Enabling Older People to Live Independently: A Shared Responsibility of Citizens and Municipality

Jeannette E. Nijkamp¹ and A.H. (Lidy) Bosker²

ABSTRACT

Background and aim – This paper studies concepts for assisted living for independently living older people. This is an important issue, as the number of independently living over-75s increases rapidly, and their needs and wishes are more explicit and diverse than before. This paper aims to explore the difficulties that emerge with respect to connecting to these needs and wishes. It scrutinizes two Dutch initiatives related to assisted living.

Methods / Methodology – Data were collected by means of desk research, conversations and discussions.

Results – A service flat is a more traditional form of a facility for assisted living. Here, older people live independently in their own apartment, while receiving services. However, difficulties can be experienced in connecting with the needs and desires of the elderly. Recently, other new concepts for assisted living have arisen, such as the Knarrenhof, which is aimed at a mix of richer and less affluent (future) elderly and which consists of groups of houses around court yards. Difficulties that such initiatives can experience relate to the collaboration between private initiators and the municipality, and between various municipal departments.

Practical or social implications – What is needed is an integral approach by the different municipal departments, which is based on a social cost-benefit analysis, and in which the municipality connects as much as possible with private initiatives. For the realization of facilities for assisted living is a shared responsibility of citizens and the municipality.

Type of paper – Research paper.

KEYWORDS

Assisted living, independent living, citizens’ initiative, role of the municipality, healthy cities.

INTRODUCTION

This paper studies concepts for assisted living that aim at independently living older people in the Netherlands. It contains an exploration of difficulties with respect to connecting to the needs and desires of these elderly. This is an important issue, as the number of independently living elderly increases rapidly, and their needs and wishes are more explicit and diverse than before. As each country has its own context, the Dutch situation is taken as an example. However, as the Dutch situation also corresponds to a greater or lesser extent to the context of other European countries, so do the insights this exploration generates.

In the Netherlands, there is a growing number of frail elderly living independently, where frailty can be defined as “a process of accumulation of physical, mental and/or social deficits in functioning” (Van Campen, 2011). In general, frailty increases with age. In 2019, there were more than 1.2 million over-75s living independently and this number is expected to rise to more than 2 million in 2030. Furthermore, the age until which they keep on living independently is also rising, just as the amount of support and care that these people need (De Klerk et al, 2019). To enable people to grow old independently, they need suitable houses with essential services nearby; advice, support and facilities that help them implement their own solutions; and a network of formal and informal care (De Kam, 2013). Factors

¹ Hanze University of Applied Sciences / Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands, e-mail: j.e.nijkamp@pl.hanze.nl
² Hanze University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands
influencing whether frail people can live independently include income, accessibility of their house and living environment, availability of a supporting social network, opportunities for social contacts and participation; and informal care. Frail people need accessible houses; a safe living environment stimulating social contacts and participation; support from social networks; and services (e.g. shops and healthcare) at walking distance or being delivered at home (Rossum et al., 2014). Until recently, these conditions were provided by publicly financed care homes. The elderly who lived in a care home had their own room, with everything being arranged for them, including meals and laundry services. These care homes also offered the option to participate in all kinds of activities, such as coffee meetings, handicrafts and choir rehearsals. Beside these care homes, there were also nursing homes for people who needed intensive nursing that could not be offered at home or in a care home.

Since the 1960’s several private initiatives have also been taken in order to realize other assisted living facilities for the elderly alongside care homes, as part of the elderly did not want to live in a care home. These new facilities mainly aimed at middle class seniors. A more traditional form of such a facility is the service flat, where older people live independently in their own apartment, while receiving services such as meals, cleaning and technical support. In the Netherlands there are approximately 360 service flats. These flats also contain central rooms, where inhabitants can organize activities together. All services used to be included in the price and obligatory for all inhabitants. However, today’s elderly are more empowered than those of some decades ago, and their needs and desires have changed (De Klerk et al., 2019). For this reason, there is a decreasing interest in service flats and other initiatives labeled for seniors among today’s vital elderly. Moreover, these elderly have a very critical attitude towards the price-quality ratio and the supplementary facilities that service flats offer. As a result, various service flats with high service cost and outdated apartments have recently been confronted with vacancy (Nouws, 2015). It is only after health problems have become manifest that many elderly nowadays consider moving into assisted living facilities such as service flats.

