

Evaluation of the Northern Fells Village Agent Project

For The Northern Fells Group, Cumbria



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The Northern Fells Village Agent Project in northern Cumbria was set up in 2009 by The Northern Fells Group. Village Agents are community members employed to help local people access information, services and resources, whilst giving support and practical help where necessary and appropriate. This report, commissioned by the Northern Fells Group and undertaken by the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, describes the evaluation of the Village Agent Project undertaken during September and October 2014.

People were finding they weren't the right age, or didn't have the right illness.

People would say 'I'm going round in a circle. Who do I talk to?'

They are often feeling quite desperate particularly if they are a carer.

Founding Trustee NFG

At first I thought why do we need them, couldn't the funding be used in a different way?

I very quickly had to eat my words – there were lots of ways they drew people in and more was done.

NFG resident

We just see what the community needs and we do it.

Village Agent

We ought to be patting them on the back heartily and saying 'You've done a great job'.

Chief Executive, Action for Communities in Cumbria

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Centre for Rural Economy would like to thank Northern Fells Group trustees and staff for their time and support informing the focus and providing data for this evaluation. We would also like to thank the many respondents who helped us in interviews, focus groups and informal conversations.

NOTE

This evaluation was carried out by Katie Aitken-McDermott and Karen Scott of the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University during September and October 2014. Although the researchers worked closely with the NFG to ensure the evaluation met their aims, interview data was confidential and anonymous and was not shared with the NFG. Apart from an introduction by Jim Cox, founding member of the NFG, the contents of this report are an independent assessment by the CRE.

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INTRODUCTION

The Northern Fells Group began in 1999 as the Northern Fells Rural Project. Based on the premise that the concept of deprived 'areas' does not work in the countryside – where wealth and poverty live side-by-side – the project aimed to demonstrate that it was possible to identify and address the unmet social needs of individual people and households in a sparsely populated rural area.

It was one of three projects launched as part of his Rural Revival Initiative by HRH The Prince of Wales. His support and understanding of the countryside was instrumental in the success of the project. Thanks to him, a huge number of amazing volunteers, a small number of part-time paid staff, generous funders and willing partners, the project was a success.

In 2002, after a thorough evaluation, the project became the Northern Fells Group which was re-launched by The Prince of Wales as a community owned, not-for-profit company registered as a charity and limited by guarantee.

The Group serves seven parishes in the northern Cumbrian fells with a population of 3,600 over 50,000 hectares (200 square miles). It aims to identify and address the needs of members of the community in a non-judgemental way. It challenges the myth that deprivation, poverty and social exclusion are only urban phenomena. It aims to identify unmet health and social need, to map existing services, to improve service provision by improving access, to identify and combat rural social exclusion and deprivation and to enable people to remain independent in their own homes and in the area.

Supported by Parish Councils (each of which appoints a trustee and makes an annual contribution to the Group's funds) and working in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies, the Group makes their services accessible. Where necessary it provides services such as transport or benefits assistance.

It is now a well-established and mature charity offering a community minibus service, a lend-a-hand scheme, help with claiming benefits, youth activities, 'men-in-sheds', numerous social events and access to many other services. Almost 20% of residents use at least one of its services. The Group has received several awards including the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2004 and Cumbria Social Enterprise Partnership's Community Enterprise of the Year 2014.

The Group learned that, to reach those people who might benefit most, it has to offer services to everyone. By being 'inclusive' it avoids drawing attention to those who need it most. It has established a reputation as an organisation that can be trusted so that people know that they can turn to it in confidence for help for themselves or their friends and neighbours.

Although it ceased to be a 'project' many years ago, the Group continues to learn from experience and to change the way it works to reflect the needs of the community. In 2008 it became apparent that there was a disparity in the uptake of Group services within the seven parishes. For example, although there was no evidence that Caldbeck residents were any more disadvantaged than others in the Northern Fells area, there was a five-fold difference in uptake of benefits assistance between Caldbeck and Westward parishes. At around the same time results of the Gloucestershire village agent pilot scheme, one of eight 'LinkAge Plus' pilot projects sponsored by the Department for Work and

Pensions, were published.¹ The Gloucestershire project focused on people aged 50 and over and their Village Agents were responsible for a population similar to the whole Northern Fells area.

Northern Fells Group's trustees decided to see whether the Gloucester scheme could be adapted so that Village Agents within the Northern Fells Group area could make uptake of services more equitable for people of all ages. Four Agents, each responsible for one or two parishes and about 900 people, would 'bridge the gap' between the local community, the Northern Fells Group and statutory and voluntary organisations. Funding was secured and Agents were recruited and trained. They were expected to become known and trusted within their parishes, to provide information, to assist people to negotiate the sometimes tortuous routes to expert advice and practical help and to ensure that, as far as possible, the needs of the most vulnerable, isolated and deprived members of the community were addressed.

This report, commissioned by the Northern Fells Group and undertaken by the Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle upon Tyne (CRE), describes the evaluation of the Village Agent project since the first appointment was made in 2009. The Northern Fells Group is extremely grateful to CRE and, in particular, to Karen Scott and Katie Aitken-McDermott for their excellent work.

Jim Cox
Founding Trustee of Northern Fells Group

¹ Commission for Rural Communities (2008). *Rural financial poverty: Good Practice*. Cheltenham: Commission for Rural Communities.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The Northern Fells Group (NFG) challenges the myth that deprivation, poverty and social exclusion are only urban phenomena. It aims to identify unmet health and social need, to map existing services, to improve service provision by improving access, to identify and combat rural social exclusion and deprivation and to enable people to remain independent, in their own homes and in the area.

When it became apparent that uptake of NFG services in different parishes did not necessarily reflect the needs of the community, Village Agents were recruited by the NFG to 'bridge the gap' between communities, the NFG and other voluntary and statutory agencies.

The NFG required an evaluation to understand to what extent the introduction of their Village Agents Project has achieved its aims.

NFG commissioned Katie Aitken-McDermott and Karen Scott, researchers from the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University, to carry out this work. Katie and Karen met with NFG trustees and staff initially to formulate a set of questions they wanted the evaluation to address. Responding to these questions this document is organised around the following sections:

1. What do Village Agents do?
2. Who benefits from NFG Village Agents?
3. What are the barriers to participation and unmet needs?
4. How do VAs ensure joined up working?
5. What are the benefits of NFG model of Village Agents?
6. What has worked?
7. What has not worked?
8. What are the recommendations for Village Agents work in the future?

This evaluation draws primarily on interviews and focus groups with key informants: NFG trustees and staff; volunteers; clients; carers; and stakeholders from other organisations. Additional insights were gleaned from visits to group activities and conversations with community members (where formal interviewing or focus groups were not appropriate or possible). Respondents included individuals from all seven parishes in the NFG area. This evaluation also makes use of data from the Village Agent (VA) Events and Enquiries databases, completed online by each VA. In addition, an online scoping of three other VA projects was carried out for comparison: South Staffordshire, Gloucestershire, and Mid Essex. Finally, Village Agent literature and local Parish Profile data was reviewed.

Individual face to face and telephone interviews took place with:

- four current VAs
- two VA co-ordinators (past and current)
- a NFG Trustee and Benefits Worker
- the NFG Funding Co-ordinator
- the Shed Master for the Men in Sheds project (informal interview during session)

Focus Groups and visits took place with:

- Caldbeck Tai Chi
- Rosley Coffee Morning

- Millhouse Drop-in
- Men in Sheds
- Caldbeck Playgroup

Telephone interviews with representatives from other organisations with experience of working with the NFG and VA project took place with:

- the Chief Executive of Action for Communities in Cumbria
- the Chief Executive of Cumbria Community Foundation
- Chief Officer of Eden Carers
- Manager of Amy's Care a local dementia and disabled care CIC
- Key members of staff from Cumbria County Council Trading Standards
- Staff from Age UK's Home Share Project

Data from VA Events and Enquiries Databases

Events data captures all events that VAs attend including information days, drop-ins, lunch groups, parish council meetings and external networking events. Data includes venue, numbers attending, male and female, number of one-to-one enquiries, and information distributed.

