

The Changing System Series

Welcome to The Changing System Series by Move Northamptonshire and the University of Northampton. In this series, we hear stories from people in who are making healthy active lifestyles integral to ALL people's lives in Northamptonshire. *Read, Be Inspired, and Be Part of the Movement.*

HOW LIBRARIES ARE SUPPORTING HEALTHY ACTIVE AGEING IN THEIR COMMUNITY

Say 'Hi' to Carl, Head of Libraries and Community Hubs at West Northamptonshire Council.

In June 2024, Carl joined the county's new Healthy Active Ageing Working Group because he recognised that libraries provide an important community touchpoint for older adults. Since joining the group, he has developed valuable relationships with healthcare colleagues that had previously been difficult to establish independently.

Carl considers these connections one of the greatest benefits of participating in the Healthy Active Ageing Working Group. The group has enabled him to develop collaborative projects with GP practices and hospitals, while also accessing Sir Muir Gray's *Live Longer Better* training. This training equips library staff with the knowledge and confidence to better support older adults who use library services.

We have mapped Carl's story against the four key aims of Move Northamptonshire's Healthy Active Ageing Enabler to demonstrate the impact of the Healthy Active Ageing Activation Event and Working Group.



Aim 1: Embed physical activity into whole-system community approaches that support improved outcomes for older adults, including models of social prescribing across the country

- Through Sir Muir Gray's *Live Longer Better* training that was supplied by the Healthy Active Ageing Working Group, library staff created a local directory of community services for each of the nine council libraries. These directories provide a reliable source of information that helps staff signpost older adults to opportunities and support available in their neighbourhoods. Combined with Make Every Contact Count training, this mapping exercise has enabled library staff to meet informal social prescribing needs and complement more formal GP social prescribing services.
- As funding for social prescribing services declines, Carl sees an opportunity for libraries and Welcoming Spaces to fill some of the gap by offering low-level, informal social prescribing support. Libraries and Welcoming Spaces often attract people during times of need or life transitions. Staff who understand the local community can help residents find the services, groups, and support they need.
- Carl would like to measure the impact that libraries have on community wellbeing. However, he acknowledges that this is challenging because libraries do not provide ongoing casework and may only interact with some residents once. As a result, staff cannot always track the outcomes of those interactions. To address this challenge, Carl has begun monitoring the demographics of library users to better understand who currently accesses services and where opportunities exist to engage underrepresented groups.

Aim 2: Create stronger connections with health and adult social care providers to build an integrated offer for older adults

- By participating in Healthy Active Ageing Working Group meetings, the libraries team built a relationship with the General Practice Alliance. As a result, the Alliance invited them to showcase how libraries can help residents use digital healthcare applications. This collaboration has created opportunities for more integrated support across health and adult social care. Library staff can now help residents navigate healthcare apps and reduce the risk of digital exclusion. For Carl, this partnership with the General Practice Alliance has been the most valuable outcome of participating in the Healthy Active Ageing Working Group because libraries and GP services had previously struggled to identify shared priorities.
- Through the *Live Longer Better* programme, Carl and his team have worked closely with Sir Muir Gray, increasing awareness of the important national role libraries play in supporting active ageing. Libraries can contribute by:
 - providing access to health information and digital literacy support; and
 - promoting local health and wellbeing opportunities.

The libraries service has incorporated these responsibilities into its delivery plan and now monitors the number of adults aged over 50 who access services and support.

- The libraries team has also partnered with Kettering General Hospital to provide temporary library cards for in-patients, enabling them to access library resources during their hospital stay. This initiative demonstrates stronger collaboration between libraries and health services. It also creates opportunities for future partnerships that could improve discharge pathways for patients to access wellbeing and physical activity services in their local community. The pilot has already welcomed its first two patients, and the team hopes to expand the initiative to Northampton General Hospital next year.



Aim 3: Apply insight and person-centred approaches to better understand older adults and provide opportunities and activities that benefit them

- Library staff strongly connected with the messages delivered through the *Live Longer Better* training, viewing it as a natural extension of Make Every Contact Count. The training challenged misconceptions about ageing and helped reduce stigma towards older adults. As a result, staff now take a more person-centred approach when supporting older adults who seek assistance.
- The libraries team also worked with West Northamptonshire Council's Community Development and Inclusion Team to review the accessibility of library spaces for older adults. Following this review, the team launched improvements to furniture and layouts, including clearer walkways and more chairs with armrests. By collaborating with the Council's Community Development and Inclusion Team, libraries are ensuring that the people they wish to support can physically access library services and activities.
- By positioning libraries as key community contact points for older adults, the service engaged 3,013 adults aged over 50 in groups and events across the nine council libraries during April and May 2026. Since January 2026, more than 11,000 adults aged over 50 have participated in library-based groups and events. However, the service has not yet identified how many of these activities specifically focus on increasing physical activity levels.
- During the same period, 8,000 adults under the age of 50 also participated in groups and events across the nine council libraries. These figures highlight both the importance of libraries as community assets and their potential to support people across all age groups. In addition, the large number of child library members creates opportunities for libraries to contribute to Move Northamptonshire's *Great Start* Enabler. Recognising this opportunity, later in 2026, Northampton Central Library will become a host site for a Family Hub service.

Aim 4: Collectively promote and advocate the benefits of maintaining an active lifestyle, including strength and balance, into later life

- Carl introduced Sir Muir Gray to the national Libraries Connected network to discuss how libraries can support active lifestyles in later life across the country. This collaboration demonstrates how a local Activation Event in Northamptonshire can create national-level impact.
- Carl and Sir Muir Gray are currently developing an Active Ageing Book Collection that libraries across the county can promote. The collection will provide practical information and guidance to help older adults remain active, maintain their independence, and improve their quality of life as they age.
- Through the Healthy Active Ageing Working Group, Carl connected with the *Volunteers in Health* leads, who shared guidance on creating supportive environments for volunteers in healthcare settings. Carl has used this guidance to strengthen the volunteering offer within libraries, with the aim of encouraging greater participation from underrepresented groups.



Get Involved

To learn more about West Northamptonshire's Libraries and Welcoming Spaces, visit:

<https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/libraries>

<https://www.westnorthants.gov.uk/welcoming-spaces>

If Carl's story has inspired you and your organisation supports older adults, consider joining the Healthy Active Ageing Working Group. For more information, contact Jackie Browne at

jackie.browne@northamptonshiresport.org.

Thank you to Carl for agreeing to share his research interview as a case study. If you have your own experiences of the Healthy Active Ageing Activation Event or Working Group that you would like to share, please contact Associate Professor Declan Ryan at **Declan.Ryan@northampton.ac.uk** to arrange an interview.

To learn more about Move Northamptonshire, visit:

<https://movenorthamptonshire.org/>

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