Alongside the more traditional facilities such as service flats, various other new concepts for assisted living have arisen recently, such as for instance houses in which several generations live together. The closedown of the care homes in the Netherlands gave extra momentum to the development of these new concepts. This closedown was induced by the sharp rise of healthcare costs, an important cause being the increasing number of elderly. In order to diminish these costs, since 2015 a policy has been implemented in the Netherlands aiming at facilitating the elderly to live independently as long as possible, instead of in care homes. These elderly are expected to arrange the support they need as much as possible by themselves, with help from their social network. Only if there is no other option should they get additional care from healthcare support. This has resulted in a decrease of the over-80s living in institutions from 63% in 1980 (Den Draak et al., 2016; Garssen en Harmsen, 2011) to about 11% (De Klerk et al., 2019). This policy was a part of a wider set of policies of the Dutch national government aimed at stimulating the so-called “do-democracy” (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2013), in which citizens co-decide and tackle social issues themselves. This do-democracy was the result of a process of decentralization and deregulation of social policies that commenced in the 1980s (Heeg, Klagge & Ossenbrügge, 2003). This resulted in municipalities retrenching from parts of the social policy domain, the underlying expectation being that this would stimulate private initiative.

Often these new concepts for assisted living have been initiated by relatively rich and highly educated (future) seniors, who have taken the initiative with a group of like-minded others to, for instance, have a house, or a group of houses, constructed or adapted for them to live in together. However, for less affluent people this is no option. Furthermore, there are also private initiatives aimed at a mix of richer and less affluent (future) elderly. An example of such an initiative is the concept of the Knarrenhof. (“Knar” means “old person” in Dutch.) A Knarrenhof consists of groups of houses around court yards (“hof” in Dutch), these houses being a mix of owner-occupied and rental properties (https://knarrenhof.nl/). All seniors who move into a Knarrenhof agree to socially support each other. Notwithstanding these new initiatives, until now the number of private initiatives has been limited (RIVM, 2018) and there are still insufficient facilities for assisted living that connect to the needs and desires of older people.

The research that underlies this paper is the first step of an investigation into how concepts for assisted
living can be realized that connect to the needs and desires of independently living older people. This research into assisted living concepts fits in with our research group’s broader research theme healthy cities. According to Hancock and Duhl (1988), who are the initiators of the UN Healthy Cities programme, qualities of a healthy city are: 1) a clean, safe, high-quality physical environment; 2) a stable and sustainable ecosystem; 3) a strong, mutually supportive and non-exploitive community; 4) public participation in and control over the decisions affecting one’s life, health and well-being; 5) meeting the basic needs for all; 6) access to a wide variety of experiences and resources and possibilities of multiple contacts, interaction and communication; 7) a diverse, vital and innovative economy; 8) encouragement of connectedness with the past, heritage, and other groups and individuals; 9) a city form compatible with and enhancing the above; 10) an optimum level of appropriate public-health and sick-care services for all; and 11) high positive health status and low disease status. Hence concepts for assisted living that connect to the needs and desires of older people should be an important aspect of a healthy city.

The knowledge that this exploration generates is aimed to facilitate the realization of such concepts. The central research question of this paper is: “Which difficulties emerge when realizing assisted living concepts for independently living elderly that connect to their needs and desires?” In order to answer this question, this paper scrutinizes two initiatives with respect to assisted living: The Vondelflat, which is a service flat, and the Knarrenhof.

METHODS
Websites and newspaper articles were consulted, followed by conversations with a member of the supervisory board of both initiatives. Furthermore, several discussions, with members of our research centre as well as with external partners, took place on desirable characteristics of facilities for assisted living, as well as on opportunities and challenges with respect to their realization. Our decision to scrutinize both a service flat initiated in the 1960s and a recent initiative was made on purpose, while our choice for the Vondelflat and the Knarrenhof can be considered as a convenience sample, contact persons of both initiatives being part of our research group’s network.