Enquiries data captures all one-to-one contacts made to the VA including: nature of the enquiry and action taken; date it was followed up; status of enquiry (open/closed); number of follow ups; and some client details – whether they live alone, are disabled, what age they are and whether they regularly attend events.²

NFG take meticulous and detailed records regarding enquiries. Some of this data is currently uncategorised however. In addition, due to different and changing funder requirements over the length of the project there are some inconsistencies in data entry. As a result of this, and the numbers of enquiries, a complete analysis of data across the four VA patches and across the whole time frame of the project has not been possible. Therefore, a snapshot analysis has been used and it is explicit throughout this document what data we are referring to and, where necessary, its limitations.

² For the purpose of this evaluation all personal data was anonymised by NFG

1. WHAT DO VILLAGE AGENTS DO?

VA activity is mainly divided into events and enquiries which are described below. A third area of VA activity is co-ordinating formal and informal volunteering. The evaluation reviewed the range, nature and importance of these activities.

Events

Events are regular and one off group activities which VAs organise and/or attend, responding to community requests, preferences or needs. At these events VAs may chat with individuals, distribute NFG literature, and encourage individuals to action e.g. to get a Home Safety check. Regular VA attended events provide opportunities for enquiries, information sharing, and VAs and clients report they have helped build up the visibility, familiarity and trust the VA model relies on. Events provide opportunities for socialising, for contact with VAs, and for building and sustaining the social networks required for informal volunteering and support. Table 1 below outlines the range of events VAs have been involved in delivering since the project between June 2010 and June 2014. (See Appendix 1 for event data for two VAs over a 12 month period).

Regular Events	Irregular/ One-off events
Lunch groups	Information Days
Coffee/Tea groups/ Drop/Pop ins	Tea Dances
Singing for Fun	Carol singing
Men in Sheds	Fund raising
Whist	IT training courses
Heart Start training	Energy switching advice events
Cooking 4 Men	
Slimming Club	
Nail cutting clinics	
Walking 4 Health	
Keep Fit	

Table 1: Village Agent Events between September 2010 and August 2014

Village Agents facilitate many regular events in the NFG area. Some activities started by VAs 'run themselves' and numbers attending are no longer counted as VA outcomes. Nail Clinics are a service now delivered by Age UK, VAs take the bookings. Men in Sheds was started as a VA run project and now has its own paid 'Shed Master'. Other events still require a lot more VA involvement and there may be scope for more volunteer involvement with these.

Regular lunch groups, coffee/tea mornings have been established and supported by VAs where none existed or where they were under threat. Where there is an established lunch group the VA attends. If necessary VAs organise the venue, they help to co-ordinate transport (using volunteers, the NFG minibus, or driving individuals themselves), and they co-ordinate volunteer bakers/cooks, bake/cook themselves, set up, clear away and wash up.

Within events there is a significant sub-group of health related activities and information days that bring services and expertise into the area. Nail clinics and information days are good examples of the model where VAs locate the need, co-ordinate the event and give the service provider easy access to

a critical mass of people. This model has successfully linked in services to the area and could have potential for other services finding it difficult to meet community needs in this isolated rural area.

Enquiries

Enquiries are one-to-one contacts which VAs have with individuals to give information, link individuals into services or just offer a listening ear. Between June 2010 and August 2014 the VA enquiries database records 1160 individual enquiries. A snapshot analysis of one year April '13 – March '14 has been used to indicate the range of issues enquiries cover (see Appendix 2 for details of the type of enquiry in each parish for this year).³ These enquiries include: VAs linking clients to 'lend a hand' after they come out of hospital; liaising with the minibus service for enabling visits to hospital or hospice; helping clients access the nail clinic; helping clients to access social events like Singing 4 Fun; liaising with fuel companies; filling in forms; and accessing home care and benefits services. Some external services VAs promote and link into successfully are Trading Standards' electric blanket checks, Fire Service Home Safety checks, and Dog Micro-chipping.

A significant number of enquiries (8%/n26) relate to providing a listening ear or some social contact. The entries show VAs remembering bereavement anniversaries and checking how a client is coping; knowing that someone has gone into hospital and checking their partner is OK; visiting clients they know have just come out of hospital; talking with upset clients; being available for a chat – on the phone and at events.

VAs enquiries play an important role in enabling and supporting access to services not provided by NFG. Data shows that 41% (n135) were enquiries regarding agencies or services not provided by NFG, while 8% came from clients choosing to link into non VA organised NFG services via their local VA. Although clients could link into these services directly they either chose not to or hadn't thought of it until VAs prompted them. Promoting and linking clients into the electric blanket checking, the home/fire safety checks, fuel companies, Age UK Nail clinics, dog micro-chipping, local oil syndicates, and the 'lend a hand' and minibus services are important outputs.

In terms of improving clients' access to services outside NFG 27% (n87) one to one contacts recorded establish or improve this. Benefits assistance is included in this category because it brings resources into the NFG area though it is via referral to the NFG Benefits Worker.

Link between events and enquiries

Enquiries are obviously linked to events; many enquiries arise out of contact with VAs at events and many enquiries refer clients to NFG events. According to the data 507 enquiries are recorded from 471 events attended by two VAs between June 2010 and June 2014. Events recorded also include external networking events, and as enquiries are only one of the outcomes to come from event attending this would seem a productive use of VA time. Tea dances and one off events seem to be particularly productive for numbers of enquiries but it is only by collecting case studies that the quality and depth of enquiries could be assessed – this is beyond the scope of this evaluation. Both events and enquiries tackle social and geographical isolation and disconnection from services, but enquiries also need to be understood for the important role they play for people who cannot or chose not to

³ There may be considerable under-reporting for one parish as numbers of enquiries from events and numbers of enquiries does not match.

attend events. Significantly enquiry data for the year April '13 – March '14 shows that 29% (n81) of the client enquiries/contacts are from clients who do not attend events. They link those clients to NFG services, bring external services into the NFG, and facilitate links beyond the area – in particular with fuel companies. So, the two activities are mutually beneficial and allow maximum coverage.

Co-ordinating Volunteering

As well as linking residents into the services provided by lend a hand and transport volunteers VAs co-ordinate volunteers to help deliver their events, and co-ordinate and facilitate informal volunteering. Volunteers regularly bake, make and serve lunches, share transport to and from events, and will also support people in their home, either with practical support or company and conversation. Much of this volunteering and neighbourliness goes uncounted but is evidenced in the VA interviews and focus groups. Respondents are clear that without VA activity and co-ordination much of it wouldn't happen. The VA role means VAs know who to ask – who can and will help, and with knowledge of their patches and their communities can connect the right people. It is important to recognise that the benefits gained from volunteering for the VA project are often two-way. A recurring theme running through VA interviews was that volunteers felt 'involved', 'useful' and better for 'giving something back'.

