

THE SCOPE TO ENGAGE WITH VILLAGE AND COMMUNITY AGENT SCHEMES (OR SIMILAR) TO PROMOTE SIGN UP TO THE PRIORITY SERVICES REGISTER

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Commissioned by: Cadent Gas, Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution

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Summary of findings

This report outlines findings from research which sought to identify where Village Agent, Community Agent or similar schemes operate and to assess their potential for promoting sign up to the Priority Services Register (PSR) operated by utility network operators. Its main purpose is to provide the project commissioners with information they might use to engage with schemes. Enhancing PSR sign up would benefit vulnerable customers in the rural areas they serve, giving those customers access to extra support if ever left temporarily without electricity, gas or water supply.

After searches and initial exploration, 14 relevant schemes were identified and examined. They variously operate at a county, district and more local levels. Half serve only rural residents and half both rural and urban residents. Current schemes are nearly all to be found in southerly regions of England, though one is in Wales.

Half these schemes are managed by county-based members of the ACRE Network, with others managed by local authorities and charities. Most, however, derive all or part of their funding from local authorities. A notable, quite recent, development is schemes accessing NHS funding and merging with social prescribing services. This may help to stabilise their funding positions.

The schemes vary greatly in size. A few have no more than 5 Agents delivering support, whilst one has 68 Agents (albeit some in specialist roles). The larger scale of 4 schemes may make them especially attractive to the utility network operators (those in Essex, Hampshire, Somerset and potentially Kent). Many, if not most, Agents work part-time and most have employee status.

Similarly, the number of clients supported by these schemes varies significantly. Most support a few hundred clients over a year, but at least two (those in Essex and Somerset) support a few thousand. Some reflected that the pandemic had impacted, but client numbers were growing again.

Only 4 schemes restrict providing support to older residents. Others will support anyone (or any adults), but in practice tend to be pro-active in reaching out to vulnerable groups or say that it is older residents mainly that refer to them. Typically, residents can self-refer to these schemes or be referred by a relative/friend/neighbour or be referred by a health professional.

The stated aims or objectives of the schemes typically cover some of the following:

- Providing residents with trusted and confidential information and advice;
- Signposting residents to services, activities and groups that match their needs;
- Being the connection between residents (and their needs) and service providers;
- Improving access to information and services (including in rural areas);
- Helping vulnerable or older residents to live safely and independently; and
- Finding community-based solutions to address residents' needs.

Scheme Agents support their clients across a wide range of issues. However, partly as a result of the pandemic, social isolation, loneliness, mental health and wellbeing are frequently top of the list. The cost of living is another issue which is rapidly becoming key. Long standing issues include access to personal or social care services and help with welfare applications.

Scheme Agents generally offer to meet or contact their clients in various ways. This may include phone calls, online meetings and seeing them at third party venues. However, there is a preference for meeting clients in their own homes where it is easier to spot other needs. Client issues tend to be explored and options considered over a few meetings or contacts and cases usually close when clients are linked up with or referred to relevant groups, activities and services.

Another side to the work of Agents can be giving presentations to promote their role, especially to groups likely to comprise vulnerable or older individuals. Some schemes go further still and support the formation of new groups or activities where these will plug a gap.

The nature of these schemes means they must build strong relations with other agencies or services, not least as 'referral partners'. This may include statutory adult social care, Citizens Advice, Age UK and a host of national and local charities or services providers. These networks have potential in terms of the schemes cascading information about the PSR.

Most, but not all, schemes are aware of the PSR, though a couple add that their understanding of it is limited. Only 5 schemes are actively promoting the PSR, however, either by encouraging or assisting clients to sign up. Some schemes said this was a useful prompt to remind their Agents.

A positive finding is the almost universal willingness to do more on the PSR, at least in principle. Indeed, some schemes express themselves keen to engage with utility network operators given the relevance of the PSR to most of their clients.

Barriers to doing more are considered few and largely surmountable. It is acknowledged that it requires client agreement to act for them on PSR sign up. Also, that many clients have poor IT skills and would struggle to sign themselves up. Some schemes felt a PSR presentation to their Agents would prove useful and some that having a leaflet to leave with clients would help. Indeed, to be effective some schemes and their Agents would need a greater understanding of the PSR.

There is also some scope to work with these schemes on related energy agendas. The situation is:

- Fuel poverty: 5 schemes (or the organisations that host them) have delivered some direct support to fuel poor households and another 4 regularly refer clients with fuel poverty issues to partner organisations. This is a growing issue for their work;
- Energy efficiency: few schemes (or the organisations that host them) deliver direct support on this topic, but most do have a referral partner for those clients with issues;
- Carbon monoxide monitors and smoke alarms: this issue crops up fairly infrequently for most schemes. However, most can or do refer clients to their Fire and Rescue Service and some Agents use home visits to check that monitors and alarms are installed.

In conclusion, whilst Village Agent, Community Agent and similar schemes are only present in certain parts of the country, this project has demonstrated that there is potential to engage with them to raise awareness of and encourage or support sign up to the PSR. The schemes are generally willing to discuss doing more and there is a large overlap between their client base and the PSR eligibility criteria. Their extensive partnerships with other organisations could also prove productive.

