

Policy and Practice Recommendations Report

Ireland – Sweden – Germany – Italy – Slovenia - France

Social Circles

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Partner key

Partner	Country
IC Geoss	Slovenia
B-Creative Association	Sweden
FHB	Germany
Insieme per la solidarietà	Italy
M3Cube	France
The Rural Hub	Ireland



01

National Abstracts / Summaries

1. National Abstracts / Summaries

Germany

The Social Circles project demonstrates how adult education can reduce loneliness and social isolation among older adults by creating inclusive, community-based learning opportunities. In the German context, and particularly in Berlin, the project is highly relevant due to rapid demographic ageing, accelerating digitalisation, and persistent concerns about loneliness among older citizens following the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2026, German policymakers, local authorities, and adult education providers increasingly recognised the importance of social participation and lifelong learning for healthy ageing. The Social Circles model aligns well with existing German adult education traditions, especially those connected to community learning, intergenerational engagement, and digital inclusion. The project's emphasis on micro-learning, coaching, and community festivals provides practical and accessible pathways for older adults who may feel excluded from formal education systems.

The German and Berlin-specific context highlights important cultural and structural considerations. Germany has a long-established tradition of adult education delivered through Volkshochschulen (public adult education centres), libraries, neighbourhood initiatives, and civil society organisations. However, barriers remain for older adults — particularly migrants, low-income seniors, individuals with limited digital skills, and people living alone. According to the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), approximately 22.3% of Germany's population was aged 65 or older in 2023, a figure projected to rise sharply in the coming decades, with one in four people expected to be aged 67 or over by 2035. Notably, 34.6% of Germans aged 65 and over live alone — well above the EU average of 31.6%. Berlin represents both opportunity and challenge: while the city has extensive educational infrastructure and active community organisations, it also faces growing social fragmentation and unequal access to digital services. Established initiatives such as Berlin's Digital-Zebra programme and the nationwide DigitalPakt Alter demonstrate growing policy awareness of digital exclusion among older adults. At the same time, many older learners report anxiety around technology, fear of failure, and limited confidence when returning to learning environments.

The Social Circles approach produced several valuable outcomes in the German context. Flexible micro-learning activities proved especially effective because they reduced pressure and allowed participants to engage gradually. Group-based activities linked to arts, storytelling, hobbies, digital skills, and local culture helped strengthen social interaction and confidence. Community coaching also supported educators in developing

more empathetic and adaptable teaching methods. However, implementation challenges included varying levels of digital literacy, recruitment difficulties among isolated seniors, and hesitation toward mixed-age learning environments. Practical improvements include offering more hybrid learning formats, increasing local outreach through trusted community actors, simplifying digital tools, and ensuring longer-term mentoring support beyond the project timeline.

Practice recommendations for Germany and Berlin focus on accessibility, trust-building, and informal engagement. Adult educators should prioritise small-group activities, conversational teaching styles, and peer learning approaches. Outreach should take place through familiar and trusted community spaces such as libraries, senior cafés, religious organisations, housing associations, and health centres. Educators should use practical, relevant topics — including digital safety, budgeting, hobbies, local culture, and wellbeing — while avoiding overly formal educational language. Inclusive learning environments should also accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, particularly in multicultural urban areas such as Berlin. Intergenerational activities can be effective when carefully facilitated and designed around shared interests rather than age-based assumptions.

Policy recommendations emphasise the need for sustainable investment in adult education for older adults. German local authorities and federal ministries should integrate social participation and lifelong learning into healthy ageing strategies. Stable funding is needed for community learning hubs, digital inclusion programmes, and outreach initiatives targeting isolated older adults. Policymakers should strengthen collaboration between adult education providers, social care organisations, healthcare systems, libraries, and local governments. At EU level, programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Skills Agenda should continue supporting innovative adult learning models focused on social inclusion and wellbeing. The DigitalPakt Alter, which entered a new funding phase in 2026, should be expanded to include stronger local mentoring systems and community-based educational coaching.

In conclusion, the Social Circles project offers a practical and transferable model for supporting older adults through adult education and social engagement. In Germany, and especially in Berlin, the project responds directly to growing social and demographic challenges linked to ageing, loneliness, and digital exclusion. The combination of micro-learning, coaching, and community events creates inclusive entry points for participation and lifelong learning. Long-term sustainability will depend on continued policy support, local partnerships, and recognition of adult education as an essential component of social wellbeing and preventive care.

Italy

This report analyzes the results of the Social Circles project conducted in Italy, focusing on the demographic and social challenges affecting the elderly population in Rome. Through

a series of focus groups, the document identifies forced digitalization and social isolation as the main obstacles to well-being in old age.

To counter these critical issues, practical recommendations are proposed—such as the use of gamification and experiential learning—to transform older adults from passive users into active resources.

At the political level, the text urges institutions to guarantee physical, community-based services and structural funding for local associations.

The ultimate goal is to promote a community welfare model that integrates lifelong education and socialization as essential tools for preventive healthcare. In short, the source outlines a strategy to transform aging into an opportunity for democratic resilience and social growth.

France

This report presents the findings from a French focus group conducted in Paris by M3Cube for the Social Circles project, which aims to mitigate social isolation and loneliness among older adults. Bringing together six experienced adult educators and community workers, the session evaluated project initiatives like the Educators Toolbox, community learning festivals, and tailored coaching programs designed to bridge emotional and educational gaps for vulnerable populations. The round-table discussion gathered valuable professional insights, best practices, and reflections on how older learners interact with educational resources.