2. WHO BENEFITS FROM VILLAGE AGENTS?

Demographic reach

Despite the aim of the VA project to be a 'cradle to grave' service, in terms of age the main group who have benefitted from the VA project have been the retired and the elderly. The age related data indicates approximately half of all enquiries are from individuals over 70, only about 5% from individuals categorised between 0-44, with approximately a quarter of enquiries from those aged between 40 and 64, and another quarter between 60 and 75 categories.⁴ Table 2 (below) shows age data of one-to-one client enquirers between June 2010 – June 2014. (See Appendix 3 for age data for VA enquiries in each area).

0 – 44	5%
40 – 64	22%
60 – 75	24%
70+	49%

Table 2: Age profile of enquiry clients

The age of the VA client group reflect the demographics of the populations served, and the isolation issues arising from an aging population in a rural area. Many of the parishes have significantly higher levels of older residents compared to the national average (see Appendix 4 for details on demographics for each area). Enquiry data for the year April 2013 – March 2014 shows 31% (n87) of the client enquiries/contacts are from clients who live alone. Respondents related overlapping layers of isolating factors including:

- Poor transport infrastructure and limited/no public transport services
- Poor health, and caring responsibilities affecting mobility
- Incomes, limited and stretched – in particular by rising fuel prices
- Poor access to Internet due to insufficient knowledge and confidence, and limited/ no broadband service
- Culture of self-sufficiency and pride can create barrier to asking for help
- Incomers without family support networks
- Falling confidence levels
- Perceptions of need

It is clear that whilst the VAs are there for everyone, being responsive to the predominant needs of an older population has determined the type of activities they organise and the services they link to. This may mean there is a perception that VAs are just there for older people. We address this further in section 2.

Geographic reach

One of the key aims of the VA service was to connect all seven parishes with NFG services and address issues of distance decay. NFG services were set up to serve the seven parishes - NFG trustees wanted

⁴ The age data on the NFG client database has too many overlapping categorises and therefore analysis has only been able to indicate broad age categories.

to address a fall in take-up of NFG services as the distance from Caldbeck increased, and the perception that NFG was ‘for Caldbeck’. The VA project, and in particular the model of one VA serving a relatively small number of people in one or two parishes, was intended to increase take-up of their services across the whole area.

While some respondents suggest VAs have successfully reached out into other parishes others suggest there is still scope for this ‘distance decay’ to be addressed in particular areas.

Northern Fell Group has different areas ... lend a hand, transport, etc. People knew about it but when Village Agents were appointed they encouraged, they widened the net.

In the early days people perceived it as [for] Caldbeck. They have widened the perception geographically.

I think they could do a lot more work in Ireby to attract those men. Ireby is on the fringe of the network.

NFG Residents

VA enquiry data and some interview and focus group data suggests that there is still work needed in Boltons and Ireby with Uldale. Comparing total number of enquiries in the four 12 month periods between June 2010 and May 2014 indicates that these areas have significantly fewer enquiries than Westward, Mungrisdale and Castle Sowerby patches in years 2, 3, and 4 relative to population size See Table 3 below (some demographic data is included in the table below for convenience but see Appendix 4 for more detailed demographic data). It is particularly notable that Westward started at a similar level of enquiries. Responses from interviewees in Ireby and the VA responsible for this patch concur with this analysis.

		Westward	Mungrisdale and Castle Sowerby	Boltons, and Ireby with Uldale	Caldbeck and Sebegham
Year 4	June 2013 – May 2014	75	98	30	74
Year 3	June 2012 – May 2013	107	160	29	54
Year 2	June 2011 – May 2012	93	123	23	66
Year 1	June 2010 – May 2011	30	73	24	33
Population Total		840	640	1090	1100
Over 65s		175	160	245	270

Table 3: numbers of enquiries from each VA patch between June 2010 and May 2014 and population size

While this observation is important it also needs to be acknowledged that take up of NFG services and numbers of VA enquiries will be affected by other factors. Ireby with Uldale is cut off from Caldbeck by five miles of fells, and other factors like differences in demographics and transport services will affect needs. Further it has to be recognised that while all the VAs are paid for the same amount of time some VAs can and do give more a lot more time voluntarily. All are factors which make numerical calculations difficult to interpret – but which could inform data collection strategy in the future.

3. WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND UNMET NEEDS?

This evaluation has found that the VA project has been very successful (see sections 1 and 2) in meeting the needs of many residents. In order to build on that success NFG wanted to know if there were any barriers to participation and any unmet needs the VAs could or should focus on in the future.

Barriers to participation

Several barriers were identified by this research:

- lack of knowledge about the VAs
- personal pride and independence
- a perception that the VA service is just for older people
- perceptions of need – either individuals perceiving themselves or being perceived as not ‘needy enough’.

Awareness

Whilst it seems many of the older residents, particularly in the very remote parishes of Mungrisdale and Castle Sowerby, and closer to Caldbeck, are aware of the VA project some respondents indicated more and better publicity and awareness raising would benefit some parishes, the ‘hard to reach’, and younger members of the community across the NFG area. A brief review of VA publicity and literature showed it contained a large amount of information which was sometimes difficult to interrogate.

It's lack of knowledge, of awareness that the Village Agent is there to help the community. They need to put themselves forward [and say] 'This is what we can do for you'.

Response from the client base

Too much information, people switch off ... not everybody has [the] reading skills.

Respondent commenting on NFG publicity

The one-to-one service in particular was perceived by some as needing publicity especially to meet the needs of the ‘hard to reach’ including those who chose not to attend events. There are tensions around publicising this as the one-to-one VA service has to be confidential and discreet which inevitably makes it less visible to the community. However more publicity of what this aspect of the project does achieve could increase take up of the service.

One respondent's perception of the VA work:

They are wonderful at organising social events and classes but I still feel that doesn't actually get to the people they were employed to reach.

S/he went on to say approvingly of the sensitivity of VAs:

[they are] stepping lightly ... it's a gradual thing ... once that seed's grown it can move on to other people.

Interview responses and data analysis comparing outcomes from different parishes indicate there is further scope for the VA project to publicise to a wider range of people and to publicise the range of enquiries that can be made. One suggestion was for a more targeted use of NFG volunteers and other local voluntary groups to promote the service and refer new clients. To do this with current resources would require strategic prioritising. Interviewees also acknowledged that no matter how much publicity there is for many the service only becomes relevant or visible when a need arises.

We're not on their wavelength until something becomes a bit complicated in their lives...when it becomes relevant we want somebody to say to them 'Why don't you give Northern Fells a ring?'

NFG Trustee

Personal Pride and Independence

Consistently VAs and other respondents identified personal pride and independence, stated as products of the local culture of self-sufficiency and historic independence, as barriers to participation. This was often attributed by respondents to indigenous men, and the local farming community. The fact that some of VA team includes people indigenous to the area was seen as very important to their success. It is worth noting that VA responses seemed to indicate some progress and success with the 'harder to reach' while recognising more time was needed to gain trust and reach more people. Respondents indicated it was indigenous men on their own who would be particularly hard to reach, without knowing if enquirers were men, and how long they had lived in the area it was not possible to see if VAs were meeting this perceived need.

*...pride and independence.
...don't want to use charity.
It's in the breeding that they are independent people.*

NFG Residents

Perception of the VA service

The perception that the VA service is just for older people was not universal but it was a barrier identified by VAs and other members of the NFG community. The evaluation found this to be a product of several factors:

- NFG and VA ongoing success meeting the needs of the older and elderly
- Limited VA resources and necessary prioritising
- The demographic characteristics of the area
- Perceptions of need from younger groups and from within the older community

*Everybody thinks 'Northern Fells, it's old people' and it's not.
There are a lot of people who are isolated who aren't older people.*

VA Team

*It wouldn't even occur to me [to go to them with a problem] but now that you've said it.
The perception is that it is for older people.*

NFG Residents in the 24 – 44 age group

Perceptions of Need

The evaluation found that perceptions of who is 'needy' or 'deserving' of help may act as barriers. This was particularly highlighted by a focus group with mothers of small children, who, although they identified many issues they were struggling with, felt that they wouldn't want to contact NFG and 'take resources away from people who really need it'.

