get information about pensions and benefits* should they require this information. In the first questionnaire **45.5% strongly agreed** and strongly agreed that this information was easy to get, this percentage increased to **69.7%** in the second questionnaire. There was a slight increase in older people knowing *how to find out about reducing their gas and electric bills*. As there are slightly more people responding to the statement in the first questionnaire (**360**) in comparison with the second (**280**) it further illustrates the greater increase of **24.2%** in the intervening period.

When asked about *accessing information which enables me to make choices about public services*, respondents to the first questionnaire (**223, 37.6%**) agreed that they knew how to access this information. When the second set of respondents were asked the same question the figure had increased to (**256, 51.6%**). There has been an increase of 14% during the lifetime of the project.

A similar increase is in relation to whether respondents *knew how to get help in their homes when they need it*. The number agreeing to this statement in the second questionnaire totalled **297 (58.3%)** compared with respondents in the first questionnaire totalling **257 (42.6%)**. The increase is 15.7% although, as with the previous statement, the number of respondents is higher for the second questionnaire than the first.

The range of findings would suggest that Village Agents have positively took on their role of signposting and putting older people in touch with a range of services, which would go on to improve the quality of life for the older person and enable them to remain independent. This is illustrated when the first set of respondents were asked whether or not they agreed that *public services enable older people to live at home for as long as they wish to*, **192 (31.7%)** agreed with this statement. When the second set of respondents were given the same statement an increased total of **224 (43.4%)** agreed.

The one statement which elicited a decline in support relates to the statement asking respondents if they felt they *lived in a community which care for people when they become frail*. The first wave of respondents agreeing to this statement numbered **237 (39.2%)**. For the second set of respondents this number totalled **228 (31.7%)**; a decline of **7.5%**. It is difficult to give a specific

reason for this decline but one possible explanation is that the second group of respondents were perceived to be more isolated than the previous group. It can also be said that the value older people place on their Village Agent is because there is no one else nearby to offer help and support.

Overall, the responses for the questions listed above illustrate that the Village Agent Project has achieved between a 5 -25% improvement on the baseline figures in overall satisfaction levels for older people over the life of the pilot. It has met the success criteria outlined in the Baseline Report in all but one of the statements.

Responses to the ELSA Well-Being Statements for the First and Second Questionnaire

<i>My age prevents me from doing the things I would like to</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	89 14.6%	204 33.4%	149 24.4%	169 27.6%	611 100%
2 nd questionnaire	139 26.3%	188 29.6%	122 23.1%	78 14.8%	527 100%
<i>I feel that what happens to me is out of my control</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	48 8.2%	146 24.8%	195 33.2%	199 33.8%	588 100%
2 nd questionnaire	68 12.7%	151 28.3%	144 27.0%	149 28%	532 100%
<i>I feel free to plan for the future</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	332 56.9%	144 24.7%	69 11.3%	38 6.5%	583 99.4%
2 nd questionnaire	223 44.9%	154 31%	74 14.9%	45 9.07%	496 100%
<i>I feel left out of things</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	32 5.4%	123 20.6%	177 29.7%	264 44.3%	596 100%
2 nd questionnaire	47 9.3%	105 20.8%	156 30.9%	196 38.8%	504 100%

<i>I can do the things I want to do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	364 60.3%	168 27%	41 6.8%	31 5.1%	604 100%
2 nd questionnaire	228 44.5%	189 36.9%	69 13.4%	26 5.07%	512 100%
<i>Family responsibilities prevent me from doing what I want to do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	14 2.4%	117 19.8%	166 28.0%	295 49.8%	592 100%
2 nd questionnaire	33 6.6%	97 19.4%	113 22.6%	256 51.3%	499 100%
<i>I feel that I can please myself what I do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	369 61.8%	189 31.6%	24 4.0%	15 2.5%	597 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	296 57.8%	161 31.4%	35 6.8%	20 3.9%	512 100%
<i>My health stops me from doing the things I want to do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	101 16.7%	189 31.2%	137 22.6%	178 29.4%	605 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	152 29.2%	185 35.5%	101 19.4%	82 15.7%	520 100%
<i>Shortage of money stops me from doing the things I want to do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	66 11.0%	165 27.5%	175 29.2%	193 32.2%	599 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	69 13.0%	189 35.7%	122 23.0%	129 24.3%	529 100%