List of Village and Community Agents Schemes (or similar) covered by this report

Names of the schemes	Scheme of relevance to:			
	Cadent	Southern Water	Wales & West Utilities	Western Power Distribution
Bedfordshire Village and Community Agents				
REACH Affordable Energy Programme in Devon				
Sussex Village Agents Programme (in East Sussex) *				
Community Agents Essex				
Cheltenham & Tewkesbury Community Wellbeing Service (in Gloucestershire)				
Cotswold Community Wellbeing Service (in Gloucestershire)				
Forest of Dean Community Wellbeing Service (in Gloucestershire)				
Stroud & Berkeley Vale Community Wellbeing Service (in Gloucestershire) *				
Community Information Service (Hampshire)				
Kent Community Wardens scheme *				
Somerset Village and Community Agents				
Bath & North East Somerset Village Agents and North Somerset Village Agents (in West of England)				
Horsham Community and Village Agents (in West Sussex) **				
Wrexham Community Agents project				

Footnote: Schemes marked with asterisks are those where it was only possible to gather a reduced set of information. A single asterisk means no interview was secured. A double asterisk means the interview was with an Agent rather than a scheme manager.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context for the project

The utilities sector has a duty to support customers who may be vulnerable if left temporarily without electricity, gas or water due to a planned or unplanned loss of supply. Customers who meet certain eligibility criteria can sign up to the Priority Services Register (PSR), which gives them access to additional support in such circumstances. Those eligibility criteria include pensionable age, disability, long term health condition, and hearing or visual impairment.

Previous research¹, carried out among rural communities by the Countryside & Community Research Institute (University of Gloucestershire) and Rural England CIC, concluded that the PSR is not as well known about as it could be and some vulnerable rural residents are therefore missing out on the benefits. The research also noted that many voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) agencies – especially smaller, local agencies – have a low awareness of the PSR. They have potential to play an important role, by getting the PSR message out to the vulnerable residents they support.

There are a wide variety of VCSE agencies which might be considered to promote PSR awareness and to support PSR sign up. Indeed, this could be seen as a challenge: where should utility companies focus their effort with so many varied agencies? One type of agency identified as potentially very useful were those known as Village Agent Schemes or Community Agent Schemes. Such schemes help residents to find and access local services, support and activities that will address their needs. They are known to target that help at more vulnerable residents or to find that, in practice, their clients are mainly vulnerable.

Four utility network operators therefore agreed to fund a project to find out more about Village and Community Agent Schemes (or other similar schemes) and to explore their potential for helping them promote PSR sign up. Those operators are Cadent, Southern Water, Wales & West Utilities and Western Power Distribution.

1.2 Research objectives

The stated objectives of this relatively small piece of research have been to:

- Identify where Village Agent, Community Agent or similar schemes do and don't exist and clarify the extent of the geographic areas where they are offering support;
- Collate some key information about each of the schemes, such as the population groups they target, their number of clients, their mode(s) of delivery, other key groups or networks they work with, their contact details and any future development plans;
- Understand how much the schemes vary from each other and whether that has practical implications for potential future PSR work with them;

¹ Dunwoodie Stirton F, Dwyer J and B Wilson, *Exploring Rural Vulnerability from a Public Utilities' Perspective*, Countryside & Community Research Institute and Rural England CIC (2022)

- Understand how much these schemes already know about the PSR and whether they are already promoting it, signposting people to it or signing people up to it;
- Clarify any opportunities or barriers which schemes perceive if they were to be asked to (do more to) promote the PSR and signpost or sign-up people to the PSR.

It was also recognised that schemes may have scope to be useful partners above and beyond the PSR. They may be able to help utility network operators with related home energy agendas such as reducing fuel poverty and reducing carbon emissions.

At the outset it was agreed the research would focus upon schemes serving rural communities, being those that operate outside of metropolitan areas and other large cities or large towns. This should include any schemes serving a mixed area containing both rural and urban places. Also, that the research should focus on those parts of the UK served by one or more of the utility network operators commissioning this project.

1.3 Research methodology

The project was designed largely as a desk exercise, involving:

Project initiation: To confirm the scope of the research and the information to be gathered from schemes;

Searches: Using extensive web searches and existing researcher knowledge to identify potentially in-scope schemes. Equally, where no scheme is identified this indicates geographic gaps;

Initial information gathering: Creating a table to present information about each scheme in a common and easy-to-use format. A blank version of the table is at Annex B. Information found on scheme and other websites was then used to start populating the tables;

Interviews: Extensive attempts were then made to contact each identified scheme and to secure a telephone interview with someone in a managerial or oversight role. Those aimed to: a) plug gaps in the website material; b) check points that were unclear on websites; and crucially c) explore other research questions, such as awareness of the PSR, how willing schemes might be to support PSR promotion or sign-up and any future scheme development plans. This material was added to complete the tables;

Report writing: Producing this short overview report for the project's commissioners, which outlines the research and analyses the scheme information gathered. Its findings were discussed in draft with the commissioners to ensure they brought out salient points.

The project was more of an iterative process than this implies, as some schemes on the initial list were subsequently found to have ceased operation or not to be relevant given their approach or remit. On the other hand, one or two schemes were added to the initial list as new information came to light. A full list of schemes both included and excluded is set out at Annex A.