We are not deserving.

It's not for people like us, with two cars.

I don't know who my VA is... they haven't visited playgroup.

NFG Residents in the 24 – 44 age group

Specific Unmet Needs Identified

A group identified by respondents as having unmet needs were young people (teenagers). Although NFG has organised activities for children and teenagers each year in the Easter and summer holidays and VAs recognised that young people can be isolated and need support to access services, there seemed to be a commonly held belief that the younger generation could and would prefer to access services or help elsewhere.

The 30-50 age group were identified by three VAs as a group under-represented in VA events and enquires and therefore there may be some needs, particularly amongst new parents, the unemployed and those without a car that require attention. One VA identified transport as an important issue, and noted the impact of isolation for those not working – even temporarily, another VA commented she would be visiting a neighbour who having recently had a baby might now be in need of her services although in the past she was working and hadn't felt a need. The evaluation found that parents of young children seemed to have some unmet needs. The feelings of isolation and the practical difficulties faced by this group caring for small children in a rural community is clear from their responses, particularly for those who are incomers.

It's hard in the school yard every day, it's really hard. People don't mean to leave you out but they all know each other and have done for years. You feel like an outsider.

With a young family ... [it's hard] if you don't have family locally to rely on.

If you don't have family to ask it's really hard...even if you do have family there's only so much you can ask.

I'm alright I've been here twenty years so I know people now ... but it was hard.

Conversation from focus group

Other unmet needs identified and prioritised by research participants included:

- the needs of carers (the take up of Attendance Allowance locally reflects this)
- specific travel issues due to the closure of weekly bus services to local shops and services
- difficulties shopping - either getting to shops or accessing online shopping
- childcare and support for young parents

In addition, some comments from older residents reflected some perceptions that younger people with children are working or too busy to get involved in the community and therefore don't hook into local support networks as well as they might. Sometimes this was perceived as unfriendliness. It was felt by some that this was a shame as the community spirit was lacking in some areas. On the other hand new families coming in sometimes felt like outsiders. Some of the older people also missed the contact with younger people now that their children had grown up and moved away. There may be some need for intergenerational or whole community events to build understanding and links across these groups.

*Young people don't want to join in.
They don't mix...missing out on neighbourliness.
Also they have lots more choice and can travel.*

Comments from older VA clients

I think Northern Fells Group try to bring the whole community together. It would help if they did more things for the community, engage the family groups etc.

NFG Resident

There is a sense that the young parent age group haven't got time but it's not actually always the case. I think when those people have younger children and they have say joined the PTA, that is when to catch them. It is those people that are the next leaders.

NFG Resident and local volunteer

Whilst this evaluation found some unmet needs, and particular groups who could perhaps benefit from VA work it does not indicate that VAs either have the capacity or are the most appropriate mechanism to meet those needs. It should be recognised, and recorded, that much of VAs work is done above and beyond their paid hours, in a voluntary capacity. In order to address new areas of need the VA project would have to access new resources and/or reallocate existing resources. The main resource is VA and volunteer time – VA time includes paid and voluntary time. All the VAs reported giving more time than they are paid for and it is important to recognise that without that extra voluntary commitment the existing VA outcomes would not be possible.

4. HOW DO VAS ENSURE JOINED UP WORKING?

Internal stakeholders

This evaluation has shown that Village Agents are generally well linked into local networks of clients, volunteers, and key community players. In the case of all the Village Agents their 9½ hours paid work per week is supplemented by their other 'hats' – other hours of paid or voluntary work and/or 'presence' in their communities - as a Heart Start trainer, as a First Responder, as a Teaching Assistant or local school governor, and/or by having lived in the community all their lives.

Different parishes and communities within those parishes are at different stages of involvement, and much depends on the geography and demographics of each parish. How well served they are by transport infrastructure and by public transport to local service centres is key, both to the demographics and needs each Village Agent is working with.

The extent to which VAs are linked in seems to depend on the amount of time each individual gives to the post, the networks VAs are part of already, and the nature of the communities they serve. This research has shown different levels of buy-in from the local community for the four different Village Agents depending on the nature of their communities, their own personal and professional networks and the amount of time they as individuals can give to the role. Common themes across the parishes indicate that key to 'buy-in' from local stakeholders is that their Village Agent lives in the community, has established connections into their community, and is 'present' - makes themselves known, attends regular events, is seen in the community for informal chat.

External stakeholders

Awareness of the NFG Village Agents amongst external and/or county wide stakeholders consulted seems to be very good and individuals have huge praise for NFG and the VA project, and what it has achieved.

One key mechanism VAs use to connect themselves and the community with other organisations and services is the Information Days which they organise. These provide opportunities for the community to access information about relevant organisations and services in the area, and for services to access and inform members of the Northern Fells community who otherwise would not necessarily be aware of them. These days bring relevant external organisations and NFG residents together and are considered by VAs and NFG residents to be highly successful events.

Between April '13 and March '14 five Information Days were held in the parishes of Castle Sowerby, Mungrisdale, Westward, Ireby with Uldale, and Caldbeck. 134 people attended. Information was provided by Allerdale Council, Age UK, Caritas Hearing Care, Amy's Care, Energy Therapy, Eden Community Alarms, the Fire Service, Recycling, Trading Standards, and Eden Care Alarms.

The importance of the VA role for outside organisations linking in was clear in the telephone interviews with local stakeholders. Some stakeholders were also keen to see how their organisation and the VA project could do more work together in the future. Only one mentioned that s/he wasn't sure how to easily transfer information to the Village Agents.

We use them to get information out. It works two ways, if they know someone with a problem they refer them to us.

They are great ... they always get back to us, they are good at keeping in touch, we never have to chase them.

We are constantly liaising with them about events we are putting on which we want them to put round. They are the link to get information transfer.

I think they are a fantastic concept and I think it's something that should be replicated across the county ... perhaps NFG could mentor other groups [to come up with a self-help solution]. That would be a funding opportunity.

We would love to do a joint bid with them because we could see them as being very key to helping us all succeed.

Comments from external stakeholder interviews

It would be nice ... if we have something going on, for example we have solicitors doing free half hour slots for us. It would be great if there was one easy conduit for us to put that information to them... As I say it probably exists now but I'm not aware of it.

External Stakeholder

5. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF NFG MODEL OF VILLAGE AGENTS?

The NFG VA project differed from other projects scoped in several ways as follows:

- No formal referral mechanism or referral partners beyond the NFG
- VAs live in patch, are always 'present' and accessible via home phone
- Team of paid staff: 1 co-ordinator and 4 VAs, each giving more than they are paid for
- Each VA covers a relatively small area (one or two parishes) and small population
- Models reflects the differentiation of the different parishes

Unlike other VA projects scoped for this evaluation NFG VAs were not linked to a larger statutory or voluntary organisation from outside their area, and did not have predetermined targets or priority groups or issues. Instead NFG VA project was set up 'from' and 'with' the community, from a shared experience of isolation and disconnection from services, and aims to provide 'a cradle to grave' service for all members of the community in need.

The NFG VA project has been allowed by the NFG to develop organically, with a bottom-up approach founded on the community organisation's knowledge and understanding of community need. Within the NFG much of that knowledge has come from the experience and expertise of medical professionals with years of experience of the local community. And the VA project has had a bank of community trust and respect for the NFG on which to build its own reputation. Listening and responding to community need, understanding the nuances of their communities, and building on the work of the NFG has enabled VA project to be very successful.