<i>I look forward to every day</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	439 73.3%	132 22.0%	19 3.2%	9 1.5%	599 100%
2 nd questionnaire	353 65.3%	149 27.5%	27 5%	11 2.03%	540 100%
<i>I feel that my life has meaning</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	403 67.1%	155 25.8%	31 5%	12 2.0%	601 100%
2 nd questionnaire	311 63.0%	133 26.9%	39 7.9%	10 2.0%	493 100%
<i>I enjoy the things that I do</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	502 83.2%	92 15.2%	8 1.3%	1 0.2%	603 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	402 77.4%	105 20.3%	9 1.7%	3 0.5%	519 100%
<i>I enjoy being in the company of others</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	450 74.1%	141 23.2%	16 2.6%	0 0%	607 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	379 72.1%	130 2.4%	11 2.0%	5 0.9%	525 100%
<i>On balance, I look back on my life with a sense of happiness</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	489 80.8%	102 16.8%	12 1.9%	2 0.3%	605 99.8%
2 nd questionnaire	385 73.8%	111 21.3%	18 3.4%	7 0.7%	521 100%

<i>I feel full of energy these days</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	136 22.7%	290 48.3%	123 20.5%	51 8.5%	600 100%
2 nd questionnaire	71 13.8%	220 42.8%	154 30%	68 13.2%	513 100%
<i>I choose to do things that I have never done before</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	104 17.6%	234 39.7%	163 27.7%	88 14.9%	589 99.9%
2 nd questionnaire	62 11.9%	193 37.2%	168 32.4%	95 18.3%	518 100%
<i>I feel satisfied with the way my life has turned out</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	381 63.4%	179 29.8%	31 5.1%	10 1.7%	601 100%
2 nd questionnaire	283 54.9%	170 33%	39 7.5%	23 4.4%	515 100%
<i>I feel life is full of opportunities</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	252 42.6%	213 36.0%	101 17.1%	26 4.4%	592 100%
2 nd questionnaire	156 31.8%	193 39.3%	103 21.0%	38 7.7%	490 100%
<i>I feel that the future looks good for me</i>	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never	Total
1 st questionnaire	264 45.2%	221 37.8%	74 12.7%	25 4.3%	584 100%
2 nd questionnaire	160 33.3%	207 43.1%	78 16.2%	35 7.2%	480 100%

The table above shows the response to the attitudinal statements listed in the two Linkage surveys. The statements can be found in the questionnaire used in the Study of Aging (ELSA) designed to explore feelings of well-being. They have been repeated in this study to provide an interesting comparison and longitudinal aspect to the research. The ELSA study focuses on people ages 50 and over and their younger partner, living in private households in England. Data was collected for ELSA Wave 1 in 2002-3 and for Wave 2 in 2004-5. The well-being statements were included in the self-completion questionnaire which respondents were asked to complete and return by post. The full data for the ELSA well-being statements can be found in the Baseline Report but will be referred to here where applicable.

Unlike the first table the second table does not show many positive responses to the questions asked. One possible reason for this is that Village Agents sampled a different group of older people from the first questionnaire and they sampled older people who are more isolated which could reasonably affect feelings of well-being. As all the statements produced a more negative response than the first questionnaire, and as the first set of questions listed above produced a positive response, it is unlikely to be the result of random sampling.

When respondents were asked about *whether or not their age prevented them doing the things they liked to do* there was an increase in those that often thought their age did prevent them. In the first questionnaire **89** older people thought it often did and this figure increased to **139** in the second questionnaire. It is a decline of **3.8%** over the life of the project and does not compare favourably with the ELSA data as for both waves the most popular category was 'never'.

In the second question, *I feel that what happens to me is out of my control*, **48** older people in the first questionnaire felt it often did, and **146** felt it sometimes did. In the second questionnaire these figures had increased to **68** and **151** respectively. Again there has been a decline between the two surveys with a 5.8% decrease and when compared with the ELSA data the figures show that the respondents to ELSA were more positive as more opted for the 'never' category in both waves.

