

Expanding library services for older people

Image: Vancouver Public Library (entrance)
Photo by Margaret Sloan



Margaret Sloan went to Canada and the Netherlands and was impressed with the programmes their library services organise for older people.

On a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship¹ to Canada and the Netherlands in 2007 I had the opportunity to develop ideas for our work in Gloucestershire to expand services to older people.

Gloucestershire offers monthly Library Clubs to housebound older people, where people are brought into libraries with community transport and can browse, select their own books with the assistance of staff and volunteers, and have a cup of tea and a chat – a very important social contact. A regular newsletter, *Book Choice*, gives recommendations from library club members.

I wanted to visit other interesting library initiatives for older people which offered social contact, community involvement and enrichment.

The helpful convener of the Canadian Library Association's interest group for older people, Desiree Baron, Head of Outreach Services at Vancouver Library, gave me other contacts and I visited four libraries in British Columbia, Calgary Library, and finally Toronto.

My contacts in the Netherlands arrived via a national network of librarians working with older people who meet twice a year, and I visited six interesting projects there.

Everywhere I found welcoming librarians aware of the importance of reducing social isolation for elderly people.

The Canadian Library Association interest group for older people stresses that older adults are not a homogeneous group: there are several generations among them, with different life experiences and expectations. As in Britain, 'older' can mean 50+, 55+, 60, 65 etc.

Programmes

It was clear when I was researching for the Fellowship that programmes/events for seniors were very important in Canadian libraries. These have developed from the large amount of programming undertaken for all customers and potential customers. Many older people also attend the general programmes. Most are free or offered at minimal charge.

The programmes included:

- Book clubs/groups, including seniors' book clubs, talking-books clubs, and ideas for a non-fiction book club and a large-print book club; also training on how to run a book group, which seemed a particularly productive use of resources
- Seniors' discussion groups, sometimes called Philosophers' Cafés, some in conjunction with a local university's continuing education programme, with a staff moderator and information on follow-up possibilities
- Memoir-writing sessions – covering practical writing and self-publishing advice; memoir writing ties in well with using library materials such as local history, photographs, poems etc
- Coffee and conversation, informal regular gatherings in the library
- Activities targeted at immigrants/New Canadians including older people. Libraries form partnerships with ESL agencies and act as venues for language learning, sometimes offering informal coffee and conversation
- Film sessions – classic films, documentaries, travel, comedy – very popular in most libraries; not exclusively for seniors but they form much of the audience and again it's a social occasion.

All programmes are seen as a way of getting more people into libraries to find out about what they have to offer. In Toronto, seniors are saying they want more programming, and the library feels seniors want to keep up with contemporary life, and programming should reflect this (for example with the discussion groups).

Some libraries have even more events during a Seniors Month, with a wide variety of activities: How to write wills; Prepare for your driving test, for seniors turning 80; Everyday wellness through Tai Chi; Preventing slips and falls; Elder Treks; Scrapbooking; and Locating reliable health information on the internet.

In some places programming is undertaken centrally, in others locally, and in others there is a combination. Sometimes the library works closely with the local Seniors Centre, supporting its programmes, e.g. with library materials for an 'Armchair China' event. Partnerships with specialist groups offer events such as 'How to protect yourself from fraud'.

Amsterdam's splendid new hi-tech central library has regular events for older people, some of which focus on using the library's technology, e.g. the new Aquabrowser system for the catalogue, and music downloads in the library. A bi-monthly reading group specifically for older people is held in a quiet area. Other sessions included topics such as sensible eating for older people, and care for older people when abroad. A cross-city reading project with free copies of *The Happy Class 1923* culminated in an 'Epilogue' event at 12 noon on a Saturday to provide opportunities to talk about the book and people's own schooldays – a chance to make people feel included.

Many older people act as carers for their grandchildren and, to make it easy for them to attend events, children's activities need to be available as well. Or, to turn it around, children's activities are an opportunity to get grandparents into the library as well.

IT sessions

All libraries I visited in Canada reported high demand from older people for IT introductory sessions. They had developed group sessions smaller than the other computer-familiarisation groups so extra help could be given. Trained staff members take the sessions, all following scripts and providing handouts. Typically, the first session familiarises people

with using the mouse, the next focuses on the internet, and the final one on email basics – including signing people up to email.

Sometimes volunteers are present at sessions – to give support, but not the training. Drop-in group sessions were also popular, sometimes as a follow-up to the more formal sessions, and there may be a social contact element to the enthusiasm for these regular sessions. Calgary also had 'Internet Dating for Seniors' sessions.

