

**In Praise of Village Agents**

**Speech for Full Council 16 March 2023 (3mins)**

**The Problem**

As a Lib Dem candidate for Bathavon South, I am privileged to meet residents and understand how I could help as their Councillor. Whilst the image is of bucolic and beautiful villages full of large houses and close communities, I meet people who are struggling which does not fit that picture. These include older people who no longer drive so the threat to rural transport is a real worry. They have become more isolated and lonelier, with families moving away, and they don't know their new neighbours. Or they have never really taken to the internet so can't access information. Or they are on a fixed income and cannot afford the price rises. Or they are struggling to care for partners and need more support. Or they have been hit with bereavement which really impacts their health and wellbeing. Or a combination of several factors.

In the past, these residents would have relied on information from the newspaper, friendly neighbours, the WI, the church, the doctor's surgery and so on. But now many of these traditional supports have disappeared or are less accessible. Covid made this so much worse.

**The Solution**

But help is at hand. The wonderful Village Agents scheme, which has been in the Chew & Somer Valley areas for over a decade, was extended in early 2022, to cover most of rural North East Somerset. Providing a free, confidential and face to face service.

The Village Agents role is to be a "matchmaker" to provide information on a whole range of services. In some cases, specialist advice is needed for housing, finances, carer support, employment or mental health, and an introduction to The Community Wellbeing Hub is best. But alongside those major issues are the important things like finding local cleaners, carers, practical help, volunteers and social clubs. Or setting up new groups because Covid has left many gaps.

People mostly refer themselves after they have heard about the service, or are referred by GPs and others. In recent months there has been a significant increase in calls from people needing financial assistance for food and fuel and claiming benefits.

## **Why It Matters**

From Oct-Dec 2022, 161 clients accessing their services and 70 new referrals made across B&NES, from Bishop Sutton to Batheaston, Combe Down to Midsomer Norton. The demand is growing.

In that period there were over 1,000 contacts with clients, representing nearly 400 hours of work, with 244 onward referrals to other agencies. Village Agents often work with other organisations. This collaborative approach benefits the clients and saves money – one example is a couple with complex life-changing needs which cost the combined services around £900 to deliver and saved the NHS and other statutory services around £95,000.

Run by the West of England Rural Network, there are 9 Village Agents, all working part-time with a project manager. 4 are funded within the HCRG Care Group contract until March 2024. The remaining 5 staff, now covering Peasedown St John, Bathavon North and South, Combe Down and Foxhill were funded by B&NES Public Health and Section 106 money with an end date of December 2023.

## **How B&NES Can Help**

And this is the crux. We can see that this is a valued and growing service, to support, advise and connect an increasing elderly and vulnerable population. It is better to support people in situ rather than leaving them to face a devastating crisis alone. Village Agents can help in the stage before that happens. Therefore, I would ask B&NES to continue funding this valuable service beyond 2023 as one whole service and consider including areas not yet covered, providing much needed equal access for all.

## **Thank you**

Additional extra points -

As a charity WERN has year on year match -funded their Core Contract with money raised from charitable sources and always invested in community development, new groups, wellbeing projects and recovery after Covid lockdowns.

The Village Agent team have always responded to unmet needs:

2020 - provided direct support and funding for a network of community led Mutual Aid groups to ensure local people had what they needed to survive.

2022 - Homes 4 Ukraine - stepped up to help deliver Welfare Checks and support for hosts as guests arrived in B&NES.

2022-23 - Cost of Living crisis- increased capacity and response to the urgent need for support for fuels and food.

2023 - Now in partnership with Age UK - delivering the Community Wellbeing Hub offer to the RUH and Community Hospitals to facilitate shorter hospital stays