

The Village Agents project was launched in June 2010 as part of the Northern Fells Group which covers the parishes of: **Boltons, Caldbeck, Castle Sowerby, Ireby with Uldale, Mungrisdale, Sebergham & Welton, and Westward & Rosley in North Allerdale and Eden.**

The Village Agents are friendly local contacts who will help people of all ages to obtain assistance and advice from a wide range of organisations and services, and support people in achieving the help they need. Recently the Northern Fells Village Agents have supported residents to establish local oil buying syndicates.

Background

Many residents living in the Northern Fells area do not have access to mains gas and are reliant on more expensive forms of heating such as oil.

The Village Agents recognised that the rising cost of heating oil was a concern for residents and decided to support them to set up local oil buying syndicates to coordinate deliveries and help negotiate a lower price.

The Project

The first oil syndicate, for Caldbeck and Hesketh Newmarket, was set up by Village Agent Julia Trotter in December 2011.

Julia, together with a local volunteer coordinator, set about gathering names to start a syndicate. They advertised in local publications and local outlets and had a great response.

Whilst the cost of oil was a concern, local residents were also keen to keep their local supplier. By coordinating deliveries, there is a reduced delivery cost for the supplier. This, in turn, can be passed on to the customer. A local supplier agreed to offer heating oil at a reduced price to the syndicate members.

It was agreed to organise an oil delivery every 3 months, but members of the syndicate are under no obligation to receive oil each time and can opt out at any time.

Julia and the local volunteer coordinator contact the members every 3 months to see if oil is needed and if so how much. Email is used wherever possible as it cuts down on time and costs. Phone calls are made where email is not available.

The delivery details are input into a spreadsheet and emailed direct to the supplier. The supplier then chooses the best day of the week for the oil price and delivers to that area.

What has been achieved?

The feedback from residents has been very favourable. They are happy for someone to organise the delivery and to also take advantage of a reduced oil price.

Savings for customers vary depending on the amount of oil ordered, however the supplier has agreed that there will always be a reduced price to syndicate members.

New members join every month; as of June 2012 the Caldbeck and Hesketh New Market syndicate had 76 members. It is also a great opportunity to raise the profile of other Northern Fells Group facilities and initiatives on offer to local residents.

Following the success of the Caldbeck and Hesketh Newmarket group, Philippa Groves, Village Agent for Castle Sowerby and Mungrisdale set up two syndicates in January 2012.



Village Agent Julia Trotter with volunteer syndicate coordinator Rosemary Bailey (Caldbeck)



Village Agent Philippa Groves with syndicate customers Ted and Angela Roper (Castle Sowerby)

What has been achieved (cont.)

Philippa followed the same process as before, promoting the syndicate through local newsletters, leaflet drops, word of mouth and at weekly drop-ins and lunch clubs.

The syndicate is coordinated mainly by email, in a similar way to that in Caldbeck and Hesket Newmarket. The same local oil supplier is used and orders are made every 3 months.

By June, the Mungrisedale syndicate had around 50 members and is run completely by a volunteer coordinator.

The Castle Sowerby syndicate, which for the time being includes the parish of Sebergham & Welton, has over 50 members and is currently looking for a volunteer coordinator.

The syndicate for Westward and Rosley, set up in March 2012 by Village Agent Anne Burgess, had 34 members by June.

Emma Jennings, Village Agent for Ireby, Uldale and Boltons is currently looking into setting up a syndicate for the remaining area covered by the Northern Fells Group and is working closely with the local school on this.

The Learning

The oil buying syndicates are an important initiative, responding directly to the concerns of local residents. Widespread publicity and word of mouth is essential to the success of the syndicates, as is the cooperation and understanding of local oil suppliers.

Whilst the syndicates have been initiated by the Village Agents, volunteer coordinators ensure their ongoing success and highlight how important and necessary an asset volunteers are to rural communities.

Email is the most efficient way of communicating, and helps to keep the volunteer coordinator time required to a minimum. However, having the option of being included in the syndicate by phone is an important alternative for those in the community without access to email.

Contact Details

For more information about the Northern Fells Group and the Village Agents, please contact Anne Burgess, Village Agent Coordinator and Village Agent for Westward & Rosley on Tel: 016973 49741 or Email: anneburgess52@googlemail.com

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