One library annually obtained external summer funding so students could give one-to-one sessions. Many of the customers were seniors; teaching experience and patience were the qualities sought in the students rather than advanced technical skills.

IT sessions were also available to housebound customers in Calgary. Volunteers visit a customer three or four times to set up e-mail etc and show them how to use the online catalogue. No hardware help is given.

In the Netherlands some library staff also deliver introductory IT sessions, but there is a national independent organisation called SeniorWeb with trained IT Ambassadors, usually retired volunteers, often former IT people. They are in every town and teach older people in the library and other venues.

Websites

A website specifically targeted at older people can demonstrate to seniors that they are a valued part of the library constituency.

Canadian libraries have web pages which offer information on library programmes for seniors: reading lists (e.g. books to retire with, books relevant to carers), gateway links to external programmes for older people, health information, leisure and travel info, legal information etc. Calgary has a '50 and Forward' website.²

In the Netherlands work is under way to develop a national Seniors Information Point website for libraries, with three levels of information: national, provincial, and information generated from a national local information database. There will be pages on health, leisure, finance, everyday living etc. One of the members of this project believes that seniors' web-based information will work best when complemented by older people's activity groups in the libraries.

There will also be a physical information point for older people at Amsterdam's new central library. In Middelburg (where their mobile already has an information terminal) it was felt that a website and other information for older people could be offered via the mobile service, reaching older people who may have difficulty in accessing information in other ways.

Outreach

Outreach delivery services in Canada and the Netherlands were not dissimilar to those in the UK, including housebound delivery, either by volunteers or by library staff with a van. In Calgary some volunteer deliverers are now reading to their customers, but the library feels it needs to be sensitive to what volunteers want to do with their time.

Deposit collections rather than mobiles often seemed to be the way of supplying books to residential homes, although there were examples of library staff regularly

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offering a library service at some residential homes. Again in Calgary, Libraries in Residence were provided by volunteers who live within sheltered housing and homes. They organised the delivered collections and liaised with the outreach service, often by email.

Canadian library patrons telephoned in requests to the housebound service for reservations perhaps more frequently than in the UK. There is extensive application of technology by libraries, and also use of technology by the customers. Reading lists were produced in print, on the web, emailed out, and new book lists put into delivery



Images above and opposite from Amsterdam's new hi-tech central library.

bags. Customers then responded by phone, email, or marking the list. Libraries such as Toronto make a point of talking through with their housebound customers how to use the online catalogue to reserve materials.

At Maple Ridge in British Columbia the library goes out to residential facilities for older people. They tell short stories and have been developing storytelling/remembrance kits (taking the model from their children's kits) to leave with homes, which include: sketches, quizzes, music, films and objects, on themes of trips/transport, school days, farm life, family etc.

The Listening in Your Armchair project in the Netherlands recruited volunteers through public meetings and trained them to read aloud to groups in residential homes. The intention is to stimulate the listeners to talk and connect with each other, breaking the isolation many feel. Some care-home staff have also volunteered to become readers. Activities organisers in the homes can be crucial, as is the enthusiasm of the home manager. The texts and poems used were carefully selected with libraries for ease

of understanding, familiarity, and memory stimulation. Over a period, the reading can become part of the life of the residential home, and twice a year there are readings to the whole home. In one project people were read to in their own homes.

Spin-offs from this reading programme have included a Story Kitchen with Alzheimer's residents, combining simple tasks – peeling fruit, drinking coffee – with listening to a seasonal story, all in a 1950s-type kitchen. The participants respond to the stimulation – and enjoy eating the cake produced. In most of the libraries I visited in the Netherlands I found materials – books, audio, games etc – specifically intended to stimulate older people and people with Alzheimer's.

In the Netherlands small library collections targeted at older people who find it difficult to access a regular library were being developed. Utrecht has a pilot library for older people and mothers with young children, in a suburb with no library, specifically requested by the local council. The 600 books, changed quarterly, reflect customers' wishes, and include large print, audiobooks, and magazines (including titles for the over-55s). The library is open two half-days a week and is staffed by volunteers; loans are on cards, and reservations can be emailed into the library. The library service generated publicity and there are around 80 members – mostly new or returners (those who hadn't been to a library for some five years). Customers say they appreciate the small size of the library which makes it easier to choose books, and volunteers think the customers also like the social contact. Special events, e.g. a poetry afternoon given by a volunteer, create more interest.