1.4 Project scope and limitations

Geography: as noted above, the geographic scope is schemes within the operating areas of the project commissioners and which serve rural clients. In practice this means areas excluded comprise all of Scotland, all of Northern Ireland, Greater London, all metropolitan areas and all major cities in England and Wales, plus the following English counties (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, North Yorkshire, Teesside, County Durham and Northumberland).

Scheme type: the project deliberately focusses on schemes which set out to refer, signpost or link residents up with local services or support agencies. These are often (though not universally) called Village or Community Agent Schemes. Other scheme types which were considered but excluded early on, as not relevant or less relevant, were:

- Befriending schemes – where volunteers visit vulnerable or older people on a regular basis, to provide them with social contact and so help address loneliness or isolation;
- Good Neighbour schemes – similar to befriending schemes, but additionally helping clients with small tasks such as driving them to appointments, bringing them shopping or doing basic tasks in the home;
- First Contact schemes – referral schemes for professionals or frontline workers where they have contact with vulnerable residents, such as the police, adult social care and fire service. It enables them to refer people if they spot a need beyond their own organisation's remit;
- Community Navigator schemes – helping vulnerable people to grow their social connections with others, finding suitable groups or activities they could join for enjoyment or to meet needs. This aims to help build people's wellbeing and address loneliness.

It is, however, noted that in practice schemes often prove quite hard to classify and within scheme types there is variation. As explained later, some Village or Community Agent schemes have recently combined with social prescribing as that approach is rolled out by the (NHS) health sector.

Some 18 potentially in-scope schemes were identified in all. However, early contact with them reduced this list to 14 (as 2 had ceased operating and 2 had altered their remit in ways that made them no longer relevant to this project). Furthermore, despite repeated effort over a period of weeks, it was not possible to secure an interview with the relevant manager at 4 of the 14 short listed schemes. For those schemes the information gathered is therefore limited to material available on websites (and in one case a short interview with a Village Agent).

Finally, it should be said that the project, carried out between April and July 2022, was relatively modest in its ambition. Its intention was to collate and assess information about seemingly relevant schemes. It is, of course, for the utility network operators to decide subsequently how (or if) they wish to take this forward, for example by engaging directly with the schemes.

1.6 Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are due to PSR managers from the four commissioning utility network operators, who engaged throughout, providing helpful comments or steers when sought. Also, to Graham Biggs

(Company Secretary of Rural England CIC) who provided project oversight and to Dan Worth (RSN) for creating the map. Finally, a big thank you must go to all the managers at the schemes who agreed to be interviewed, not least for their time and interest in the topic. If any misunderstandings or errors have crept into the report or tables they are, however, solely the author's responsibility.

2. Scheme types and management

2.1 Village and Community Agent schemes

The term Community Agent tends to be used when serving a town or urban area and the term Village Agent when serving smaller rural settlements, though this rule is not universal.

Moreover, despite the title of this project only 7 of the 14 schemes it covers are now called Village or Community Agent Schemes. Another 5 previously used that title but have undergone name changes. Mostly (4 cases) this is because the previous scheme has merged with the roll out of social prescribing by the NHS, meaning they now form part of a Community Wellbeing Service. However, for the sake of consistency this report refers throughout to schemes and to their Agents.

It is worth adding that 2 further Village or Community Agent schemes were among the initial list for this project but were found to have closed due to the cessation of funding sources.

2.2 Scheme management and funding

Seven of the 14 schemes covered by this project are managed and delivered by members of the ACRE Network (a network of county-based infrastructure support organisations which work across rural England). Of the remainder:

- 3 schemes are managed and delivered by a local authority (variously a County, a Unitary and a District council);
- 2 schemes are managed and delivered by a local branch of Age UK (still called by its former name, Age Concern, in one case); and
- 2 schemes are managed and delivered by locally based health and wellbeing charities.

In a minority of cases these schemes form part of a wider service being managed by a collaboration of delivery partners. For example, one scheme forms part of the Essex Community Wellbeing Service and another part of the Bath & North East Somerset Community Wellbeing Hub.

Information about funding is available for 13 of the schemes. Many are funded by more than one source, so the following list adds up to more than this. The picture is that:

- 12 schemes are funded or part-funded by a County or a Unitary Council;
- 4 schemes are funded or part-funded by the local NHS (Clinical Commissioning Group);
- 2 schemes are funded or part-funded by Parish or Town Councils; and
- A variety of other sources fund or part-fund just 1 of the schemes, namely a District Council, a utility network operator, the National Lottery, a housing association, an adult social care provider and a local trust.

As hinted at above, much of this funding is short term or renewable. Like many community support schemes their future is often uncertain, especially at a time when local authorities face increasing pressure on their budgets and when discretionary services are those most likely to face cuts. This doubtless, helps explain why a number of the schemes have merged with social prescribing, which the NHS is rolling out nationally and which has funding to underpin this policy drive.