One crucial difference between the models came from NFG understanding that each of the parishes presented different needs, and that this and the geographical distances between the parishes made it important for one VA to serve a smaller population than in other projects. Four VAs living in the communities they serve has produced subtly different approaches to the role – reflecting the differing needs of each community. It has enabled the project to access many more networks internal and external to the area and, it has meant more voluntary hours – all make the breadth and depth of VA activity possible.

In contrast to NFG VAs other projects have had the backup and resources of organisations like County Councils, Rural Community Councils, and Health Commissioning Groups. Although the NFG VA project does not have the same depth and range of resources and expertise to draw on, or formal links into large statutory or voluntary organisations, it is embedded in the NFG services and volunteers. The NFG and its services have from the start of the project provided the VA with resources and credibility to enable them to carry out their role. NFG services include a Benefits Worker; Lend a Hand co-ordinator and volunteers; Community Transport scheme; Youth Activities co-ordinator, and local Lunch Groups. NFG services enable VAs to combine practical help, and a listening ear.

Along with four VAs own personal and professional networks the project began and continues with the advantage of NFGs reputation with external organisations and their belief that NFG VAs could be trusted to help them meet their own targets. A good external reputation, networking beyond the area, and a ready audience has meant VAs are well placed to leverage in funding, support and information into their communities.

Four Paid Village Agents: Seven Parishes

The Village Agent model the NFG devised for the seven parishes reflects the physical and social geography of the communities they serve with one village agent serving one or two parishes each with very small populations of between 640 and 1100. This evaluation has found that understanding these parishes and their individual characteristics has been key to the success of the service, and is critical to understanding and evaluating the service and individual village agents' outcomes.

Though covering a relatively small population the four Village Agents cover seven diverse parishes and serve residents experiencing rural living and isolation in a variety of different ways with much of the population widely dispersed across an area of 200 square miles in isolated dwellings or small, isolated settlements of two or three houses, with some parishes separated by miles of fells.

Each parish has its own character and identity, and different needs, depending on which service centres the community looks to, how well linked the service centres are by road and public transport, the physical geography and the demographics of each area.

Our concerns are here in the village.

There's five miles of fells between Caldbeck and my area.

NFG Resident

[this parish has] totally different people.

Comparing our patches – well they might as well be on different planets.

I don't think it [my patch] is difficult, it's just different to everyone else's.

VA Team

That the VAs 'live in' the communities they serve is considered by their clients as crucial to their success and not one respondent felt that it would be possible for one full time VA to effectively serve the whole area. The need for a Youth Club in Bolton would not necessarily have been noticed by a VA in Mungrisdale, two very different areas demographically.

The model of 1 VA working with smaller population groups:

- Reduces travel time and expense in a large area, allowing VAs to attend groups
- VAs have a sense of belonging and community responsibility
- Builds familiarity and trust with community
- Makes internal or informal referrals more likely – a little chat, 'a word in the ear' 'a whisper' from a shopkeeper/ hairdresser, in the school yard, or when out walking the dog
- Makes best use of volunteers and informal social networks within their community
- Means 'follow up' is easier and less formalised
- Means the project has four paid members of staff, a team, to share the load and share ideas
- Means VAs are more likely to understand wider aspects of their communities and so are better placed not to 'step on toes' - for example ensuring lunch groups are not competing with pubs, knowing about local historical fallings out – over farm land for example

The importance of being 'present' at events, of living in the community, of being from the community and getting involved has been reiterated throughout this evaluation.

The more familiar you are with them the more likely you are to ask them can you help me with this that or the other.

[We] get chatting "O you know Mr So and So who lives at that farm cottage? I happen to know he is not coping very well". Well Mr So and So isn't necessarily going to approach a VA but if the word is a passed along the VA can go and discreetly make some enquiries.

One of the reasons people weren't accessing the service [was] they were too far from the point of enquiry. Having just one person still left too many isolated.

Having one VA over a small area means people know who they are and there's always something local.

Having four is safety mechanism for them.

You lose the local effect if you only had one person...you certainly wouldn't have the personal connection.

I live in my patch which does help. It's supposed to be a 9½ hour per week job but...I take the dog out and somebody grabs you. That's why it works. If I lived in Carlisle and popped by twice a week they're not going to talk to me.

Most of what I pick up is when I'm out and about.

NFG Residents, VA volunteers and VA clients

If we have a problem we'll email the girls 'does anyone know?'

We are a team and I think we are a very good team.

It's a lot of pressure for one person. It's not the same as working in a town.

VA team

Having four VAs means the team can draw on four sets of networks, expertise and currently four individuals giving time voluntarily. Given that so much VA time is given voluntarily and so much else of NFG activity relies on volunteers this evaluation sought to find out if VAs needed to be paid and so asked other volunteers in the area if it was necessary. Local long term volunteers asked felt the role was too much responsibility and that VA payment provided 'leadership'. Leadership, co-ordination, flexibility and reliability are all qualities the NFG are paying for that a voluntary VA could not be expected to provide across the range of issues and projects currently being delivered.

You need a leader in communities and that's what the VA are supposed to be.

Not fair to be voluntary. It is a lot of responsibility. And there is a limit to what you can ask volunteers to do.

NFG residents and volunteers

6. WHAT HAS WORKED?

In its first five years the VA project has successfully addressed issues of isolation and disconnection from services. The Village Agent approach has been multi-faceted, has responded to community need, and has accessed and used resources from within the community and beyond for the benefit of many living in the seven NFG parishes. We identify several areas of success:

- *Responsiveness*
- *Being creative, thinking outside the box, coming up with solutions to problems*
- *Creating self-sustaining initiatives*
- *Engendering trust and air of confidentiality*
- *Enhanced socialising activities and sense of community*
- *Providing practical help and emotional support*
- *Built confidence of people in the area to stay in the area*
- *Helping incomers find a way in*
- *Successful in helping NFG tackle their priority issues*
- *Successful at reaching those not coming to events, hard to reach, extending reach of NFG*
- *Successful at leveraging in other support*

Responsiveness

The success of VA activities, evidence from clients, including volunteers, and examples of their work – Men in Sheds, Nail Cutting service, Walking for Health, and Bolton Youth Club all show that VAs are responding to community need and listening to clients.

- Men in Sheds began with a comment made by a client two years ago and now runs as a standalone project providing local men with opportunities to be and feel productive, and to socialise.
- Nail cutting services began with one client in need and has grown to two local bi-monthly nail clinics run by Age UK.
- Walking for health activity was requested by the community and two VAs have been trained by Macmillan Cancer Support and the Ramblers and now organise regular short walks.
- A youth club was set up in Bolton after parents commented there was nothing for young people to do, it ran successfully until similar activities were organised elsewhere.

It's been a huge learning curve because when we set off we didn't know what we were going to do.

We respond to what the residents ask us to do Everything tends to come from an enquiry from a resident.

It's needs driven. Then the parameters have then got to be set. We listen, we listen as a group, as an organisation, and we respond to what people are requesting.

VA team

It's about listening to need ... chatting ... a little conversation turns into the apple scheme.

VA volunteer

Being Creative, Thinking outside the Box

In responding to client need VAs have found creative solutions to problems, solutions with benefits beyond the immediate needs. The apple scheme is a good example of their enterprising activities. All the VAs interviewed recognised a range of benefits the apple scheme brought and saw the opportunities it, and the oil syndicates, could provide for reaching out further into their communities. Oil syndicates in particular were noted for their potential to improve the reach of the VA service, as they attract a wide range of people of all ages.