In France, lifelong learning for retirees is heavily hindered by deep-rooted societal ageism and the professional, employment-focused connotation of the term "formation continue". Furthermore, a pronounced digital divide driven by low self-esteem, anxiety over online safety, and rapid public service digitisation segregates younger, tech-autonomous retirees from older, isolated demographics. These challenges are heavily exacerbated by structural, geographic, and socio-economic disparities, creating distinct "educational deserts" in remote rural areas compared to resource-rich but socially stratified urban ecosystems like Paris.

The focus group highlighted highly positive outcomes regarding senior engagement, emphasising that small-group formats, peer learning, and opportunities that combine personal experience-sharing with new knowledge acquisition are key to sustained participation. However, educators noted that certain evaluation tools, like true-or-false quizzes, were overly simplistic and failed to stimulate deeper dialogue. Future project implementations must prioritise flexibility in curriculum delivery, introduce more critical-thinking activities, and provide continuous communication to strengthen group cohesion.

To optimize educational delivery, practitioners should favor interactive, small-group settings that build a robust sense of community and support-group belonging. Curricula

must remain adaptable to emerging learner needs, blending indoor lessons with outdoor community or cultural excursions that isolated seniors could not easily organise independently. Additionally, because educators frequently encounter participants experiencing intense psychological distress or social isolation, there is an urgent practical need for specialised training and toolkits to help educators properly refer vulnerable individuals to local social care services.

At the policy level, there is a crucial demand for sustained financial and institutional backing from local funding bodies, municipal entities, and European programs like Erasmus+. Local authorities should proactively provide free or low-cost community spaces to lower the operational overhead of delivering social and educational activities. Moreover, policymakers must promote cross-sector collaboration by integrating education, health, and social services—leveraging holistic frameworks like the WHO's ICOPE framework—to address senior autonomy and wellbeing comprehensively.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that successful senior education projects rely far more on social connection, flexible personalisation, and community belonging than on simple knowledge transfer. Educational programs must align directly with the highly diverse, expressed needs of older learners while properly equipping educators with personal soft skills and referral resources. Structurally, establishing free public learning assets, strong cross-sector networks, and long-term funding streams is imperative to ensure that lifelong learning remains genuinely inclusive for all.

Ireland

The Social Circles project explores how community-based adult education can help reduce loneliness among older adults in Ireland by creating opportunities for connection, confidence-building, and meaningful participation. Through a mix of practical micro-learning activities, a Community Coaching Programme, and outreach initiatives such as community learning festivals, the project aims to respond to common barriers, including stigma, low confidence, and negative past experiences of education.

In the Irish context, the focus group highlighted how strongly place matters. Participants spoke about the realities of rural life, where limited transport, fewer local services, and digital barriers can make it harder for older adults to take part. At the same time, strong community ties and familiarity can work in favour of engagement when trust is built. Attitudes toward learning in later life also play a role, with some older adults hesitant to return due to past experiences or a sense that education is "not for them". Educators responded very positively to the overall approach of the Social Circles resources, particularly the emphasis on practical, hands-on activities. These were seen as well-suited to older learners and adaptable to different settings. However, participants also noted that even small digital elements could be challenging for some learners, and highlighted the

importance of keeping activities simple, flexible, and well-supported, with clear guidance for facilitators.

When it comes to practice, the discussion reinforced that outreach is most effective when it is personal and rooted in trusted relationships. Local organisations, familiar venues, and word-of-mouth play a crucial role in encouraging participation. Creating a relaxed and welcoming environment, where people feel comfortable and not judged, was seen as just as important as the activity itself. Flexibility, patience, and an understanding of the emotional realities of ageing were all highlighted as key elements of good practice.

At a policy level, participants felt that while there are strong national strategies in place around ageing, wellbeing, and lifelong learning, there is still a gap when it comes to recognising the role of community-based education in tackling loneliness. More consistent funding, better coordination between sectors, and support for educators were all identified as necessary to make this type of work sustainable, particularly in rural areas.

The findings suggest that Social Circles has real potential to make a meaningful difference, particularly if the approach remains flexible and grounded in local realities. The next phase will be important in testing and refining the resources, while longer-term impact will depend on continued investment, strong partnerships, and closer alignment with existing policy frameworks.



02

Introduction and Focus Group Profiles

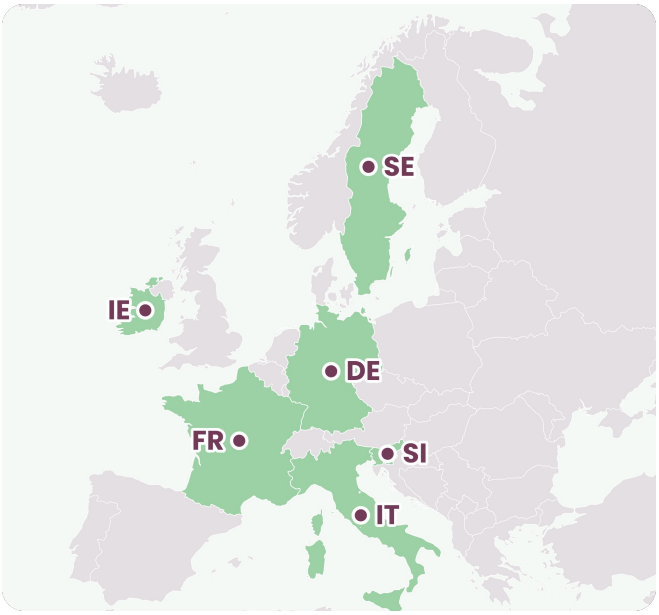
2. Introduction and Focus Group Profiles

The national focus groups conducted within the Social Circles project were designed to gather first-hand insights from professionals, educators, volunteers, community workers and other practitioners involved in working with older adults. Across Slovenia, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France and Ireland, the consultations provided an opportunity to reflect on the realities of supporting older people through adult education and community-based learning, while also identifying the barriers, needs and opportunities that influence participation in different national and local contexts.