The decline continues for the statements, *I feel free to plan for the future* and *whether people felt left out of things*. For the first statement, **56.9%** of older people from the first questionnaire often felt they did and **24.7%** felt they sometimes did. In the second questionnaire these figures had declined to **44.9%** who often thought they were free to plan for the future, however, the number who sometimes felt they did rose to **31%**. For the second statement there was also an increase in the number of people who felt left out of things. These figures were **32%** for the first questionnaire and **47%** for the second who often felt left out of things.

When asked about *whether or not they could do the things they wanted to*, **364** of respondents in the first questionnaire felt they often could and **168** felt they sometimes could. Out of the second questionnaire **228** respondents often felt they could do the things they wanted and **189** felt they sometimes could. This is a **15.8%** decline and the biggest decline for all the statements and considerably less than the scores from the ELSA data (wave 1 58.7% and wave 2 57.8%).

The statement relating to *whether or not family responsibilities prevent me from doing what I want to do*, **2.4%** of respondents in the first questionnaire felt they often did and **19.8%** felt that sometimes they did. Out of respondents to the second questionnaire, **6.6%** felt they often did and **19.4%** sometimes felt they did. Although there has been a slight increase in those saying they often felt family responsibilities prevented them doing what they wanted there has also been a small increase in those saying they never felt this way, from **49.8%** to **51.3%**.

When asked *I feel that I can please myself what I do* **61.8%** of respondents in the first questionnaire felt they often could and **31.6%** felt that sometimes they could. Out of the second questionnaire **57.8%** of respondents felt they often could whereas **31.4%** felt that they sometimes could. This produced a smaller decrease of **4%** and is nearer to the ELSA figure of **58%**.

For the statement *my health stops me from doing the things I want to do* there is an increase of **4.3%** in respondents who sometimes feel health has been a barrier. There has been a further increase of **12.5%** for those respondents who said they often felt health was an issue. The figures for both first and second questionnaires are higher than those for the ELSA study.

The remaining well-being statements show an overall negative response and as it is the dominant trend each statement does not require further analysis. Explanations for the decline in positive attitudes are difficult to pinpoint as there has been an increase in the satisfaction levels for questions relating to obtaining practical help and information from the same sample of people. One possible reason is that the sample for the second questionnaire targeted individuals who are more rurally isolated and may therefore have a more negative outlook on their situation. If this is the case it strengthens the need for Village Agents and the work they do. The sample group, therefore, is compiled of different people to the first questionnaire. The responses for the well-being statements illustrate that the Village Agent Project has not achieved a 5 -25% improvement on the baseline figures in overall satisfaction levels for older people over the life of the pilot. Unfortunately, as far as these statements show, it has not met the success criteria outlined in the Baseline Report.

5. The Value of Village Agents- An older person's Perspective

This particular section concentrates on the value of Village Agents from an older person's perspective. This perspective is illustrated by responses from older people on the extent of their contact with Village Agents at the end of the monitoring period. A series of focus groups, set up at the end of the monitoring stage, provided the opportunity for older people to talk about the community where they live, the value of having contact with a Village Agent, and in what way the project could be improved. Both qualitative and quantitative sources are referred to in this section.

The table below contains data from the second questionnaire relating to views about Village Agents and the role they perform.

Respondents completing the second wave of questionnaires were asked about their own range of contact with the Village Agents Project.

A total of 524 Respondents were asked : <i>How many times have you made contact with a Village Agent?</i>	Never	Once	Twice	Three /four times	Five or more
	74 14.1%	79 15.0%	67 12.7%	139 26.5%	165 31.4%
A total of 443 Respondents were asked : Did you find this contact useful?	Very useful	Quite useful	Not useful		
	341 76.9%	105 23.7%	7 1.5%		
A total of 353 Respondents were asked : On your most recent contact, what were you hoping to get from the Village Agent?	Information	Advice	Referral	Other	
	160 45.3%	104 29.4%	41 11.6%	48 13.5%	
A total of 421 Respondents were asked : Has your quality of life improved as a result of this contact?	A great deal	A little	No		
	234 55.5%	130 30.8%	57 0.07%		

The above table shows that once an older person has made contact with a Village Agent, the older person is more likely to continue with this contact. When asked about the number of times they made contact with a Village Agent, 165 out of **524 (31.4%)** of older people said they had contacted a Village Agent five or more times. This number of contacts reflects the types of case studies and the diaries completed by Village Agents contained in the Interim Monitoring Reports.

