

Highbridge Medical Centre

Village Agent as part of the Practice Team

Dr Harvey Sampson (GP) and Steve Ballinger (Village Agent)



About the practice

We are a relatively large practice of around 12,600 patients covering the town and surrounding area of Highbridge in Somerset. Like many other practices, Highbridge Medical centre, as part of Symphony Healthcare Services, has introduced many workforce changes to help cope with the rising tide of patient demand. We have extended the range of professionals working within the practice to include Nurse Practitioners, an Emergency Care Practitioner, a Pharmacist and a Village Agent. We have modernised the waiting area and changed the layout of the reception area by removing the glass panels to create a much more open feel. We hold multi-disciplinary (MDT) team meetings weekly in which all the team activity contribute.

“The Village Agent provides patients and the practice with essential options involving a much wider network. We plan to continue with the role over the longer term” – Dr Harvey Sampson

How the Village Agent post works

In Somerset, Village Agents are employed by the Community Council for Somerset (not County Council). This is a Registered Charity that has been helping to reduce loneliness, isolation, poverty and improve wellbeing in Somerset since the 1920s. A small amount of Village Agent time was already available in North Sedgemoor and the practice made a decision to fund an additional day (7 hours, currently Wednesdays) per week. This time is specifically focused on patients of the practice and helping them with practical and emotional issues that would otherwise continue to adversely affect their health. To help make these joint working arrangements as effective as possible, the practice has:

- **Access to EMIS:** we have appropriate information sharing arrangements in place so that the Village Agent can write updates directly into the patients' notes, review previous notes and be tasked by the GPs to see specific patients or follow up specific issues. The Village Agent can message the GPs for quick updates and advice.
- **Involvement in MDTs and team training:** The Village Agent participates in our MDT teams and is invited to participate in any team training that is considered relevant and helpful. Having the Agent on site allows for valuable informal exchanges between team members which are less likely to happen otherwise.
- **Image / door sign:** It's a small thing but the Village Agent's magnetic door sign is professionally made to the same style as the GP, nurse and other professionals.
- **IT and nhs.net:** - The CCG has arranged for the Agent to have an NHS-compliant laptop and an nhs.net email account which allows for information to be exchanged confidentially just like any other member of the team
- **Referrals –** The Village Agent receives referrals via email, EMIS tasks or verbally from other members of the team. These can be directly from reception, from nurses, GPs or other local agencies that are also working with our patients, e.g. the Mulberry Day Centre at Burnham on Sea. The Village Agent has also provided advice to our own staff in relation to their own situations or that of their family (we are after all, all people!)
- **Appointments:** The Village Agent usually has six 45 minute appointments per day. The remainder of the day is spent preparing, responding to specific tasks sent by other team



members or following up with patients over the telephone. The appointments are purposely longer to allow time to build relationships, really find out what matters to the patient, what support they most need and what strengths, support networks and resources they themselves can access. The Village Agent also supports Highbridge patients on days when they are not at the practice (funded through their other time), particularly home visits.

Unique knowledge and skills of the Village Agent

- They know well the wide range of other local services and support available and help patients engage with them (e.g. Hands of Change, Men's Shed, Somerset House, Admiral Nurses, transport options, Citizens Advice, Age UK, micro-providers for personal care, home care, cleaning and home maintenance)
- They have good levels of knowledge about the benefits system, patients' entitlements, how to apply for essential funds. They have good knowledge of Adult Social care and will know if eligibility criteria are likely or not likely to be met and advise patients accordingly
- The can access grants, emergency funds and food bank vouchers

Examples of patients' needs and circumstances helped

The person:

- Is frail and isolated and not engaging with anyone else except the GP but is now attending a local support group and day centre
- has no heating in the winter, a hole in the roof that is letting in the rain to their bedroom, has completely run out of money and has no food - all resolved by connecting the person with other local services
- has had their benefits stopped incorrectly and helped to reinstate these
- is hoarding. Their living conditions are neglected and they are surrounded by trip hazards – all improved with the support of a cleaning and repair company, paid for willingly by the patient themselves
- Is stockpiling and not taking medication – identified and resolved during a joint visit to the patient's home with the practice pharmacist. New dispensing and support arrangements are now in place
- is caring for their partner who is becoming unstable in the bathroom whilst washing – home adaptations put in place via Social Services
- is losing confidence and is afraid to leave the house – now attends Men's Shed...(and the list goes on..!)

To find out more: To find out more please contact either: Dr Harvey Sampson (GP), Harvey.sampson1@nhs.net or Steve Ballinger, Village Agent for Burnham & Highbridge Tel: 07746 340541 or email: steve@somersetccc.org.uk