The focus group activities were carried out between 2025 and 2026 using a variety of formats, including in-person, hybrid and facilitated round-table discussions. Although the size, composition and organisation of the groups differed between partner countries, participants represented a broad range of professional backgrounds and levels of experience in adult education, community work, social support and services for older adults. Several participants had also been directly involved in Social Circles activities, including the Educators' Toolbox, Community Coaching Programme, workshops, outreach activities and community learning events.

Across the partner countries, discussions explored participants' experiences of working with older adults, their observations of older learners, and their reflections on the effectiveness and relevance of the Social Circles approach. Particular attention was given to social isolation and loneliness, access to learning opportunities, digital inclusion, confidence and motivation, outreach, accessibility, and the role of community-based support. Participants were also invited to reflect on the wider cultural, social and policy environments that influence adult education for older people and to identify practical and policy recommendations for improving future provision.

The following focus group profiles provide an overview of how the consultations were organised in each partner country and describe the participants who contributed to the national findings. Together, these perspectives form the empirical basis for the comparative analysis and recommendations presented in the subsequent chapters of this report.



6 partner countries

6 partner organisations

IE SE DE IT SI FR

2.1 Slovenia

Date: 22 July 2026

Format: Hybrid – in person and online via Microsoft Teams

Location / context: Slovenia

Number of participants: 5

Gender: 5 women

Age profile: Two participants aged 43–46; two participants aged 50+; one participant nearly 80 years old

Professional profiles: Healthcare educator; social network coordinator; educator of older adults; educator and researcher; volunteer organising educational activities for older adults

Experience: All participants had more than 10 years of experience in their respective fields

Focus group approach: Presentation of the Social Circles project followed by discussion on the national and cultural context, project impact and reflections, policy recommendations, support needs, sustainability and cross-sector collaboration

2.2 Sweden

Date(s): October 2025, November 2025 and January 2026

Format: In person

Location / context: Sweden; rural area

Number of participants: 9

Gender: All women

Age profile: 45–59 and 60+

Professional profiles: Activity leaders, staff and managers working in elderly care

Experience: 6–10 years and 10+ years of experience in adult education

Involvement in Social Circles: Participants were involved as instructors and activity leaders, contributed to adapting activities for older adults, and supported outreach and recruitment

Focus group approach: Project introduction, discussion of professional experience with older adults, targeted questions, additional observations and recommendations, and a summary of key findings

2.3 Germany

Date(s): 2025–2026

Format: Hybrid – online and in person

Location / context: Germany, with particular emphasis on Berlin

Number of participants: Approximately 6–8 participants per group

Gender: Mixed

Age profile: Not specified in the submitted report

Professional profiles: Adult educators, community workers, senior-support volunteers, staff from local learning centres, and representatives of organisations working with older adults

Experience: Participants represented different levels of professional experience; several had experience supporting older learners during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Involvement in Social Circles: Participants engaged with project resources and approaches, including the Educators' Toolbox, Community Coaching Programme and micro-learning activities

Focus group approach: Discussion of experiences with older learners, inclusive educational practices, community learning, digital inclusion and the practical application of Social Circles resources

2.4 Italy

Date(s): 23 October 2025, 6 November 2025, 11 February 2026, 25 February 2026, 11 March 2026, 25 March 2026 and 14 April 2026

Format: In person

Location / context: Rome, Lazio, Italy; urban area

Number of sessions: 7

Session duration: 2 hours per meeting

Number of participants: 9 participants in each of the first two sessions; an average of 6 participants in the following five sessions

Gender: Majority female; the first two sessions included 7 women and 2 men, while the following sessions included on average 5 women and 1 man

Age profile: 60–65 and 70+

Professional profiles: Volunteers, social and cultural animators, psychological support provider, and staff and managers working in elderly care

Experience: 6–10 years and over 15 years of experience in adult education

Focus group approach: Project presentation, sharing of previous experience with older adults, guided questions, open discussion, practical and policy recommendations, and concluding reflections

Documentation: Discussions were transcribed into digital notes and analysed thematically

2.5 France

Date: 25 May 2026

Format: In person; round-table discussion

Location / context: Paris, France; urban area

Number of participants: 6

Gender: 5 women and 1 man

Age profile: 27–35 and 40–50

Professional profiles: Adult educators; community workers supporting migrants, women and isolated older adults; volunteer facilitators; educators working with seniors

Experience: 2–5 years and 10+ years of experience in adult education

Involvement in Social Circles: All participants had previously been involved in Social Circles activities to varying degrees and had attended the dissemination meeting for the Educators' Toolbox and the local training

Focus group approach: Exchange of professional experiences, advice and good practices, reflections on older learners, and discussion of the French cultural, social and policy context