Social prescribing has been designed to take pressure off NHS medical services, staff and budgets. It assists patients whose needs are not (or largely not) medical, but rather could be addressed by connecting them with physical or fitness activities and social or wellbeing activities. Social prescribers link people up with activities near where they live that will suit their needs and interests. They often also support the formation of new activities or groups to plug gaps. After some favourable pilots, social prescribing is being rolled out across the country, usually commissioned by the NHS primary care sector.

2.3 Number and status of scheme agents

Among these schemes, the number of Agents delivering their services varies significantly, though it should be noted that many if not most Agents are working part-time. Of the 13 schemes where relevant information was available:

- 4 could be described as smaller schemes with up to five Agents;
- 5 could be described as medium-sized schemes with between 6 and 13 Agents; and
- 4 could be described as large schemes with between 30 and 68 Agents. (Though some Agents in the largest scheme are in specialist roles perhaps less relevant to this project.)

This indicates that, other things being equal, there are 4 schemes which could prove of particular interest for utility network operators simply due to their scale and capacity. They are: Community Agents Essex (35 Agents); Community Information Service Hampshire (30); Somerset Village and Community Agents (68 – some in specialist roles); and Kent Community Wardens Scheme (50).

Somewhat to the surprise of the author, at almost all the schemes the Agents are employees (at 11 of the 13). There is one scheme where the Agents are contracted and one scheme where they are volunteers.

3. Scheme reach and beneficiaries

3.1 Geographic reach of schemes

Thirteen of the 14 schemes covered by this project are in England and (even allowing for the fact this project excludes two northern regions) these are clustered in the southerly regions, namely the South West, South East and Eastern regions. Frustratingly, 4 potential schemes on the project's initial list from the Midlands and North West, all had to be dropped when it was found they had ceased operating or had altered their operating model.

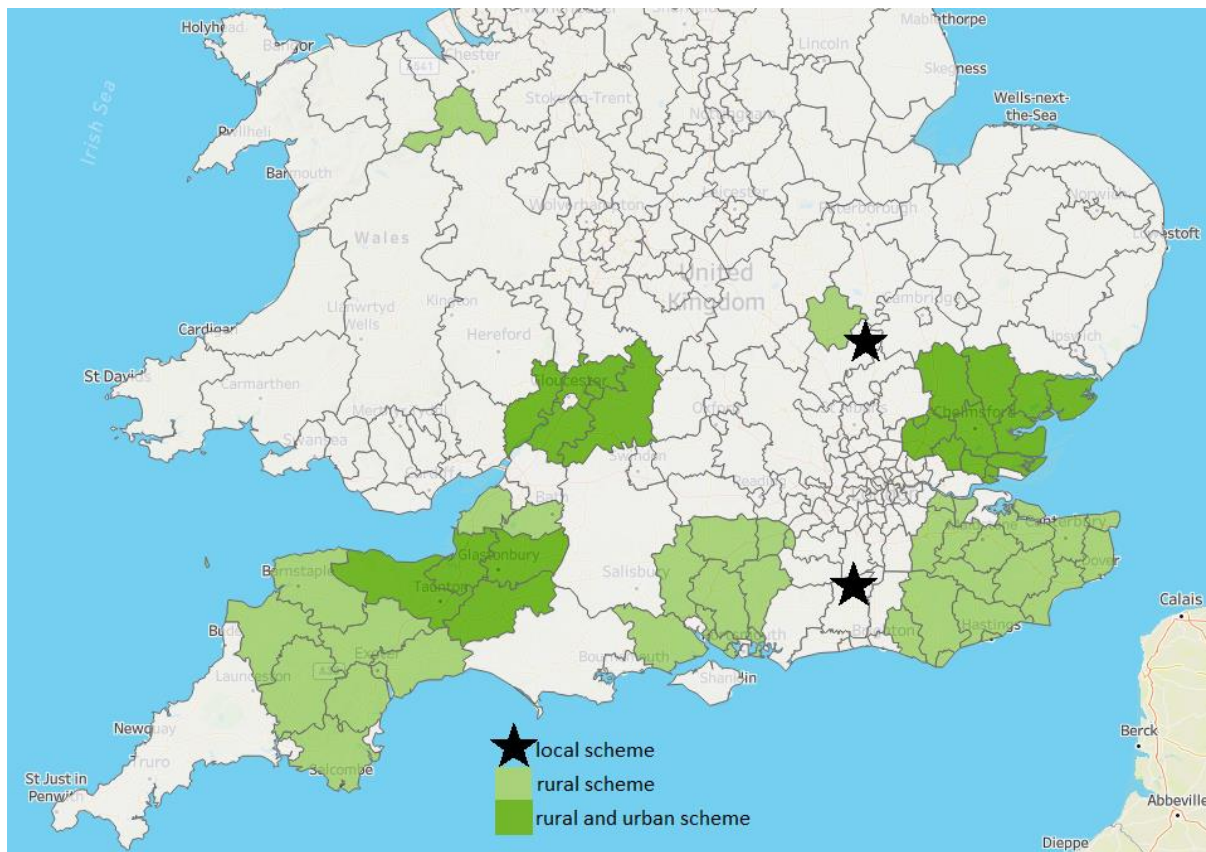
There is also 1 scheme in Wales covered by this project. It was disappointing not to find more: what appear to be widespread in Wales are Community Connector schemes which have a specific focus on linking people to health and care services.