RESULTS
The Vondelflat in Groningen
The Vondelflat in Groningen is a service flat that was built in the 1960’s as a private initiative. From the start, all inhabitants rented their own apartment and there were also rooms for general use. Moreover, the management of the flat provided for domestic services and also for warm meals, for which service costs had to be paid. Since the start, these meals had been prepared in the kitchen of the flat. However, in 2016 the preparation of meals was outsourced to a big catering business, because of financial reasons. This caterer cooked the food within its own organization, after which it was transported to the Vondelflat. Here, the food was divided into portions, warmed up and served to the inhabitants. As the elderly judged the quality of the meals as insufficient, a number of them decided to order their meals somewhere else. However, according to the management, these meals formed a compulsory part of the concept of the service flat, for which the inhabitants had to pay, whether they made use of it or not. As several elderly persisted in their refusal to pay, the management took them to court. This caused indignant reactions throughout the country and attention from the media (see e.g., Van der Laan, 2017a). Subsequently, the rules were changed, so that from that moment the elderly could decide for themselves where to order their meals.

In the meantime, the Vondelflat had to deal with increasing vacancy, as the building had become outdated. For this reason, in 2013 the management decided to not only rent apartments to older people, but also to other groups of people who had difficulties in finding suitable housing, including young people and singles. Furthermore, a start was made to develop plans for a new building. At the time of our research, these plans were finished and the construction of two new buildings was about to start, at a nearby location. The initial idea was to move the elderly living in the Vondelflat to one of the new buildings. However, these elderly appeared not to be willing to move. As moreover most of them were already very old, it was decided to let them live in the old building.

The design for the new buildings took account of new insights into needs and desires of old people.
However, this turned out to be only general insights, as no elderly, nor any organization representing them, had been involved in the design. At the moment of our research a start had just been made with contacting elderly from the neighbourhood who might be interested in living in one of the new buildings. Meanwhile, two organisations providing care for frail people had indicated that they were interested in renting one of the buildings. However, this offer had been refused, as the establishment of an healthcare organization in one building was supposed to negatively influence the options for renting out the other space.

This example illustrates the difficulties that a private initiative such as this serviceflat has in connecting with the needs and desires of older people.

The Knarrenhof in Zwolle

In 2018 the first Knarrenhof was realized in the city of Zwolle. Meanwhile, it has become a popular concept that also attracts media attention (see e.g. Van Dinther, 2020), as it aims at a mix of property owners and renters instead of only at affluent people, with all inhabitants agreeing to socially support each other. Inhabitants are enthusiastic and elderly in other places are also interested in living in a Knarrenhof. Therefore, the Knarrenhof foundation has been established with the aim of rolling out this concept in other places. However, this does not go without a struggle. On one hand, a lot of enthusiasm exists concerning the concept of the Knarrenhof, as it seamlessly fits in with the policy of the Dutch government. The Knarrenhof enables seniors to live independently as long as possible while stimulating that the necessary support be provided as much as possible by their social network, and as little as possible by professional caregivers.

On the other hand however, the Knarrenhof foundation faces several considerable difficulties with respect to the realization of other Knarrenhofs. One important problem is the price of land. Locations that are deemed suitable for a Knarrenhof are mainly located in the middle of a city, close to facilities such as shops and easily accessible by public transport. However, because of these characteristics the price of land is high, which is often too high for the Knarrenhof foundation, as it is aimed at realizing a mix of cheap and expensive houses. A second problem concerns the contacts with the various municipal departments that have to be involved for a new Knarrenhof to be realized. The representatives of the Knarrenhof foundation have experienced that they were sent from pillar to post, which makes the process of realizing a new Knarrenhof longlasting and full of frustrations. In order to break through this situation, the initiators needed endless patience, strong social networks, and knowing who to go to.

Finally, a third difficulty is related to getting a bridging loan, which is needed as the Knarrenhof foundation has insufficient funds to prefinance a new Knarrenhof. After a long process of deliberations, in 2019 a regulation was implemented and funds were made available in order to enable social initiatives like the Knarrenhof foundation to get a bridging loan. However, the process of applying for such a loan is treacly and not transparent, reason for which the available funds have hardly been appealed to until now. The main reason why the Knarrenhof foundation in the beginning of 2020 had still not succeeded in getting a bridging loan was because the executives of the regulation considered the Knarrenhof to be a commercial project developer instead of a social initiative.