2.6 Ireland

Date: 10 February 2026

Format: In person

Location / context: Ireland; participants represented both rural and urban areas

Number of participants: 18

Gender: Participants represented different genders; a detailed breakdown is not provided in the Chapter 2 profile

Age profile: Participants represented a range of ages; specific age groups are not provided in the Chapter 2 profile

Professional profiles: Educators, volunteer facilitators, programme managers and directors working in adult and community education

Experience: From early-career practitioners to participants with more than 10 years of experience

Involvement in Social Circles: All participants had engaged with Social Circles activities; several had worked directly with older adults through workshops, coaching or community events delivered by The Rural Hub

Focus group approach: Discussion of experiences within Social Circles, observations of older learners, and the broader cultural and policy contexts influencing adult and community education



03

Country and Cultural Context

3. Country and Cultural Context

Slovenia

Based on their experience, the participants identified geographical dispersion and the poor accessibility of the region in which they work, and in which we operate, as two of the most significant barriers. The challenge posed by this geographical dispersion can only be addressed by providing education at individual locations situated far apart from one another, since inviting people to attend activities in the town would reach considerably fewer individuals.

Poor accessibility is closely related to this issue, as the target group consists of older people who either do not have their own means of transport or cannot use another form of transport. Some are also too old to drive their own cars safely to a location in the town.

Limited financial means and a lack of motivation to attend events are also common barriers. Many people, for example, know that they have to visit a doctor. In such a case, the motivation is present, and their financial resources must be adjusted to accommodate this obligation. Attending events, by contrast, is a matter of personal choice. Motivation may decline as soon as an individual lacks sufficient financial resources to attend an event. Moreover, these are people who have already established a fixed daily routine, meaning that attending an event may represent a significant departure from their usual way of life.

This issue is also connected to the additional challenge of communicating information to the people for whom the educational activities are intended. There is no central information point where everyone can obtain appropriate and reliable information. The participants mentioned that word-of-mouth communication, which they considered the most effective practice, is partly successful but still not sufficiently effective. The local newspaper is also used, although not everyone necessarily reads it consistently enough, either in terms of timing or content. The participants highlighted the need for some form of local information contact (a 'herold') who could keep these individuals informed, while also emphasising that several such contacts would be required. This again reflects the geographical dispersion of the local communities and the need for an information contact in each of them.

The participants are aware of technological developments that enable information to be shared through social media and registrations to be completed online. However, these possibilities create additional barriers, as many potential participants have insufficient digital literacy or no digital literacy at all. The social media pages used by organisations

may have a considerable number of followers and users who like their posts, but these are mostly acquaintances of the organisers and not necessarily local residents.

The participants also identified problems relating to the opening hours of centres providing educational activities. Both the participants and potential attendees find that the centres are often unavailable precisely when they would have time to visit them. A further difficulty arises when they discover that the activities themselves are not adapted to older people.

In Slovenia, certain unwritten cultural norms also contribute to the development of various prejudices among older adults. Many believe that they are too old for any form of education. The terminology used in this field further reinforces such beliefs. In their view, the term 'university', as used, for example, in the name 'University of the Third Age' (U3A), is associated with younger people, who find it easier to learn and to understand and accept new developments. The participants were also saddened by the fact that older adults no longer perceive education at this stage of life as an advantage, but rather as an additional and sometimes even unnecessary obligation.

Associations and other types of organisations in Slovenia that provide various forms of education for older adults generally rely on several different sources of funding. These include national calls for proposals, municipal funding, and organisations' own resources, obtained primarily through membership fees. Some organisations also participate in international projects. However, they encounter a considerable number of barriers and difficulties in doing so.

Most organisations do not have enough appropriately trained staff. Although they apply for funding, the actual implementation of a project may already present a problem. Difficulties with applications are also connected to the organisation's legal form or status. Associations with public-interest status, for example, have more opportunities to apply for funding, but this status also entails additional obligations. These often place a burden on the volunteers who subsequently implement the projects.

Associations can most often participate in projects only as partner organisations, for example in projects run by the Partnership LAG Zasavje (known locally as LAS Zasavje). This means that they receive less funding than the applicant or lead organisation. Nevertheless, they support practical networking in the development and implementation of projects, although they observe that, at the local level, such cooperation is too limited far too often.

They also recognise the need for a coordinator who would have to be completely independent and should therefore be provided by the Municipality. A further difficulty is the instability of funding. Funding is provided only for the duration of a project, which prevents a successful project from continuing. Municipal funding is the only source that offers stability, but even this is sometimes reduced without any explanation.

Sweden

What specific barriers do older adults face in your region/country that may not be common elsewhere?

- In Skåne and Sweden more broadly, some barriers for older adults can be more pronounced due to local demographics, service structures, and geography. These are not universal, but they tend to be more noticeable in certain parts of Skåne (and can differ from other regions).

Language and integration needs (especially for immigrant/refugee elders)

- Large immigrant populations in urban Skåne (e.g., Malmö) mean many older adults have limited Swedish and may need interpreters or culturally tailored activities.Limited availability of culturally appropriate programs or staff with language skills in some municipalities.

Transportation and mobility

- In rural-leaning areas of Skåne, fewer public transit options and longer distances to services can restrict access to education, social activities, and healthcare.Even in cities, older adults with mobility issues may struggle if accessible transit or step-free routes are not reliable.

Health and social care coordination

- Fragmentation between Region Skåne healthcare and municipal social services can create complex navigation for home care, rehab, and day-center support.Variation in how much in-home support and day programs are funded or available from one municipality to another.