Apple Collecting

The Apple Scheme started as a chat while looking at apples going to waste. It now runs across the seven parishes, volunteers help to pick the apples, they are pressed into apple juice locally, which is then sold. Last year NFG made over £700 from the sale of apple juice alone. Collecting apples and involving the community differently gives VAs a 'foot in the door' and enquiries come from it.

People don't want to be seen as needy but you can go round to collect apples ... "could you pop round and collect my apples? By the way what do I do about..." (VA)

Self-sustaining activities

It was clear from responses from the VA team that activities 'running themselves' were regarded as an important sign of long term success. Activities identified as running themselves were the nail clinics and the oil syndicates.

Two bi-monthly nail clinics are run by Age UK in Rosley Village Hall and Hesket Newmarket Chapel Room as a result of VAs identifying a need, leverage in, and then publicising, a service. They now run regularly, clients make an appointment with the VA, and individuals make use of NFG transport where necessary. Between April 2013 – March 2014, 134 appointments were made for this service. Previously clients would have had greater difficulty accessing this service. It has also been useful in picking up and referring clients who need medical attention who may not have been seen otherwise.

All of the seven NFG parishes are now served with oil syndicates, most have been established by VA activity and all are promoted by VAs, but they require very little VA time with large financial benefits for the customers. Between April 2013 and March 2014 there were £5200 of savings for clients.

Engendering Trust and Confidentiality

The importance given to maintaining the trust of the community and the reputation of NFG was reiterated many times by staff, volunteers and clients during this evaluation process. And it has been evident that VAs understand their community and have maintained appropriate levels of discretion. We found no evidence of barriers to using the service due to lack of trust or concerns about confidentiality. This is contrary to what we expected to find in small communities.

*People are very discreet.
I know if I wanted help Northern Fells would be the first place I'd go.
Me too.*

Conversation at VA event

We never discuss things outside.

VA

It would die a death if people didn't trust

NFG volunteer

Enhanced socialising activities and sense of community

Initiating and supporting social activity been shown to be very important to the VA addressing social isolation and disconnection from services. Social activities build trust and familiarity to encourage enquiries, provide opportunities for VAs to listen and identify need, and provide a ready audience of people to connect into events like Information Days. The events and activities also strengthen informal support networks and encourage informal volunteering - neighbourliness. The role VA activity plays in supporting informal networks and building a sense of community, was apparent from VA client and volunteer responses, particularly in the more rural parishes.

People volunteer without being volunteered.

VA Team

The value of regular social interaction to a sense of community and an individuals' mental health is difficult to quantify and it was beyond the scope – and ethics - of this short term evaluation but it is reasonable to assume, given existing evidence, that providing regular opportunities for groups to come together has important mental health benefits.

Providing practical help and emotional support

By combining practical help and emotional support the VAs can work with individuals on whatever level they want to engage with the service and VA interviews indicate that one will often lead to another. The remit of providing both practical and emotional support means one Village Agent can serve different needs in one or more visits with no artificial service-led division of the individuals' needs.

*They do follow up.
She came round and sat with me for two hours. You can't buy that sort of loyalty.
It's about knowing somebody local to talk to.*

VA Clients

Built confidence of people in the area to stay in the area

An important VA outcome reported by VAs and their clients is raising the confidence and sense of security of older people enabling them to stay in their own homes and in the area. Lack of confidence and worry are identified as priorities by VAs and clients. Confidence issues were often related to living

alone, and to having to engage with external services. The clients and the data report VA providing practical help like support for filling in forms, making telephone calls, accessing home and emotional support.

A lot of our clients are not computer literate and everything is 'go onto our website'. Village Agent enables them to do it from home. They can feel confident.

They don't have to worry. [People worry about] 'I've got to get myself to town, and there's all the forms, I don't know what forms I need'.

VA Team

It is worth noting that while self-help independence and a 'can do' attitude were all described as important to the Northern Fells culture, a lack of confidence dealing with external organisations was also noted - perhaps too also a product of self-sufficiency.

When you get older it gives you security. They are worth their weight in gold. There's no payment to reward them.

It gives you clout [when speaking to external services].

[It's] a lifeline.

VA clients

Very often families [at a relative's funeral] would ask that part of the collection go to Northern Fells because of what it had enabled relatives to do in their own home with confidence.

NFG Resident

One younger person said that she was aware of the NFG and respected the work they did but currently she was not in a position to volunteer because she was too busy, and at the moment she didn't need their help. However, she felt that just knowing they were there when she did get older or her life changed was very important. She said it gave her confidence to stay in the area.

That VAs are 'on call' and available would seem to be an important feature for some clients.

Helping incomers find a way in

The evaluation has indicated that the VA events and activities were particularly important for older incomers to the area. People without family locally find that the VA service provides them with a link into the area, both as volunteers and clients. To investigate if indigenous residents are served differently by the project it may be useful or informative for enquiry clients, in particular, to be asked how long they have lived in the area if this is of interest to the project/ funders.

There's a strong farming community...they have relatives, their own support system. If you are outside that it [VAs and NFG] fills a gap.

NFG Resident

Successful in helping NFG tackle a priority issue

Though the VA project did not have targets when they were setting up the project the NFG had identified fuel poverty as one issue that particularly affected the area. Tackling fuel poverty has been one of the successes for the VA project and gave the project an initial focus. Identifying a similar priority issue for the future could give the VA project another focus and reach demographically and geographically just as tackling fuel poverty has done.

Fuel Poverty

To address fuel poverty VAs have provided information from outside organisations at Information days, brought local CAB advisors into the area to advise clients, established oil syndicates, and liaised with energy companies for clients.

VA work to tackle fuel poverty represents an excellent example of how the project has involved key community players to refer clients and disseminate information.

Interviews with Village Agents about fuel poverty and fuel bill issues demonstrated the importance of those confidential, one to one enquiries with a trusted individual embedded in their community. Reports of a minibus driver sharing energy saving information advice with their passengers shows how VA activity embedded in the NFG network can have impact.

Between April 2013 and March 2014 oil syndicates saved individual participants a total of £5200; three energy switching days were held in conjunction with Citizens Advice Bureau, one client saved £112; and 47 fuel-related individual enquiries were recorded by Village Agents. Of the 47 fuel related one to one enquiries, 24 were linking into the oil syndicates, and many of the remaining 23 enquiries were about energy bills.

VA fuel poverty work is one example of the project facilitating the work of external organisations by providing them easy access to a relevant and receptive audience.

This evaluation found the NFG Village Agent Project has helped to address the following priority issues:

- Social isolation
- Accessing health services
- Accessing safer living services
- Healthy Living
- Fuel Poverty

Successful at reaching those not coming to events, hard to reach, extending reach of NFG

The evaluation has shown that VA work has been successful in expanding the reach of the NFG services with a total of 1,161 enquiries to village agents recorded between June 2010 and August 2014. Of all the enquiries recorded across the four patches in the sample year April 2013 - March 2014 8% (n27) are from individuals choosing to access NFG services via their local VA rather than directly through the NFG staff responsible for those services. NFG services included in the count are Lend a Hand, Transport, Apples Scheme, Benefits/ Blue Badge advice, NFG membership.

Significantly of all enquiries recorded between April 2013 – March 2014, 25% (n81) were from individuals who don't regularly come to events, in one patch this number rose to 59% (n47). 8% (n26) of enquiries were categorised as providing a listening ear/ social contact and 27% (87) from people recorded as living alone.