This example illustrates the difficulties that a private initiative such as the Knarrenhof can experience, notwithstanding the fact that it connects well to the needs and desires of older people. These difficulties relate to the collaboration between the private initiators and the municipality, and between various municipal departments.

DISCUSSION

Both national and local government policies have been instated that aim at citizens living independently as long as possible when they grow older. Furthermore, these elderly are supposed to arrange the support they need as much as possible by themselves, with help from their social network. Hence citizens are expected to take the initiative. Driven by these government policies including the closing down of care homes, as well as by dissatisfaction with more traditional assisted living facilities such as service flats, various recent private initiatives have indeed been established with respect to realizing
facilities for assisted living that connect to the needs and desires of older people. However, our analysis of the Knarrenhof illustrates that notwithstanding the fact that these private initiatives are in accordance with national and local government policies, the initiators are hindered by regulations and municipal departments who do not collaborate, instead of being facilitated by the municipality. Actually, there is a mismatch between the local government and citizens who want to take the initiative, or a friction in “the market for citizenship” (Boutellier & Klein, p. 11). If municipalities consider it important that citizens take responsibility and initiative, they should facilitate private initiatives instead of hindering these initiatives by obstructive regulations or lack of collaboration between different departments.

This current practice is counterproductive, in the first place because it causes much frustration for citizens who take the initiative to realize facilities for assisted living. As far from every citizen – old or young – is able to take the initiative and to arrange their own support, as many do not have the necessary skills and networks (De Klerk et al., 2019; Nijkamp, Burgers & Kuiper, 2017), it should be realized that it is very important to prevent those who do take the initiative from becoming frustrated. Furthermore, in the second place, this is also counterproductive for economic reasons. On the one hand, the real estate department of a municipality may earn less when selling land to, for instance, the Knarrenhof foundation. However, on the other hand, the municipal department for health and social care might save considerably on expenses related to home adaptations and on support and care for the elderly who live in a Knarrenhof. What is needed is an integral approach by the different municipal departments, which is based on a social cost-benefit analysis, and in which the municipality connects as much as possible with private initiatives. For the realization of facilities for assisted living, which enable older people to live independently, is a shared responsibility of citizens and the municipality.

REFERENCES


Rossum, F. van, Leidelmeijer, K., Wever, T., & Ham, M. van den (2014). *Randvoorwaarden voor extramurale wonen bij ZZP’s VV 01 t/m 04.* Amsterdam: RIGO.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Prof. Mark Mobach and his research team would like to gratefully acknowledge the honour of receiving Delta Prize (in Dutch ‘Deltapremie’) handed by Ingrid van Engelshoven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, in The Netherlands in November 2019. The authors of the papers in companion proceedings of the European Facility Management International Conference 2020 are grateful to acknowledge the support of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences and the Dutch Taskforce for Applied Research. They also thank EuroFM for the collaboration and the possibilities for sharing their results and ideas with the EuroFM community.

Deltapremie
The ‘Deltapremie’ or Delta Prize is a new leading research prize in the Netherlands focusing on practice-oriented research by professors. The prize is developed for professors who have managed to repeatedly make a special difference with the social impact of their research over the years. It shows where practice and research can come together in an innovative way. Practice-oriented research has acquired a solid place in Dutch society. Almost 700 professors and more than 3,000 teacher-researchers are currently involved. The starting point of the research is always to find solutions for practice-based problems, also by partnering with practice. In this way, practice-oriented research provides applicable solutions to societal challenges.

An independent selection committee selected the winners. The committee consisted of six experts from Erasmus University Rotterdam, Innofest, Delft University of Technology, Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends, and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities. In the report the selection committee tributes Mark Mobach and his research group for the impact that they have on the crossroads of various domains from public transport to mental health. Mobach: “We see the prize as enormous encouragement to continue our research into space and organisation in healthcare, education, offices, and cities together with our partners. We extend our research to areas where there are perhaps fewer financial possibilities, such as research with the arts and frailty.”

Research focus area
With his research group, Prof. Mobach wants to contribute to the best buildings for people and organisations. He does so by devising better space and services in a multidisciplinary setting together with students, lecturer-researchers, Ph.D.-students, and postdocs. Better spaces and services for education, offices, and even cities that stimulate healthy behaviour, better healthcare buildings that reduce stress, but also prisons and stations that better meet the needs of society.