Digital inclusion gaps

- Even in a highly digital country, a subset of older adults struggle with online services (booking, benefits, health records), and some municipalities have limited in-person alternatives.
- Language and literacy barriers compound digital gaps for immigrant seniors.

Are there any cultural norms or attitudes that affect how older people view learning or community engagement?

In Sweden, attitudes toward older adults are shaped by a strong mix of individualism, equality, and social support systems.

Lifelong learning is normalized Sweden has a long tradition of adult education (like studieförbund and folk high schools), which means:

Learning at 60, 70, or beyond is socially accepted and common

It's often framed as personal growth, not career advancement

Courses are usually informal, discussion-based, and non-hierarchical

A key cultural norm:

Older adults are expected to remain self-sufficient as long as possible

Even within families, there's less expectation of daily interdependence

This can lead to:

Strong autonomy and confidence

But sometimes social isolation.

Sweden stands out because it combines:

- High acceptance of lifelong learning
- Strong individual freedom
- Accessible public systems

So older adults in Sweden often have freedom and opportunity, but must take more personal initiative to stay engaged.

How is adult education funded and structured in your country?

- Study circles are funded by the state through tax revenue; some are free of charge, whilst others charge a reduced fee, in which case a certain amount is subsidised.
- Retirement homes and health centres in the municipality organise lectures and activities – the costs depend on the speakers' fees and the subject matter.
- Day centres and community meeting places often offer activities and lectures at a reduced price
- In Sweden, we have access to many community meeting places that organise a wide variety of activities; there are knitting cafés where older people come to meet and knit or do handicrafts together, as a way of socialising with other older people. Many activities are very well attended; examples of activities include: music quizzes, IT cafés, bingo, musical entertainment, dancing, lectures, games evenings with brain teasers, fashion shows for seniors, choirs, etc., as well as outdoor activities such as boules, walks, cycling trips, and quiz rounds.
- The local library organises lectures completely free of charge.
- If you belong to a senior citizens' association and pay an annual fee, seniors have free access to most lectures. In some cases, such as bus trips, they may have to pay a small fee.

How do national or local policies support or limit lifelong learning for older adults?

- Sweden generally supports lifelong learning for seniors, but the level of support and the way it's delivered can vary by national policy and by municipality.
- Studieförbunden (study associations like ABF, NBV, Sensus, Vuxenskolan): provide affordable study circles and courses, often critical for community-based learning and social engagement; funded via government subsidies.

Germany

Germany has a strong tradition of adult education, lifelong learning, and community-based social programmes. Public adult education centres known as Volkshochschulen play an important role in providing accessible learning opportunities across the country. In Berlin, these centres operate alongside libraries, neighbourhood centres, migrant organisations, and senior associations that support informal learning and social participation. However, despite strong educational infrastructure, barriers remain for older adults, particularly regarding digital exclusion, mobility, financial insecurity, and confidence in returning to learning environments after long absences.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified social isolation among older adults in Germany. Research conducted using the German Ageing Survey (DEAS) and published by the German Centre of Gerontology (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen / DZA) in Berlin found increased loneliness among seniors, particularly those living alone or with limited digital skills. A 2023 study published in the Journal of Health Monitoring (Robert Koch Institute), drawing on DEAS data, found that loneliness among older adults living in nursing homes exceeded 35%, substantially higher than in the general population, and that those lacking digital communication skills faced particular vulnerability during periods of social distancing. Research tracking pandemic loneliness trends found that among German adults more broadly, the proportion reporting frequent or severe loneliness rose from 2.3% in 2017 to 16.2% in 2021 (SOEP data). Berlin experienced particular challenges due to its large urban population, social inequalities, and rising living costs. While many services moved online after 2020, not all older adults were able to access digital platforms confidently.

In response, Berlin's network of public libraries launched Digital-Zebra in early 2023. Operating across more than 24 library sites by 2025, the programme employs trained "Digital-Lotsen" (digital guides) who assist citizens with smartphones, online public services, e-prescriptions, appointment booking, and internet access. Digital-Zebra is part of Berlin's broader digital strategy "Gemeinsam Digital: Berlin" and is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It works in partnership with Silbernetz e.V. and Seniorennetz Berlin (AWO). At the federal level, the DigitalPakt Alter (a joint initiative of BAGSO and BMFSFJ) has supported over 300 local "Erfahrungsorte" (experience hubs) across all 16 German federal states, providing training, counselling, and peer-learning

opportunities for older adults. A new funding phase beginning in 2026 includes corporate partnerships and aims to anchor these structures more deeply within municipalities.

Cultural attitudes towards ageing and education also shape participation in Germany. Adult education is generally respected, but some older adults still perceive formal learning environments as intimidating or not designed for them. Participants in the Social Circles discussions consistently highlighted that trust, informality, and personal invitation were more effective recruitment approaches than formal advertising. In a city as culturally diverse as Berlin, where a significant proportion of older residents have migration backgrounds, inclusive educational approaches must incorporate cultural sensitivity, multilingual support where possible, and recognition of the diverse life experiences older learners bring.

Italy

In Italy, and particularly within the urban area of Rome, the project takes on a crucial relevance. Today, Italy is one of the countries with the highest ageing index in the world, and the capital faithfully reflects this demographic challenge.