In answer to the second question, *did older people find this contact useful*, out of the 443 respondents asked **341 (76.9%)** said that they found this contact very useful. This number reflects the messages coming out of the monitoring process, which is the enormous value older people place on the Village Agent. This value will become even more apparent from the analysis of the focus groups with older people talking about the role of Village Agents and the Village Agent project.

The most common reason for contacting a Village Agent was for information **160 (45.3%)**. However, as the case studies and the diaries of Village Agents have shown, the request for information is just a start to what can lead to a series of support given by the Village Agent.

When respondents were asked about their quality of life as a result of contacting a Village Agent out of 421 respondents **234 (55.5%)** said that their quality of life had improved a great deal. This is interesting as it seems at odds with the low level of support for the well-being statements covered earlier in this report. It suggests that although older people have a positive experience of the help provided by Village Agents, it is not yet filtering down to general feelings of well-being.

Respondents were also asked in the second questionnaire two further descriptive questions on the impact of their lives through having contacted the Village Agent.

What is the most important thing that the Village Agent has done for you?

The responses were varied and came from each parish cluster. Although the responses varied, the patterns were similar within each parish cluster. When collated, the responses came under the three headings below:

Giving Information and Advice

The Village Agent is very much seen as a source of information and advice. However, the type of information varies and the level of advice can also vary.

The level of advice and information given to the older person can automatically change to practical help. This practical help can commence on the first contact, but practical help usually commences with follow up contact. This source of information and signposting to different services and service providers can be divided into particular groupings. A number of older people said that the most important thing Village Agents had done was to contact fire and safety for them which had lead them to having smoke alarms fitted throughout their homes. This was followed by a number of older people asking for information and help from Home Improvement Agencies about loft insulation. A number of people said they had felt safer and more secure within their homes as a result of Village Agents arranging security checks within their homes. Other older people were saying how important the benefit checks and information had been

because Village Agents had helped them to get a care allowance and attendance allowance or an increase in their tax allowance. Other older people said that their Village Agent made sure they had assessments in their homes and as a result they now had grab rails, rails on the stairs, and grab rails in bathrooms

Practical Help

The Village Agents overall role is to provide information or signpost older people to different services. However, a number of older people identified ways in which Village Agents had given practical help and this had been of great importance to them. Several Village Agents, for example, have been responsible for setting up Tai Chi Classes, which had benefited a number of older people. (An average of over 100 people each week now attend Tai Chi classes initiated by Village Agents) Another respondent said that the most important thing her Village Agent did was to find her a place at a day care centre.

A Point of Contact

The Village Agent is now a valued point of contact for older people. This one to one contact with older people and its importance has been highlighted throughout this evaluation report and right through the monitoring process. It is of no surprise then some of the most important thing a Village Agent has done for an older person is to be a person ‘*who is there*’.

One Village Agent, who acted as a mediator between an older person and an energy supplier, resolved what had appeared to be an intractable problem. The older person in question said of the Village Agent’s help and advice:

“She has given me advice and become a very good friend. I feel there is someone there who I can call on. She has made my life so much easier. It is very important to me that she is there if I have any worries.”

The following quote from an older person illustrate just how important the Village Agent is to their life. The quote also highlights the fact that many Village Agents work well outside their 10 hours remit.

“Being an independent person it has always been difficult to ask for help. The Village Agent has given me the confidence to know that there is someone out there who will listen, who will help if I ask who would not refuse to help and respond immediately.”

A number of Village Agents are setting a precedent in terms of the role of Village Agents. Village Agents are appointed to signpost older people to services and increase the number of referrals to benefits, fire and safety checks, energy efficiency and home improvement agencies rather than actual physical support. Contrary to the notion of not providing physical support, there is one incident where an older person was returning from hospital after an operation and needed her bed moving downstairs to enable her some degree of independence and mobility but there was nobody to do this. The Village Agent took on this task with the help of her husband and moved the bed downstairs. This is not a task which should necessarily be recommended or emulated by other Village Agents but it does show how involved and needed the Village Agents are as being people ‘who are there’ when no one else is and older people have nobody else to call on. They have, therefore, now become ‘Champions’ of older people within Gloucestershire. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this situation but maybe the role of the Village Agent should be redefined to accommodate the extent of their work.

How do you think the work of the Village Agent can be improved?

