

Library that lets you take out people who are left on the shelf

By David Rennie in Brussels

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A public library in Holland has been swamped with queries after unveiling plans to "lend out" living people, including homosexuals, drug addicts, asylum seekers, gipsies and the physically handicapped.

The volunteers will be borrowed by users of the library, in Almelo, who can take them to a cafeteria, and ask them any questions they like for up to an hour, in a scheme designed to break down barriers and combat prejudice.

The library's director, Jan Krol, said yesterday he had been deluged with requests from prospective borrowers after his project was reported in the Dutch media.

Almelo, a prosperous town of 72,000 people in the Twente region of east Holland, is not known as a hotbed of Amsterdam-style liberalism.

The people-lending scheme was conceived as a local project, designed to encourage the solid burghers of Almelo to make contact with members of ethnic minorities and other marginalised members of society but caught the imagination of the Dutch press.

"It has caused a lot of interest, a lot of people have already called with questions like: do I need a library card?" said Mr Krol.

Borrowers of people will not need a card, he said, though one will remain necessary for more prosaic items, such as books. There will be no fines for returning people late, he added.

"Most meetings will last 45 minutes, we imagine. You can ask anything you like, but racist or strong language is not allowed. To avoid unpleasantness, all meetings must take place in the library café."

Mr Krol, who said he was inspired by a similar scheme in Sweden, has already filled many of his volunteer slots, and hopes to launch the project next month.

He said: "I've got several gay men, a couple of lesbian women, a couple of Islamic volunteers, I've got a physically handicapped woman, and a woman who has been living on social security benefits for many years in real poverty. "

Mr Krol said he was especially keen to find members of Holland's small Roma gipsy community after a recent attack on two gipsy families in the city of Enschede.

Under the scheme, photographs and short biographies of the volunteers will appear in the library, and on its website. Library users who wish to take a person out can apply for an appointment. Mr Krol said he had not cleared the scheme with his municipal bosses.

"Oh, I never ask the council before I do anything," he said. "And there are no costs at all, only two cups of coffee."

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Story from Telegraph News:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/1496927/Library-that-lets-you-take-out-people-who-are-left-on-the-shelf.html>

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