Demographic Data: According to the most recent ISTAT data, over-65s account for approximately 24% of the population in Italy. In Rome, this percentage translates into more than 600,000 residents, with a particularly high concentration in certain historic neighbourhoods and more peripheral districts, where local services are less widespread.

Future Outlook: Projections indicate that by 2050, the proportion of those aged over 65 in Italy will exceed 34%. As an "ageing metropolis", Rome must face the pressure of the baby boomer generation transitioning into retirement.

Social Vulnerability: An alarming statistic concerns the composition of households: in Rome, around 30% of elderly people live alone, a figure that exposes citizens to a high risk of social marginalisation. Furthermore, inflation and the cost of living in a major city like the capital place approximately 20% of elderly residents at risk of relative poverty.

Consequently, there is a growing urgency for responses that promote active ageing, mental health, and the social inclusion of older people. The focus groups revealed that the main structural barrier for elderly people in Italy is the digitalisation of public and private services which, in the absence of adequate digital skills, translates into a form of systemic exclusion. The focus group highlighted that, alongside structural barriers, cultural factors also exist which influence the perception of learning and community engagement in later life.

In particular:

- Access to healthcare, social security, and administrative services is increasingly dependent on the use of digital platforms.

- Digital skills among the elderly population appear fragile or insufficient.
- Alternative channels (physical counters, telephone assistance) are being progressively reduced or not adequately enhanced.
- Bureaucracy is complex and poorly accessible, especially for those who do not have access to digital tools or family support.

This situation leads to:

- Dependence on children or relatives to manage administrative procedures.
- Further vulnerability for elderly individuals who are alone or lack a family support network.
- The perception of being a "burden" to one's family members.
- The risk of exclusion from fundamental rights connected to service access.

Furthermore, a structural shortage of lifelong learning pathways dedicated to older people emerged, particularly in the field of basic digital skills. Finally, limited support from the local municipality (Municipio) was highlighted for small cultural and social associations, which could otherwise play a key role in the inclusion and activation of the elderly population.

The combination of these factors reduces:

- Participation in social and community life.
- Access to lifelong learning opportunities.
- Opportunities to build independent social networks.

France

The landscape of lifelong learning for seniors in France is deeply shaped by entrenched cultural attitudes toward education and aging. The very term “formation continue” (“continuous training”) carries a heavy, employment-focused connotation that frequently acts as a psychological barrier for retirees. Many older adults in France internalise self-directed ageism, believing that formal learning is no longer meant for them once they exit the active workforce. This hesitation is further amplified by linguistic barriers, particularly the numerous anglicised tech jargon, which can feel elitist and exclusive for many seniors. To bypass these, local initiatives are rebranding (with success!) their educational training, utilising community-focused titles like ateliers citoyens (“citizen workshops”) or universités pour tous (“universities for all”) to frame learning as an act of social participation rather than strict academic achievement. However, this is primarily the case in France’s major cities, whereas not all older people in more remote rural areas benefit from these initiatives. Furthermore, the issue of transport is crucial for the latter, who are often unable or unwilling to travel long distances by car or public transport to take part in cultural and social activities.

Social stratification among French seniors has grown increasingly pronounced with the rapid, mandatory digitisation of public services. As essential administrations like health insurance and tax portals push toward entirely digital operations, acquiring IT skills has shifted from a leisure hobby to a fundamental necessity for personal autonomy. We can now identify a strong gap between relatively young, autonomous retirees who navigate smartphones with ease from older, deeply isolated seniors. For this older demographic, the digital divide is driven by low self-esteem and an intense anxiety regarding online safety and financial scams. This isolation is heavily exacerbated by transport logistics, where rural seniors face geographic exclusion due to the lack of public transit networks, while urban seniors navigate rich transit systems, although it does present difficulties related to physical accessibility issues like non-automated metro stations.

These geographic and logistical differences highlight severe structural inequities across national, regional, and urban scales. At the national level, France possesses unified strategies and digital inclusion frameworks, yet its highly centralised nature often leaves rural zones as underserved educational deserts. Regional authorities, such as the Île-de-France council, where Paris is located, attempt to correct this imbalance by funneling localised subsidies and coordinating physical public service stations in peri-urban areas, though the quality of these services ultimately depends on the wealth of the specific region. At the urban scale, Paris represents a dense ecosystem overflowing with prestigious cultural institutions and highly subsidised lecture programs like the Universités du Temps Libre. But a social divide persists between affluent central districts and working-class neighborhoods where access to paid educational resources remains limited.

Despite these inequalities, concrete programs and specific financial mechanisms exist to support senior education throughout the country. For academic enrichment, major institutions like Sorbonne Université Inter-Âges offer non-degree courses in humanities and sciences specifically designed for retirees at low costs. On the social and cultural front, specialised non-profit organisations actively deploy localised projects, including the "Social Circles" initiative for emotional and educational coaching. Furthermore, grassroots groups like Old'Up have empowered seniors to become educators themselves through peer-led pedagogical toolkits like "Vieux et Connectés" (“Old and connected”), which demystify technology from an elder's perspective.

Funding these diverse educational actions relies on a patchwork of public and individual financial systems. Younger retirees can leverage their Compte Personnel de Formation (“ Personal Training Account”), using the public funding accumulated during their professional careers to finance certified languages or technical courses even after retirement. For older or more isolated demographics, local workshops are heavily financed by the Caisse Nationale de Solidarité pour l'Autonomie (“National Solidarity Fund for Independence”) through departmental bodies called the Conférence des financeurs (“Funding Bodies Conference”), which channel public funds directly to non-profits to ensure that digital and wellness classes remain entirely free for vulnerable citizens. Additionally,

local municipalities often distribute the Pass Numérique ("Digital Pass"), a public voucher system that seniors can redeem locally to receive accredited, hands-on technology training at no personal expense.