Answers to this question in the second questionnaire stress how pleased older people are with the work of Village Agents with many saying it cannot be improved, as the following quote illustrates,

“I don’t feel my village agent’s project can be improved as he is alone and does a fantastic job and covers everything in the village”

Others highlight how the work of the Village Agent should be publicised more and perhaps even using mail shots as some said there were still older people who knew nothing of the service.

Many respondents said there should be more assistance to help Village Agents, such as more funding for the project, more visits made, more Village Agents and extending the project county-wide. Better pay for Village Agents and for them to work more hours including weekends as one respondent said,

“Sunday is the loneliest day of the week; Village Agents are with their families then”

Other answers stated there should be more recognition and collaboration with other professionals such as doctors and that other groups should also be included for Village Agents to work with such as children and young mothers. One person not falling into the older person category said,

“Perhaps there are others like me within a younger age group but who have significant disabilities who may not seek access to the project as it is advertised/geared towards older people. Whilst I’d seen it advertised there was nothing which invited younger people in difficult circumstances to apply. I would not have therefore got in touch with project if the district nurse hadn’t got in touch directly with the project on my behalf. It is good that the project exists and my experience of the project has been very positive.”

Regular, fixed meetings and more social gatherings, events and outings were all listed as potential improvements to the project. More practical help was mentioned too,

“Perhaps arrange for small odd jobs being done, for payment, sometimes we don’t know how to find people to do small jobs and feel nervous about letting strangers in our homes.”

Overall, the response was very positive and highlighted how successful the scheme has been and how invaluable people found the help and support of Village Agents. Indeed, when asked what could be done to improve the work of the Village Agent, one respondent answered ‘by living next door!’ proving just how important the Village Agent is.

Analysis of Focus Groups

A final set of focus groups took place towards the end of the Village Agent Project. These focus groups were held in a number of parish clusters where Village Agents have been working.

Each focus group gave the opportunity for older people to comment on matters or issues concerning them and there are great similarities between the problems raised in these focus groups and those raised in the first round of focus groups (see Baseline Report). The issues clustered around:

- The closure of local post offices and the importance of local shops. Older people are worried about how far they will have to travel to use the nearest post office and stress just how important shops and the post office is to older people living in rural areas.

“It’s older people that need to use the post offices and shops. They don’t have cars and are able to go out everywhere to do their shopping”

- Public transport and problems with infrequent services, poor use of existing buses, hard to access bus stops and confusing routes.

“We got a bus that comes into the village on Thursday. That comes into the village and it’s the only bus. The other buses go at the end of the lane and you can’t walk or if you’ve got shopping it’s a lot to carry up the lane.”

- Trying to make and attend doctor and hospital appointments with particular emphasis on transport to and from locations.

“You have to depend on someone to take you but it’s so embarrassing, I don’t like imposing, it’s not fair you should have to ask.”

- The lack of village spirit

“you don’t get neighbours like you used to. This is why we are grateful for people like you, the Village Agents, and the community police.”

- Community safety and policing issues

“What is a Policeman, please?! Once a month they visit with their mobile police station, they only stay in the village. They don’t get out of the vehicle and walk around the village.”

- Personal safety within the home and out and about

“We go to the falls prevention classes, not sure if it makes it any better. It shows you, if you fall, how to get up by yourself if you can. They do balance things like Tai Chi”.

- Social Activities

“We don’t have much during the day”

“The thing about night time activities is when you live in villages than being in the town we don’t have street lighting, everything is pitch black.”

Many of these concerns have been raised before in earlier focus groups and the work of Village Agents may not be able to solve or alleviate all the issues but the project could help with attitudes towards some of these problems, such as helping to lift village morale and contacting social activities and clubs about their events. Indeed, one Village Agent has set up an over 60s club with 62 members and she brought in libraries to the village.

One good example of how a Village Agent was able to successfully influence the bus company providing services to the village is outlined by one respondent:

“The buses didn’t always come though villages and what was happening we were coming from Cirencester to Swindon along the bottom road, during the winter season it didn’t want to come up and we walked the distance in the dark, it’s nearly a mile and there isn’t a lot of street lights. Jenny (Village Agent) managed to persuade them to change the bus stops and to allow the bus stops to come up into the village.”