Analysis of event data for 2 VAs between April 2013 and March 2014 shows 42% (464) were men attending regular and one off events, often considered a hard to reach group. Evidence gathered from the interviews with the clients and providers of the Men in Sheds project shows another important group of users being served by the VA established project – men with dementia and their carers.

Successful at leveraging in other support

VA successes have been achieved through a wide variety of mechanisms and projects, by making good use of local volunteers and often by making use of local statutory and voluntary support networks. External funding and resources have been successfully leveraged into the area to tackle priority issues matched by Village Agent hours, paid and voluntary, and community voluntary hours. Describing how one VA made best use of local volunteers, one VA volunteer said:

She does so much you feel you can do something too. It is non-stop. The phone always rings. There is always somebody wanting her – she's available full time.

VA volunteer

For many respondents, one main factor of the success of the VAs is that they link into services from outside and bring ideas, information and funding into the area. An example of local volunteering, and external resources being leveraged by a VA in response to local need is the Men in Sheds project (see box below). Other examples of this include:

- Walking for Health
- Information Days
- Home Safety checks
- Electric Blanket testing

It is recognised within the project and by external stakeholders that one of the reasons the VA project is good at attracting funding and support is their reputation for getting things done, they can be relied on.

Men in Sheds

The Men in Sheds project runs twice a week in Caldbeck, it is run by a paid 'Shed Master' and provides men in the NFG area with a work space, work projects and the opportunity to get together while doing something practical.

The project was born from a comment made by a VA client. The VA knew of a similar scheme in a local town but it was too far for the client to travel regularly. So recognising a need common to others in her community the VA set about finding premises, tools, volunteers, and funding.

With good networks beyond the area the VA was able to link into a small amount of grant money, which was matched by donations of time and tools from the community (and the unpaid time and tenacity of the VA).

Let's see if we can't get our own shed. It took two years but we got there.

After having to move from their original premises due to flooding Men in Sheds now occupies a large workspace – the shed - in the centre of Caldbeck village and now provides time and space for groups of men to regularly meet and make. Produce made at the shed is sold and money raised goes to support NFG.

We suddenly started drawing on different clients.

Men being able to talk to other men.

After recognising that a male worker was needed to run the shed, funding was sourced for the Shed Master's position. Now working with a local Community Interest Company providing specialist dementia day care the shed also provides a space for men with dementia, with clear benefits for those men and their families.

When a man with dementia says 'I've done a really good days work', it doesn't matter that he hadn't but that he felt he had.

Adding yet more value to this project the VA was approached by a member of the community and so, with donated tools, men with dementia were sharpening tools to give to 'Tools for Self-Reliance' a charity providing tools to people in Africa.

People helping people helping people.

7. WHAT HAS NOT WORKED?

There is little evidence of failure in the NFG Village Agent service and this in itself is testament to how responsive VAs are, how well they know their community, how well they listen, how well trusted they are, and how much time they give to provide a service that is appropriate to their clients.

This evaluation has found two main areas for change or improvement concerning:

- Being on call and using home telephones
- Big Lottery Fund (BLF) Questionnaire

On call/use of home phone

The primary advantage of VAs being embedded in the community and contactable through their home numbers is that this has established accessibility for the community. It has been important when working in an area with poor mobile signal and with clients who often don't like calling mobile phones because of the perceived or actual expense. However this was causing some difficulty and it is clear that while all VAs appear incredibly committed to their work and work far more hours than they are paid for, some stresses are apparent. For long term sustainability of this service and for staff support other options may be explored e.g. work lines in VA homes, VAs taking turns 'on call'.

*The one thing I would do differently is not use our home phone.
Having a week off doesn't work.
People ring at 7 'o clock in the morning and 11 o' clock at night.
It is flexible but you are on call. You've got to be available.*

VA Team

BLF Questionnaire

Respondents and VA staff felt the questionnaire used by VA for the Big Lottery Fund has its drawbacks on the ground – people don't like doing them partly because it is filled in by people in front of the VA which will cause some distortion. In addition, it was felt that the data it provided was of very limited use (apart from providing almost universal praise for the service) and could be grounds for reconsidering how VAs outputs are assessed. To supplement data already collected and add depth for evidencing VA outcomes use of individual case studies and some use of journey mapping – rating outcomes for some new clients from their perspective before and after contact with the VA project. Focus on collecting key case studies that prove the value VA work and reflect current and future funder priorities e.g. isolation; mental health; need for respite.

You've just got them on your side then you [hand them a questionnaire] people don't like doing them.

VA

8. THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VILLAGE AGENTS WORK IN THE FUTURE?

A changing landscape

When looking to the future it is clear the NFG have to find their place in a changing landscape of service provision. The lines delineating private and public provision are increasingly blurred. The statutory and voluntary sector services that NFG clients need are prone to decentralisation. Increasingly services are being delivered by private companies, social enterprises are being set up, and contractual agreements are required to access funding e.g. with trained volunteers and formal voluntary agreements.

The bottom-up, responsive, self-help, community-run model of co-ordinated neighbourliness and flexible volunteering that the NFG VA project is founded on is its main strength and yet it is that informality that is threatened by formalised contractual arrangements. Some of the external respondents felt that initially NFG were offering something innovative but that is no longer the case, the landscape has changed dramatically and organisations need to be 'fleet of foot' to compete for increasingly limited funding. They also felt that due to the changing environment NFG needed to be cleverer in the way they use statistics and language which would speak to statutory services and commissioners. For instance: using the needs 1-5 scale and being clear that as a community group they cannot and should not be expected to meet needs in the 4-5 categories; not using 'rural' as an indication of need but using 'isolation'; discussing mental health needs in the area and how they can be identified.

One thing NFG were concerned about was that VAs were not duplicating existing statutory or voluntary services, with the danger that, in the climate of substantial cutbacks in public spending, those services would perceive Northern Fells area to be well supported and shift priorities to other areas. We found no evidence from our interviews that this was the case. However, it is clear that rural services are incredibly stretched and advice was that NFG need to be clear about what they can and cannot provide to ensure essential statutory service provision in the area is not undermined.

Publicity and Networking

While 'word of mouth' and 'reputation' is very important for self-referrals and referrals from within the community the research shows there is still scope in some parishes to better publicise VAs. A review of VA publicity is recommended and should consider:

- A re-launch of the service, given the changes of staff and time passed since original launch. This would introduce existing VAs and new VAs, and re-connect with local groups.
- Posters on the parish notice boards stating who they are and what they do (perhaps to include pictures)
- Review of activities/ events publicity including simplified event and activity publicity and, if resources allow, an easier to read and more comprehensive NFG information booklet. A review of the NFG booklet could be an opportunity for VAs to collect information from their patches thereby reinforcing their presence, deepening community awareness and broadening perceptions of who they serve i.e. all ages.
- Publicised examples of what they can do, the types of things they help with and who they can help, to broaden the client base beyond those who are already networked into 'the know'.
- Internal NFG networking to make better use of NFG volunteers to refer and inform clients

Review of VA data collection

This evaluation has shown that improvements should be made in the data collected from Village Agents to improve the quality of the data, cut data input time and make it easier to pull off reports for internal and external use. It may be that lessons learnt at the South Lakeland VA project could be borrowed, and assistance is available from Cumbria Community Foundation, both could help to improve the VA data for current and future funding opportunities. In addition, a review of data needs in a changing funding landscape would help the NFG think about what sort of data they need in order to evidence need and justify funding. Greater and smarter use of technology could save VAs time and broaden their client base. Whilst we recommend a stand-alone review (which was beyond the scope of this evaluation), we make some suggestions as follows:

- Drop-down boxes on the online forms could save time (drop downs for age, category of enquiry)
- Inclusion of a 'How do you know about the VA service?' (drop-down box)
- Clear guidance to VAs on how a disability will be assessed and recorded, if it is useful/ practical at all (drop down box to include 'not known' rather than blank)
- Review the amount of data which is recorded on databases – some of it is unnecessary and could stay in paper files with proper security and duplicates
- The project should record the amount of voluntary time VAs commit.
- Postcode data already collected could be recorded and used to monitor the project's reach, mapping where enquiries/volunteers/clients are based. This could be set up and automated using simple and free/cheap software and helping to identify gaps in provision geographically.
- An online booking form for lunch groups (completed by staff or in the future clients) could save VA time.
- NFG could consider offering a placement to masters students from colleges/universities in the area to attract a good student with statistical training to work on this as a student project.