Ireland

Although to date, the Social Circles project has been implemented solely in County Cavan, the focus group highlighted meaningful regional and local differences that shaped older adults' engagement with learning activities. Cavan's largely rural geography plays a significant role in determining access to community education. Participants noted that older adults living in more remote areas often face limited public transport options, fewer community venues, and greater physical distance from services, all of which can contribute to isolation and make participation in workshops more challenging. In contrast, those based closer to Cavan Town or larger villages benefit from more frequent activities, better transport links, and stronger visibility of community programmes. These differences influence not only attendance but also the types of outreach and support educators need to provide.

Cultural attitudes within the county also affect participation. Educators observed that many older adults in Cavan value informal, relationship-based learning environments and may be hesitant to join structured classes due to past negative experiences with formal education. This can be particularly true in rural communities, where stigma around "going back to learning" may still persist. At the same time, strong community bonds in rural areas can work in the project's favour, as word-of-mouth recommendations and trusted local educators often play a crucial role in encouraging participation.

These dynamics sit within a broader national policy context in Ireland, where strategies such as the National Positive Ageing Strategy and the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy emphasise the importance of lifelong learning, social participation, and inclusion for older adults. However, the experiences shared by educators suggest that barriers related to access, confidence, and outreach continue to limit engagement at community level.

Local policy and funding structures further shape the landscape of adult education in Cavan. Participants described a reliance on short-term project funding and voluntary or part-time educators, which can limit continuity and long-term planning. However, they also highlighted the value of partnerships with local libraries, Family Resource Centres, community development organisations, and Cavan County Council programmes, which provide essential support for outreach and venue access. These local dynamics underscore the importance of designing a flexible and context-sensitive model that can respond to the realities of rural life while ensuring that older adults across the county have equitable opportunities to engage in learning and social connection.



04

Project Impact, Reflection, and Practical Improvements

4. Project Impact, Reflection, and Practical Improvements

4.1 Project Impact

Across the participating countries, the Social Circles approach demonstrated that adult education can have an impact that extends well beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The strongest outcomes were linked to social connection, increased confidence, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for older adults to participate actively in their communities.

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Practical, accessible and socially engaging activities were consistently identified as the most effective. Micro-learning, hands-on workshops, storytelling, cultural activities, digital support and opportunities to exchange personal experiences helped reduce the pressure often associated with formal learning. Short and manageable activities enabled participants to engage at their own pace, while small-group formats encouraged interaction, peer learning and mutual support.

The social dimension of the activities was particularly important. Regular meetings, informal conversations, shared activities and community events created opportunities for relationships to develop and helped transform participation into a meaningful social routine. In some contexts, participants highlighted that feeling useful, sharing their own knowledge and contributing to the group strengthened self-esteem and shifted older adults from the role of passive recipients to active participants.

The project also had an impact on educators and facilitators. Working with older adults encouraged greater awareness of the importance of empathy, patience, active listening, flexibility and relationship-building. Educators increasingly recognised that effective learning with older adults requires attention not only to educational content but also to emotional wellbeing, confidence, social circumstances and individual learning needs.

4.2 Reflection and Lessons Learned

The national experiences also revealed several common challenges. Reaching older adults who are already socially isolated remains particularly difficult. Those who would benefit most from community-based learning may have limited contact with existing organisations, lack confidence to join unfamiliar groups, experience mobility or transport difficulties, or simply be unaware of available opportunities.

Digital exclusion remains another important barrier. Limited access to devices, low levels of digital confidence, anxiety about online safety and the increasing digitalisation of everyday services can reinforce dependence and social exclusion. The findings suggest that digital skills are more effectively introduced when technology is connected to a meaningful everyday purpose, such as communicating with family, accessing services, planning activities or pursuing personal interests, rather than being taught as an isolated subject.

The experiences also confirmed that older adults should not be approached as a homogeneous group. Participants differ substantially in their interests, abilities, confidence, previous educational experiences, cultural backgrounds, physical needs and digital skills. Programmes that follow a rigid curriculum are therefore less likely to respond effectively to the diversity of older learners.

A further lesson concerns the importance of the learning environment. Familiar, informal and non-judgmental settings can significantly reduce anxiety about participation. Personal invitations, trusted local contacts and support during a participant's first visit can be more effective than general advertising or digital promotion. At the same time, participation must remain voluntary; some older adults may choose not to engage in group activities, and this choice should be respected.

Several countries also identified limitations in the educational materials or delivery methods. Activities that are overly simple may fail to stimulate meaningful reflection, while activities that rely too heavily on digital tools can exclude learners with limited digital confidence. Materials therefore need to provide sufficient flexibility for facilitators to adjust the level of difficulty, introduce open-ended discussion and respond to different abilities within the same group.

Finally, continuity emerged as an important factor in maintaining engagement. Building trust and social relationships takes time. Short-term activities or project-based interventions may generate initial interest but can struggle to maintain momentum if there is no regular follow-up, mentoring or opportunity for participants to continue meeting.