The schemes differ considerably in their geographic scale. The information below comes from all 14 schemes but adds up to more than this because a couple of schemes span local authority boundaries and have different geographies in each. The analysis shows:

- 10 of the schemes operate at a County or a Unitary Council scale;
- 4 of the schemes operate at a District Council scale; and
- 2 of the schemes operate in just a few parishes or settlements.

Among the 14 cited above as operating at a County, Unitary or District Council scale, there are 7 which serve only rural residents or communities, whilst 7 serve all residents or communities – whether rural or urban – in their operating area. (In one case, where no interview was secured, this conclusion is inferred from the named localities served by its Agents.)

The map below illustrates these findings about the geographic reach of the schemes.



3.2 Target population groups

The project also considered who is eligible to receive support from the schemes and their Agents. Information gathered from 13 schemes shows that most will support anyone or at least any adult. The analysis (which adds up to more than 13 since one scheme uses different targeting in its two operational areas) finds that:

- 10 schemes will support anyone or, at least, any adult (some specifying 16+ and some 18+); whilst
- 4 schemes limit their support to people from older or pensionable age groups (variously defined from 50+ to 65+).

Four of the schemes which will support any adult will also support anyone who is registered with a local GP. These are all schemes linked with social prescribing.

Other groups deliberately targeted for support by 1 of the schemes include informal carers, young people and people with learning disabilities or autism.

An important point is that, among the schemes which say they support anyone or any adult, around half qualified their answer by adding that they nonetheless made extra effort to reach out to certain vulnerable groups. Those named were older people, isolated or lonely people, service poor people, fuel poor people and people not online. Indeed, one scheme which will support anyone, said in practice that 80% or 90% of its clients are elderly.

3.3 How clients are referred

There are different ways in which clients can seek help from or be referred to these schemes. Information gathered from 11 of the schemes shows that allowing self-referral is universal. The full picture is that:

- 11 schemes can be approached directly by the individual who needs help;
- 8 schemes accept people referred to them by a GP or health professional;
- 6 schemes accept people referred to them by an individual's neighbour, friend or relative;
- 4 schemes accept people referred to them by a partner organisation; and
- 2 schemes encourage their Agents to seek out people needing help (for example, when giving presentations).

3.4 Number of scheme clients

Another indication of the relative scale of these schemes is the number of clients they are helping. Comparisons are complex, however, since schemes measure or count this in different ways. Some cited client numbers at any one time, whilst others referred to clients over the space of a month or year. Some cite all the clients they work with, whilst others restrict themselves to citing those they refer on to services or activities.

With that proviso, information gathered from 9 of the schemes indicates that they vary from around 150 clients per year to around 9,000 per year. Most are helping many hundreds of clients over a year, but two – those in Essex and in Somerset – are large and provide help to thousands over a year. It is noted that a few schemes refer to numbers having dropped during the pandemic and still not having climbed back to pre-pandemic levels.

4. Scheme delivery and partners

4.1 Scheme aims or objectives

The aims and objectives of the 14 schemes vary considerably and are not easy to summarise, though they do have some common threads.

Sometimes they stress the provision of trusted and confidential information and advice. This includes helping people to manage during difficult times or to make better life choices.

Unsurprisingly, a good many describe the signposting role, helping people to find out about and link up with appropriate services, activities and groups to address their needs. In one instance, this is described as helping people to navigate their way through the options.

A few objectives refer to improving people's access to information and access to services. This can be explicit about physical access for those who are living in rural areas.

Similarly, some schemes underline their role connecting individuals with relevant statutory or other service providers.

"We seek to bridge the gap between isolated, excluded or vulnerable individuals and statutory or voluntary organisations."

There are schemes using their objectives to emphasise how they seek to improve people's ability to live safely and independently, especially where they refer to supporting older people.

Quite a few of the schemes use their objectives to highlight particular topics or issues which they look to address. These include health and care issues, personal finance and debt issues, welfare issues, housing issues, and home heating or fuel poverty issues. The most frequently cited, though, is helping to reduce social isolation and improve general wellbeing.

Finally, there are some scheme objectives which stress finding community-based solutions to client's needs. As one scheme succinctly puts it, "Keep it local". This is sometimes with the aim of improving community resilience, helping vulnerable people to build or to widen their social and support networks. Indeed, there is one scheme which arguably goes a step further, its objectives stating that it takes a community development approach. This point also comes through in the way some of these schemes are delivered.

4.2 Frequent support issues for clients

There is information from 11 schemes about the issues that they most frequently support clients with. A fairly wide range of issues were mentioned, but those most often cited are:

- Social isolation and loneliness;
- Mental health and wellbeing;
- Debt and the rising cost of living;
- Access to personal or social care;

- Welfare applications e.g. Pension Credit;
- Blue badge (parking) applications; and
- Housing issues.

A few schemes stated that social isolation was a particular concern as a result of the pandemic. Other schemes mentioned that the cost of living was rapidly becoming a major concern. Linked to that, two schemes specifically noted that home heating costs are now among the issues most frequently raised by their clients.