The role of the Village Agent and the impact it has had on older people is summed up by the following respondent in a focus group:

“Our Village Agent has been able to come out and explain what it means and what services we are entitled to. By doing it, that method, it’s changed our village.”

6. Overall Evaluation of Village Agent Project

The following section considers the overall evaluation of the Village Agent in relation to the 4 original Memorandum of Understanding outcomes. It also gives a cost benefits analysis of the Village Agent Project

- 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.

Feeling more secure and cared for and having a better quality of life

The report has identified that Village Agents have made **31,244** contacts with older people from January 2007-January 2008, a **247%** increase over the set target. Such contacts have resulted in Village Agents signposting older people to different services, helping them to feel there is someone who they can turn to for help and advice. Indeed, as **197** referrals were made to Fire and Safety (**9%** over target) and **58.3%** agree they know how to get help in their home (an increase of over the life of the project), it would seem older people in Gloucestershire may feel more secure and cared for.

There are a number of social activities arranged for older people which they enjoy as is evidenced by the focus group material above and by the following quote taken from one such focus group,

“I have a different outlook on life, if I may be morbid just for a minute, at times I used to sit there and think of when the time comes this, that and the other. It might sound silly but it’s not now – I live for tomorrow. I have a different outlook and it’s all down to Penn (Village Agent)”

Results from the practical and information gathering questions in the survey also show a 5-25% improvement on the original Baseline questionnaire figures, contributing to the overall feeling that older people feel more safe and secure. **55.5%** of those surveyed in the second questionnaire also stated that their lives had improved a great deal as a result of their contact with a Village Agent. Feeling safe and secure was a positive outcome for one older person who made the following comment during a focus group,

“Jan [Village Agent] organised a police officer to come visit me, he went round and gave me ideas of safety within my home, security lights fitted to the garage at the back. Jan also organised for the fire brigade to come and visit me and fit two new fire alarms. It is absolutely marvellous and they fitted them with ten year batteries so I don’t need to change them or worry about that and in that way I feel secure.”

Easier access to wide range of information enabling decisions

The amount of contacts made with older people by Village Agents listed above identifies how involved Village Agents have been in signposting older people to different services. In the questionnaire, when asked whether they know how to get information about pensions or other benefits when need arises, **54.9%** agreed with the statement, an increase of **19%** since the first questionnaire. A further **51.6%** also agreed they knew how to get information which enables them to make choices about public services (again an increase of **14%**). The increased figure for knowing how to get help in their homes has been mentioned above.

The following quote illustrates how Village Agents have been instrumental in helping older people to make informed choices and decisions.

“You don’t always know the right people to approach and tell you who to contact about issues; Village Agents are fantastic”

The work of the Village Agent has also contributed greatly to a holistic service delivery and promoting partnership work as is illustrated by the partners within Fire and Safety who had nothing but praise for Village Agents in increasing the visibility of older people and making it easier for fire and safety officers to go into the older person’s house to discuss fire and safety issues and fit smoke alarms. As - the Chief Executive of the County Council commented,

“It’s about getting the right people in contact with the right services, and that’s not easy because we are a sparse county. Some of the people would not have had any need for support perhaps for the first 60-70 years of their life. But now they just need some support to stay independent.”

Independence and part of a supportive enabling community

The questionnaire statements testing whether older people felt able to gain access to information and services which would help them live more independent lives have all been raised above. All statements produced a substantial increase on the figures for the first questionnaire. Perhaps more interesting for this outcome, therefore, is the Village Agent who contacted the local bus company and managed to get a bus stop moved into the village so local people could use public transport and bring shopping home with them. The previous location meant it was quite a long walk for people particularly if they were carrying shopping. Another Village Agent also arranges mini bus trips for older people so they could do their Christmas shopping, and fostering greater community spirit. The focus groups listed a number of older persons clubs, coffee mornings, street markets, residents clubs, bowls, wine clubs, social events in local pubs, and lunch clubs. One member of a focus group said of her Village Agent,

“It’s lovely having coffee mornings that are just a few miles away and the trips out she has organised to garden centres during the daytime are great”

Development of the Village Agent Role and future Service Provision

Over the lifetime of the Linkage Project, the work of Village Agents has been extended. They now cover wider geographical areas in order to reach more older people. They have also been key in collecting the research for the project, whether through distributing and collecting questionnaires, suggesting names for focus groups, filling in Gateway forms, and writing up Village Agent diaries and case studies, as well as performing the role they have been engaged to do. The positive response they have received from older people, and the support and encouragement of the project manager, has helped them settle into their role and define how they fit in with their older community’s wants and needs. As time has gone on, Village Agents have developed their own networks and have become much more confident in becoming the person older people turn to and knowing how to help. They have helped older people feel their voices

can be heard and have increased their visibility within the overall local community. Such is the impact of the Village Agents scheme that other parish clusters, not already included in the already extended area covered by Village agents, have phoned up Gloucestershire County Council asking why they do not have Village Agents!