In Middelburg the library has started a collection at a 'Grand Cafe', a restaurant at an older people's complex of sheltered housing and nursing care. Sheltered housing residents can join, and combine selecting a book with having a coffee in a social setting. The nursing units can become members, as can people in respite and recovery care, and day-centre users. The library collection includes picture books, large print, and games for stimulation. Again it is staffed by volunteers. The library service is taking advantage of new developments in systems of care in the Netherlands and collaborating with 'wellness agencies'.

These libraries/collections differ from a mobile library in that they are available to customers for longer periods, and offer a venue in which people can go and socialise. In Gloucestershire, Village Agents have started monthly mini-library clubs where older people from the local village drop in and choose books from a collection which is regularly changed. Tea and chat are an integral part of these informal sessions,

which have also helped the agents discover any needs they can help people with.

Most libraries in the UK have services and sometimes activities for older customers, but how many libraries have a strategy for older people? [See box, below.] In Calgary a strategic programme of services to older people, 'Libraries for Life!', began in 2003. It covers all aspects of services to older people (65+) and has led to the development of a comprehensive suite of services and activities supported by marketing, staff training etc. They had realised that older people were using the library less than other groups, and felt that increasingly the library has a role in supporting the ability of older people to live independently, and remain actively engaged in the community and the world of learning. Toronto Library is now also responding to the demographics of the ageing population and consulting to prepare a strategy.

Both countries visited had substantial numbers of volunteers. Many volunteers are themselves older people, making a contribution enabling libraries to offer services to all groups of customers, including children and young people. The presence of volunteers greatly contributes to the community involvement feeling of activities organised by a library.

In the past older people have not always been very vocal about their wishes for library



services, but this may be about to change. Although I did not find much happening yet specifically targeting the newly ageing population, everyone agreed that libraries need to attract this group, and that the 'baby-boomers' will have higher expectations of service and be more vocal in their demands.

My Netherlands visit also included a huge national exhibition, '50 Plus', with stands on travel, courses, health campaigns, home improvements etc. This has been run for several years and reflects how this group is taken seriously by commercial organisations. Are

libraries taking this group seriously, we must ask ourselves. 🌟

References and notes

1 The Fellowship was in the category 'The Third Age. Opportunities and Challenges for an Ageing Population' and could include any projects examining aspects of enriching life for the elderly, including leisure, social contact, and community involvement.

2 www.calgarypubliclibrary.com/fifty/welcome.htm

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Steps in developing a strategy for older people

Consultation

In Calgary the library held focus groups of users and non-users. In Toronto, as well as having evaluation forms at seniors programmes, consultation sheets now ask seniors what they think the library does well for them and what could be improved. On-going consultation can help even an established strategy to continue to develop.

Staff participation

In Calgary identifying one key person in each branch who specifically enjoys working with seniors was part of developing the strategy. These staff also worked with older people's agencies in their community, sometimes co-hosting events. They formed a Seniors Liaison Group, meeting twice a year to look at programme ideas and issues.

A comfortable and encouraging environment

Libraries need to be senior-friendly for both customers and volunteers. This includes physical access, assistive materials and technology, and a welcoming and positive staff attitude. Calgary carried out a senior-friendly audit of library facilities by trained seniors. Customers wanted to have staff who were not too busy on hand to help them. Older people also wanted quieter areas in libraries, and these are being developed.

Marketing

Both Calgary and Toronto were very successful in making productive links to local newspapers and magazines, resulting in more older customers. Calgary's targeted marketing included distributing a lifestyle magazine for people of 50+ which covered travel, investment etc in return for free advertising. In Toronto the local daily newspaper distributed the programmes brochure with the newspaper.

Partnerships

As they said in Calgary, older people's needs are often complex: collaborating with other agencies, including health-care and older people's agencies, extends the reach of the library.

Not all library-related activities need to take place in a library, and partnerships can bring services out to older people and offer them together with social contact. With partnerships, libraries can also offer a gateway to specialist information activities, e.g. information on health, making wills, leisure activities.

Checklists for progress

ProBiblio in the Netherlands has developed a checklist for libraries to assess their progress in meeting the needs of older people. It covers whether the library knows the local demography, contact with older people's organisations and agencies, communication, library activities for older people and inter-generational projects, accessibility, the collection, and staff responsibilities for working with older people. Such checklists could be used to ensure all elements are progressed throughout the library service.

Inclusion

One part of a strategy for working with older people would be to ensure that older customers are included in all library developments which are being planned, for instance that they are seen as participants in all technological developments, e.g. accessing downloadable books. Some older customers may need extra support and assistance initially to access these new services – as offered in Amsterdam – but the technology can be especially beneficial to their needs. A newer generation of older people will be probably even more keen to participate in new technological developments.