4.3 How client support is delivered

Agents typically deliver support to their clients by meeting them or speaking with them in one of a variety of ways. This can include home visits, telephone conversations, online/virtual discussions and meetings at community or third-party venues e.g. GP surgeries. This is both practical and lets the client choose an option they feel comfortable with. That said, several schemes said their Agents prefer face-to-face visits to clients' own homes because these are more likely to identify related or wider (hidden) issues.

A number of schemes noted that the pandemic had severely limited their ability to make home visits and had driven change in their delivery model. Home visits had in all cases restarted but were still not as common as they had been in the past.

Some schemes make use of an initial phone call or contact to gather basic information and to understand the situation before they arrange for a home visit or more detailed follow up support.

Agents often visit or contact their clients a few times, though this likely depends on client vulnerability and the reason for seeking support. Multiple visits enable an Agent to start by exploring needs and preferences, and then allow a client to consider what referrals or solutions they wish to proceed with. Some schemes described creating a 'plan' with each client. One scheme said that it typically takes about four visits before a client is linked up with sufficient external support, activities or services and their case is closed.

Individual Agents typically work in local patches or neighbourhoods, where they build up expert knowledge of the available services, groups and support networks. Indeed, some Agents work proactively with local communities to encourage the formation of new activities or groups which will plug gaps or meet perceived needs.

A number of schemes also mentioned how their Agents attend or present at social events (such as coffee mornings) where they are likely to meet residents in their target groups. This both enables them to promote the scheme and often leads to new clients coming forward or being identified.

Although all the schemes offer initial support to their clients, there is evidently much variation in how far that support offer goes. Some appear to refer on to other more specialist support agencies relatively quickly, others provide more prolonged support themselves and others again work with communities to strengthen local support networks.

4.4 Involvement of partner organisations

Forging strong links with other organisations and their services is a key feature of these schemes, so that clients can be appropriately signposted or referred to meet their needs. When asked about partners organisations some interviewees called them “referral partners”.

Information gathered about this from 12 of the schemes finds that the most frequently cited types of partner organisation are:

- Local agencies or charities providing personal or home care;
- Statutory adult social care services;
- Citizens Advice (local bureau);
- Age UK (local branch);
- GP surgeries and medical centres;
- ‘Community hubs’ set up to support residents; and
- Other services provided by the organisations hosting these schemes.

Additional partners, less frequently cited, include parish councils, lunch clubs, churches, food banks, the Energy Saving Trust and a range of well-known charities e.g. Royal Voluntary Service, British Red Cross, Stroke Association, MIND, Parkinson’s UK.

4.5 Scheme development plans

Schemes were asked if they had any future development plans that might be of relevance to this project. Information gathered from 11 of the schemes identified:

- A currently rural (only) scheme which is seeking to expand its support into the urban settlement in its Unitary Council area;
- A scheme which is undertaking a recruitment drive for volunteers to plug geographic gaps in its coverage;
- Similarly, a scheme which has just taken on new Agents so it can extend support across all rural parts of its Unitary Council area;
- A scheme whose Agents are to receive training from the Centre for Sustainable Energy so they can act as Energy Champions;
- A scheme which is piloting having a team member focussed on support for high intensity users of GP or other NHS services. If successful the hope is to extend and expand this approach;
- A scheme which has just taken on an additional team member to provide dedicated support for families and young people; and
- A scheme which has just been brought under an umbrella comprising other community wellbeing services, with a reorganisation to improve links between those services.

A few of the respondents said they had ambitions, rather than plans at this stage. Subject to sourcing the funding, one scheme wished to expand geographically and another its service offer. Another felt that its Agents could become more proactive with clients, to raise awareness of services that should benefit them, even if tangential to the original request for support.

There were, though, 3 schemes saying they had no development plans, and it was business as usual. Indeed, two schemes pointed out that their survival depended on year-to-year funding, which had to be bid for or a case made.

5. Current and potential engagement on PSR and energy agendas

5.1 Priority Services Register awareness and support

Information gathered from 11 of the schemes found that 8 of them are at least aware of the PSR. Whilst most of these could be described as having an informed awareness, there are 2 cases where the level of awareness is (by their own admission) limited.

Despite this, only 5 schemes said that their Agents were actively supporting the PSR – either by promoting it or (in 3 cases) helping eligible clients to sign up. Managers at the other schemes did not think any such actions were being undertaken. A couple added that it was possible some individual Agents were giving PSR support but, if so, this was not being logged on their returns.

Two schemes said that it would be timely to remind their Agents about the PSR at an upcoming team meeting. Another said that it was a useful reminder to induct its recently recruited Agents about the PSR. A couple of scheme managers asked for – and were sent – links to information about the PSR on the websites of electricity or water network operators serving their area.

5.2 Willingness to expand PSR support

Ten of the schemes provided answers about their willingness to do more to support the PSR. Those responses were positive, with 9 saying that they are willing and just 1 stating that it does not normally assist clients with any form filling or applications (though even this is seen as possibly negotiable). Indeed, it would be fair to say a few of the schemes are keen to engage with utility network operators, recognising that the bulk of their clients are eligible for the PSR if they are not already signed up.