Review of volunteers

More use of volunteers could be made at regular VA events, awareness raising with all NFG volunteers (e.g. drivers and lend a hand volunteers) and encouraging volunteers to refer clients to VAs could free up VA time and deepen the project's reach.

Joint working

Some joint working/funding with local organisations could further benefit the community, lessen the load on VAs, and bring in funding. Small scale test/ pilot projects with trusted local service providers that are carefully, and explicitly managed to retain NFG identify as a self-help community-based group.

Making and funding time for reflection and strategy

Taking time out from delivering services VAs could benefit from time to reflect and strategise, to make the most of their limited time and best use of the resources available to the project.

Ideas for future areas of work

- Transport – threats to weekly bus service in the parishes are presenting more need in this area and there is opportunity to link into communities further from the NFG hub.
- Shopping – given threats to the bus service and the cost of alternatives – even community transport compared to using a bus pass - a shopping delivery service could be co-ordinated.
- A focus on carers - focusing on carers of all ages as a group could support many more isolated individuals in the community, mean VAs working across age groups, and bring financial income into the area through an increase in the uptake of Attendance Allowance. Joint working/ bids with groups such as Eden Carers or Amy's Care could be opportunities for future funding.
- One off/ annual whole community events – building on the successful fundraising activities that already involve different age groups, particularly parents of young children, and involving other voluntary groups like PTAs to strengthen awareness, broaden the net for volunteers, build sustainability, and improve links between the generations.

Appendix 1

Enquiries recorded from four VA patches between April 2013 - March 2014, categorised.

Category	Type Enquiry	WW	CS M	C S	B IU	Total
Isolation & Mental Health						
	Listening Ear/ social contact	2	20	3		26
	Lunch club/ Tea/ Drop in	3			3	6
	Craft activity	5				5
Health						
	Nail Clinic	8		6	1	15
	Health Visit/ Hospital Discharge	5			2	7
Fuel						
	Oil Syndicate	11	2	10		23
	Fuel Bills	3	3	18		24
Practical						
	Forms/ help external liaising	1	4	1		6
	Lend a Hand	4	5			9
	Transport	3	4		1	8
	Medical loan		2		1	3
2+	Apples scheme	1			2	3
2	Dog Micro chipping	1	23			24
	Home care				1	1
Safety						
	Electric Blanket check	7		14		21
	Home/Fire Safety check	6	1	1	2	10

	Driving			2		2
	Benefits / Blue Badge		1	3	1	5
Various						
	Singing 4 Fun		14			14
	Youth club				4	4
	Parish hall info				2	2
	NFG Membership				2	2
Other		19	21	7	1	48
Total		79	100	65	32 ⁵	324

	WW	CS M	C S	B IU	
Lives Alone	20 yes	35	25 yes	7 yes	87 yes
	25%	35%	38%	21%	27% ⁶
Attends Events	47 no	18 no	3 no ⁷	13 no	81 no
	59%	18%	4%	41%	25%

⁵ This record does not tally with enquiries from events record for the same period so this total may be the result of some under reporting

⁶ % of total number of enquiries across all patches

⁷ 25 of all entries had no record so this number may be due to under reporting

Appendix 2

Event Data for 2 VAs in a 12 months period April 2013 – March 2014.

		Men	Women	No. Enquiries
Drop ins	x 20 (only 16 with data)	122	261	13
Singing 4 Fun	x 12	55	224	4
Singing one off events	X 3	68	95	3
Lunch Clubs	x 4	90	59	
Micro chipping	x 1	16	16	2
Information Days	X 1	23	42	
Pie event	X 1	50	60	1
Charity event	X 1	40	60	
Networking (Internal and External)	x 10	251	179	2

		Men	Women	No. Enquiries
Pop ins	X 11	24	35	29
Coffee	X1	4	7	2
Lunch Clubs	x 7	42	86	5
Tea Dance	X 1	22	34	5
Youth Club	X 6	19	33	
Information Days	X 3	34	29	14
Community one offs				
BBQ		27	32	3
Lights on				

Appendix 3

Age Data for VA Enquiries between June 2010 and June 2014.⁸

Categories	Westward	Mungrisdale and Castle Sowerby	Boltons, and Ireby with Uldale	Caldbeck and Sebegham	Ages Grouped	Total
-14				1		
15-24	3	3	1			
20-30		3			-30	11
25-44	18	12	11			
30-40				8	25-44	49
40-50		10	16	17	40-50	44
45-64	54	86	5			
50-60				23		
50 +				2	45 – 64	170
60-70	8	35	13	17		
60 +	16	3				
Retired		5				
65-74	70	57	2			
65 +				2		
65 – 75				3	60-75	231
70-80		130	22		70-80	152
70 +	20	7		103		
75 +	91	70	3			
80s			15		70+	311
90s			2			

⁸ This data should only be used to indicate trends because the age categories overlap, however entries have not been double counted

Appendix 4

Parish Profile Data.

<http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk/ResourcesPublications/ParishProfiles.aspx>

	Total pop	No. Households	Working age	Over 65s	1 parent fam.	Single pensioner households	Black/ min ethnic	Born outside UK	Dependency ratio	Work from home
Westward	840	330	540	175	5	20	15	10	0.56	85
Boltons	630	270	395	130	10	35	15	20	0.59	65
Ireby and Uldale	460	200	280	115	5	25	10	5	0.65	60
Caldbeck	735	310	425	210	10	55	15	10	0.73	70
Sebergham	365	140	240	60	0	20	5	10	0.52	50
Castle Sowerby	345	140	230	70	0	15	5	0	0.51	70
Mungrisdale	295	125	160	90	0	15	5	0	0.82	50

Dependency ratio (the ratio of none-working age to working age population)

cont.

<http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk/ResourcesPublications/ParishProfiles.aspx>

	National	Westward	Boltons	Ireby and Uldale	Caldbeck	Sebergham	Castle Sowerby	Mungrisdale
% over 65	16.3	20.7	20.7	25.5	28.4	16.7	20.6	29.6
% working age population claiming DWP benefits	14	5.6	14	5.4	6	5.5.	5.3	7.4
% households estimated to be in fuel poverty	10.9	16.7	14.1	13.6	14.1	16.4	13	10.6
% households with no car	25.8	0.6	7.7	4.5	5.1	9.4	4.3	7.3
No. people travel to work by public transport	11	1.3	1.3	1.8	1.4	0.7	0.7	0.3
Road distance in km from GP	1.2	5.2	7.1	10.1	1.7	6.9	7.3	11.1
Attendance Allowance claimants (% of age 65+)	16.7	14.9	14.6	12.8	10.5	18	15.5	13.6
% working from home	3.5	13.7	14.3	17.1	13.5	12.2	25.7	22.3