Cost Benefit Analysis

The figures showing the number of referrals made to the Local Pensions Office exceeded the success criteria. The Village Agents are directly responsible for an extra £6015 in benefit claims per week. This figure can be further broken down into specific benefits:

- £4000 - Attendance Allowance
- £1000 - Pension Credit
- £650 - Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
- £365 - Council Tax and Housing Credit

In terms of evaluating the Village Agent project and the work of Village Agents this figure equates to £312,780 in extra benefits coming into Gloucestershire. This breakdown of figures also represents amounts of money going to older people in Gloucestershire which will have some if not significant impact on their quality of life.

In terms of the original key outcomes of the project older people are in receipt of extra benefits which will provide the services or assistance that can help them remain independent in their own homes and enable them to feel part of a supportive enabling community. These extra benefits will also provide a higher standard of living and so enable the older person to make decisions into their own well-being.

A crucial note to this cost analysis is that the figure of £312,780 in extra benefits coming into Gloucestershire is almost the running costs of the Village Agent Project itself.

Setting up similar projects

The project has already attracted the attention of Essex County Council who visited the Linkage Project Manager, Rosie Callinan, to discuss how she approached and developed the scheme. Essex County Council is keen to roll out Village Agents across the whole county. Other counties showing interest are Lancashire and Wiltshire.

The Cabinet Office, is scoping a project on rural exclusion and older people and is presenting to ministers in the first week in November and she too is very interested in the work of Village Agents. It has now been signed off and is taking place. The Conservative Party Policy Unit, is also very interested in the project.

The Village Agent project has been successful in helping older, isolated people. In this instance, older people are rurally isolated but the problems they identified, simply having someone trusted to turn to and 'who is there', is something desirable for an older person in either a rural or an urban setting. Having someone to help with and explain benefit forms, introduce them to existing or new social activities, applying for home improvements are some of the roles performed by Village Agents and which could be performed anywhere across the country. They provide an invaluable link within the community of older people as the Village Agent is the link between the statutory and voluntary organisations and older people themselves.

Indeed, such is the success of the scheme for some focus group members that they suggested similar projects should be set up for young mothers, young families and children.

7. Conclusions

The success of the Village Agent project has been measured via DWP targets, questionnaires, focus groups, Village Agent and older persons' diaries and case studies. The diversity of the research available highlights the achievements and wider consequences of the project to be:

- Older people are now more likely to contact statutory organisations
- Older people have a better awareness of preventative measures
- Social networks are supported and promoted
- Initiatives and information can be directly targeted to the intended recipients
- Village Agents can identify vulnerable older people in an emergency

Through the work of Village Agents of putting older people in touch with different statutory and voluntary agencies has resulted in people are receiving more services. Indeed, as older people have good experiences of receiving services they are now less reluctant to ask for support. This in turn has increased their awareness of preventative measures in relation to their continuing independence. Such is the importance of the Village Agent role that they are now a mainstream council service with an allocated budget provided jointly from Social Care and PCT budgets.

The achievements of the Village Agent project have already been presented and discussed in this report. One of the future and wider aims of the project is that older people are seen as more than consumers of health and social care. The diversity of their needs and interests is as rich and complex as for any other age group. Social interaction, help with home improvements, issues with public transport and bus routes, information on paid work, and contributing to the community and village life, are all areas where Village Agents have been involved with older people. Health and social care form only a small part of the concerns older people have.

As the data and information gathered for this report has been summarised throughout this document, the report will end with the views and thoughts of some of those older people who have benefited from the scheme. The warmth, affection and support they have for their own Village Agent and the impact that person has had on their day-to-day lives is the best illustration of the achievements of this scheme.

"We really didn't know what we were entitled to before we met the Village Agent."