When asked whether there are barriers to them carrying out more PSR related support, the general sense is that any barriers are modest. A number noted that they would need client consent to help with signing up to the PSR, but this was thought unlikely to pose a significant barrier once the register and its benefits was explained to clients. Poor IT skills amongst clients was also cited if they were being encouraged to sign up to the PSR online. Other potential issues raised include Agent capacity/funding to take on more work, schemes' own (current) lack of PSR knowledge and the need to get agreement for new activity from senior management.

Two of the schemes expressed an interest in having a utility network operator visit to give a PSR presentation at one of their Agents' team meetings. One of these also thought there was scope to give a presentation at one or more of the Talking Cafes which they host, mainly for vulnerable or isolated residents.

A number of the schemes indicated that having some sort of leaflet or information pack they could leave with clients would help to address the potential barriers. Ideas for this included FAQs, case studies and how to access further information (such as PSR web pages of utility network operators).

5.3 Support on wider home energy agendas

As well as support on the PSR, it is possible that these schemes have something to offer in terms of pursuing other energy agendas. Indeed, those on the PSR may well be those most in need of support on those agendas. Information about this was therefore gathered from 11 schemes.

Fuel poverty: five of the schemes (or strictly speaking the organisations which host them) manage or have recently managed some form of direct support for clients struggling with home energy costs. Actions include contacting utility providers on behalf of clients, running energy saving workshops, being a BESN² delivery partner, issuing energy vouchers, distributing Surviving Winter grants, making relevant payments from a Crisis Fund, engaging with housing associations on behalf of tenants and managing an oil collective scheme.

Another 4 schemes are not involved in direct delivery but do regularly refer clients to partner organisations where they have a fuel poverty concern. Those partner organisations include the Centre for Sustainable Energy, Groundwork, an Age UK Information & Advice Team, the District Council and the County Council.

There were 2 schemes which did not carry out any activity on this agenda although, given its recent topicality, one of them would like to start doing so. Indeed, a number of the schemes mentioned a growing workload on this agenda.

Home energy efficiency: relatively few of the schemes (or the organisations which host them) provide direct support for their clients on this related agenda, which is taken to mean carbon reduction and thermal efficiency of homes, rather than coping with the cost of energy bills per se. Perhaps as a reflection of their scheme objectives, some managers described it as “not a major topic” for their clients, one which “infrequently crops up” and one they are “rarely” asked about.

Having said that, most (9) schemes could point to something. In most cases this is referring clients on for advice or support. Named referral agencies include Severn Wye Energy (SWE), the Centre for Sustainable Energy, Groundwork and an Age UK Information & Advice Team. One scheme recently had SWE give a presentation at a Community Hub and another scheme will provide clients with names of trusted traders for any energy efficiency work.

Two schemes were more active. One with specialist knowledge provides advice to clients at both a basic level (e.g. draft proofing) and a more complex level (e.g. loft insulation, low carbon energy options). The other scheme takes the view that providing entry level advice is key and is realistic with vulnerable clients. It described how it often spots things during the course of making home visits e.g. wrongly set thermostats, energy wasted when cooking and uninsulated loft hatches.

Carbon monoxide monitors and smoke alarms: monitors or alarms are typically something that schemes say their Agents are asked about only occasionally. One scheme went so far as to say that (to its surprise) the issue had not arisen recently. In many cases schemes simply noted that, where it arises, they will refer clients on to the local Fire and Rescue Service (FRS). One of those schemes said that it had a formal ‘referral account’ with its FRS.

² BESN is the Big Energy Saving Network which is an annual programme that commissions local delivery partners to cascade energy saving information to consumers.

There are a few cases where schemes go beyond referral. Three schemes said that Agents frequently check that monitors and alarms are installed when making home visits. Another spoke similarly of Agents actively encouraging their clients to have them installed. There is also a scheme whose Agents are asked quite often if they will replace batteries in monitors and alarms. Finally, one scheme has recently given away carbon monoxide monitors which were funded from a Winter Warmer fund.

6. Concluding comments

The number of active Village and Community Agent Schemes (or similar) is broadly in line with expectations at the start of this project, though their presence is notably skewed towards the southern half of the country, not least following some fairly recent scheme closures or changes. Many rely on relatively short-term funding. This doubtless explains why some have merged with social prescribing schemes that have access to NHS funding. Arguably a downside is if this steers schemes to focus so much on the health and wellbeing agenda that it squeezes out other issues.

This project has also demonstrated how varied the schemes are and how hard it is to group them. There is no single delivery model and their stated objectives differ more than might be expected. That said, the reality is that most of their clients almost certainly meet the eligibility criteria set for the PSR. They therefore appear a useful group of schemes for the utility network operators to engage with.

In terms of scale, there are 3 or 4 schemes (from amongst the 14 researched by this project) whose scale would seem to make them of particular interest. They have the most Agents and the most clients, being those operating in Essex, Hampshire, Somerset and Kent³.

That said, many of the schemes have strong links with other in-house initiatives or with partner organisations which adds to their value. For example, the Bedfordshire scheme considers that, whilst it is its Village and Community Agents scheme that could in principle be more active on the PSR, its Good Neighbour Schemes may also be able to assist with the basic task of PSR promotion.