"She's turned out more than a Village Agent, she has become a friend."

"The things that Jenny [Village Agent] has done with our village has amazed me ... she has the right contacts for organisations"

"Penny's [Village Agent] has been my saviour; it's a fine thing this Village Agent scheme."

"I can't praise her enough, to be honest with you, the things we got now are for people through the things Jenny [Village Agent] has done, these people where entitled to it but never knew about it."

Appendix I

Gloucestershire Flooding in 2007 - A Village Agent Diary

A VERY WET WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A VILLAGE AGENT – JANE GRIFFITHS TEWKSBURY BOROUGH

My diary for the week read:

Monday 7.30pm Maisemore Parish Council Meeting
Tuesday 1.30pm Village Agent meeting Gloucester
Tuesday 6.00pm Police Neighbourhood Co-ordination meeting, Innsworth
Wednesday 6.00pm Police Neighbourhood Co-ordination meeting,
Tewkesbury Borough Council Offices
Thursday 2.00pm Maisemore Friendship Group 10th Anniversary Celebrations,

As you can imagine, the reality was rather different!

Monday: Checked around my parishes by phone to see where I could be of most practical help, and how everyone was coping. Two of my parishes, Sandhurst and Chaceley, were severely affected by the flooding, and while I offered support, they were beyond anything I could do at that time. I imagine my services will be more in demand at a later date, when the immediate situation has been alleviated, and residents will be looking for answers to questions about insurance, housing, grants, council services etc. Ashleworth,

Maisemore and Hasfield were relatively unscathed, all retaining their water supply throughout the crisis. Tirley, on the other hand, lost their supply, and were pretty well cut off from civilisation. I spoke to some of my contacts in Tirley, and promised practical help to get water to the elderly as soon as the first delivery arrived.

Tuesday: Ascertained likely time of first water delivery, so drove to Tirley, calling in at one of my clients on the way to drop off some basic necessities. Arrived at the Village Hall where a group of villagers were awaiting the arrival of the water delivery. As soon as it arrived, we all formed a human chain, and soon got it stacked up in the Village Hall. I even roped in two of my sons to help. Once the water was safely stored, I made a list of the elderly and others who would have difficulty getting their own supplies, loaded up my car and set off on my 'water round'. I know the circumstances were far from ideal, but I made a lot of new contacts and gained useful knowledge of where people were particularly in need, for future reference.

Wednesday: I received a call that a local hotel landlady, who still had a water supply, was keeping rooms open for people to go and shower. I relayed this information to some of my contacts in Tirley, produced some posters to display the information, and also some flyers with this information and the offer of help with shopping for necessities during the crisis.

Thursday: Another day, another delivery of water (two tons of the stuff) to unload and deliver, along with my leaflets and some bread which I had been to the local bakery to collect first thing. Picked up a shopping order to deliver later. A dreadful day, weatherwise, so was very grateful for a cup of tea back at the Village Hall. I was rather concerned about one elderly gentleman that I called on, as he hadn't been getting his meals on wheels this week. His neighbour promised to keep an eye on him, and I made a mental note to check up on him at the beginning of the next week. Managed to fit in a home visit to discuss tax credits during the day, but otherwise, normal business suspended for the moment.

Friday: Back at my other job, but clutching my GRCC phone, as I have been asked to take part in a feature on how Village Agents are helping during this emergency, with Mike George on Radio Glos, along with Barbara Piranty. This takes place at 2.30pm. I am a bit nervous, but it seems to go very well, and later that afternoon, I receive a call from Barbara, who has been contacted by a lady who heard the interview and is dreadfully worried about her friends in Tirley who are flooded out, but refused to leave their home. I manage to track down some information about them and find out that they are ok, but unfortunately, the lady gave Barbara an incorrect phone number, so despite our best efforts, we were unable to pass this on. Also following on from the radio feature, I get a phone call from a lady in Maisemore who is very keen to help out in some way. I take her contact details and promise to get back in touch when I know what further help is needed.

So we get to the end of a very strange week. This is obviously an ongoing situation which will continue to affect people for some considerable time. The water has returned to the taps, although not suitable for drinking. I am returning to Tirley next week to check on the situation, and will re-visit all the people I called on, checking that everything is fine, and also offering to take their empty plastic water bottles to be recycled.