A positive finding is the widespread willingness of scheme managers to at least consider doing more to promote or support sign up to the PSR. Schemes felt that barriers to doing so were few and likely to be resolvable. Actions which utility network operators could consider, to assist this, include attendance at Agent team meetings to improve their understanding of the PSR and producing a leaflet (or using an existing leaflet) which Agents could leave with their clients.

The schemes (or the organisations that host them) are also mostly engaged in some way with the fuel poverty agenda and recognise it as of increasing urgency. There is certainly scope for utility network operators to engage them about tackling fuel poverty. Whilst fewer schemes currently provide support on home energy efficiency or carbon monitors/smoke alarms, there may still be opportunities. Supporting vulnerable households through the transition to low/zero carbon home heating seems certain to be a matter of growing significance.

³ It should be noted that no interview could be secured with the Kent scheme, so their interest needs testing.

Annex A – List of Village Agent, Community Agent and other schemes researched

Schemes of interest included in this research:

Bedfordshire – this includes the Village Agents Scheme operating in rural parts of Bedford Borough and the Community Agents Scheme operating in parts of Central Bedfordshire.

Devon – the REACH Affordable Energy programme operates across rural parts of Devon. It is arguably an outlier, differing from Village or Community Agents schemes, but because of its clear PSR relevance it was considered worthwhile including.

East Sussex – the Sussex Village Agents Programme operates across many rural parts of the county of East Sussex.

Essex – the Community Agents Essex scheme operates across the county of Essex.

Gloucestershire (Cotswold) – this Community Wellbeing Service operates across the district of Cotswold.

Gloucestershire (Forest of Dean) - this Community Wellbeing Service operates across the district of Forest of Dean.

Gloucestershire (Cheltenham and Tewkesbury) - this Community Wellbeing Service operates across the district of Cheltenham and Tewkesbury.

Gloucestershire (Stroud) – this Community Wellbeing Service operates across the district of Stroud.

Hampshire – this Community Information Service operates across the rural parts of the county of Hampshire.

Kent – the Community Wardens Scheme operates widely across the county of Kent, but seemingly (this could not be verified with a scheme manager) only in rural areas.

Somerset – this Village and Community Agents Scheme operates across the county of Somerset.

West of England – this includes the Village Agents Scheme operating across rural parts of Bath & North East Somerset and the Village Agents Scheme operating across rural parts of North Somerset.

West Sussex (Horsham) – this Community and Village Agents Scheme operates in the northern part of Horsham district.

Wrexham – this Village Agents Scheme operates across almost all rural parts of the Wrexham council area in Wales.

Schemes explored but not included in this research:

Cheshire West – the Pathfinder West Service operates across the Cheshire West & Chester Council area. However, its remit was found to be limited to befriending and linking isolated older residents with social activities. The service manager explained it does not seek to link residents with wider services. Moreover, funding for the service is due to cease fairly soon and there are no plans to operate it beyond 2022/23.

Leicestershire & Rutland – the Rural Coffee Connect project, which was a mobile scheme visiting villages, ceased to operate after March 2022, when its National Lottery funding ended. It has left a legacy of locally based groups that meet socially. However, the element of the project which helped residents to find out about local services no longer exists.

Lincolnshire (East Lindsey) – the TED Ageing in East Lindsey scheme ceased to operate as a stand-alone scheme in March 2021, when its National Lottery funding ended. From that date it was ‘mainstreamed’, as far as possible, within the services of East Lindsey District Council. It is now largely about delivering age friendly services and encouraging local businesses to do likewise.

Powys (in Wales) – this Community Connectors scheme, which appears to be replicated in other parts of Wales, is strongly tied into delivery of health and care services, not least to help residents live independently at home for as long as possible. It is a narrower focus than the Village Agents scheme in Wrexham (covered by this research). The scope to bend this to wider agendas, such as the PSR, seems limited though it could be considered.

Staffordshire (South Staffordshire) – this Village Agents scheme which was managed by the South Staffordshire Partnership was found to have ceased operating some while ago. No obvious equivalent appears to operate in the area now.

Note: The initial web search went well beyond the schemes that are listed above. However, no schemes worth further investigation were identified in other areas.

Annex B – Blank version of table used to present scheme information

RELEVANT TO: CG SW WWU WPD	
Scheme name:	
SCHEME MANAGEMENT	
Geographic area served:	
Managed by:	
Partnership or commissioning arrangements:	
Scheme contact details:	
SCHEME OPERATION	
Number of Agents:	Status of Agents:
Client groups targeted or eligible: [including how referred to the scheme]	Number of scheme clients:
Scheme aims or objectives:	
How service is delivered:	
Most frequent client issues:	
Links with other local support networks:	
Any notable future development plans:	
PRIORITY SERVICES REGISTER ACTIVITY	
Awareness of the PSR:	
Existing PSR support activity:	
Willingness to do more on PSR: [including scope to cascade to other local support networks]	
Barriers to providing PSR support: [including any comments about how they might be addressed]	
OTHER UTILITIES ACTIVITY	
Existing or potential activity on fuel poverty:	
Existing or potential activity on home energy efficiency:	
Existing or potential activity on carbon monoxide or smoke alarm awareness:	