4.3 Practical Improvements for Future Implementation

Future implementation should place even greater emphasis on flexibility, accessibility and local adaptation. Activities should be organised as close as possible to where older adults live and, where appropriate, offered at different times and through different formats. Face-

to-face participation should remain central, while hybrid options can provide additional flexibility for people affected by health or mobility limitations.

Learning activities should continue to focus on practical and relevant subjects while combining educational content with opportunities for social interaction. Micro-learning, hands-on activities, storytelling, cultural experiences, creative workshops and community events provide useful formats for maintaining engagement. Digital learning should be integrated into meaningful real-life activities and supported through simple instructions and, where needed, one-to-one assistance.

More informal social time should also be deliberately incorporated into programmes. Coffee conversations, peer-led meetings, buddy systems and time for discussion before or after structured activities can help relationships develop naturally and strengthen group cohesion.

Outreach should rely more strongly on trusted local networks. Cooperation with community organisations, senior centres, libraries, health and social care providers, local authorities, neighbourhood organisations and other actors already in contact with older adults can help identify and reach people who are otherwise difficult to engage. Personal invitations, telephone calls, home or community outreach and support during the first visit can help reduce anxiety and increase participation.

Older adults should also be involved more actively in shaping the programme. Co-designing topics and activities can ensure that learning responds to real interests and needs while increasing participants' sense of ownership. Peer-support approaches can further strengthen participation by enabling older adults to support one another and share their own knowledge and experience.

Educational materials should be easy to adapt to different abilities and local conditions. Facilitators would benefit from clearer step-by-step instructions, sample scripts, demonstration materials and a wider range of low-cost and low-tech activities. Open-ended questions, discussion-based exercises and critical-thinking activities should complement simpler quizzes and structured tasks.

Before wider implementation, new or revised activities should be piloted with small groups of older adults. Their feedback should be used to refine the content, level of difficulty, instructions, accessibility and delivery methods. Continuous communication and follow-up should then be maintained throughout the programme to support engagement and strengthen the sense of community.

Finally, educators require appropriate professional support. Training should include age-inclusive facilitation, communication and active listening, adaptation to different learning abilities, digital inclusion, cultural sensitivity and awareness of the emotional and social challenges associated with ageing. Educators should also have access to clear referral pathways when participants require specialised health, psychological or social support.

Taken together, the national experiences suggest that the future development of Social Circles should not focus on creating a single rigid model. Instead, the approach should provide a flexible framework that can be adapted to local circumstances while maintaining its core principles: practical learning, social connection, accessibility, active participation, trusted community relationships and sustained support.



05

Practice Recommendations

5. Practice Recommendations

The findings across all partner countries show that effective adult education for older adults depends on more than the educational content itself. Successful practice combines accessible outreach, relevant and engaging learning activities, welcoming environments, strong relationships, flexibility and sustained support. The following recommendations bring together the most consistent practical lessons identified across Slovenia, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France and Ireland.

5.1 Outreach and Recruitment

Outreach should be personal, local and based on trust. Older adults, particularly those who are isolated, hesitant or less digitally connected, are often more likely to respond to a recommendation from a familiar person or organisation than to general advertising.

> Outreach should be personal, local and based on trust.

Educational providers should therefore:

- use personal invitations, telephone calls and word-of-mouth communication;
- cooperate with trusted local organisations such as libraries, senior centres, community centres, healthcare providers, social services, parishes, local associations and neighbourhood organisations;
- promote activities in places older adults already visit, including community cafés, health centres, pharmacies, GP practices, local shops and public meeting places;
- combine different communication channels, including printed materials, local newspapers, community noticeboards, SMS, email and social media where appropriate;
- ensure that information is written in plain language and clearly explains what the activity offers, where it takes place, when it takes place and whether transport or other support is available;
- provide information in accessible formats, including large print and, where relevant, multilingual, audio or other adapted formats;
- avoid presenting activities as services only for vulnerable or dependent people and instead emphasise learning, discovery, social connection, participation and the contribution older adults can make to the community.

Personal support can be particularly important at the point of first participation. Where possible, a staff member, volunteer, peer or community contact should welcome new participants and help them feel comfortable entering an unfamiliar group.

5.2 Relevant and Engaging Learning Methods

Learning activities should be practical, meaningful and connected to everyday life. Older adults are more likely to remain engaged when they can immediately recognise the relevance of what they are learning and when activities allow them to participate actively rather than simply receive information.

Recommended approaches include:

- short and manageable micro-learning activities;
- hands-on demonstrations and practical workshops;
- storytelling, memory-based activities and discussion groups;
- hobby-based learning such as cooking, gardening, arts, crafts and creative activities;
- digital learning linked to real-life purposes, such as communicating with family, accessing services, planning journeys or pursuing personal interests;
- cultural visits, local excursions and community events;
- peer learning and opportunities for participants to share their own knowledge and experience;
- intergenerational activities based on reciprocal exchange rather than one-way support;
- visual and accessible materials such as infographics and short videos;
- interactive tools and gamification where these are appropriate and do not create additional barriers.

Small-group formats should be prioritised wherever possible. They provide more opportunities for conversation, peer support and individual attention while reducing the pressure associated with formal learning environments.

Learning activities should also include opportunities for deeper discussion and reflection. Simple quizzes or structured exercises can be useful, but they should be complemented by open-ended questions, discussion-based activities and opportunities for participants to connect new information with their own experiences.

5.3 Social Connection and Belonging

Social interaction should be treated as a core part of the learning process rather than as an additional benefit.

Programmes should deliberately create time and space for:

- informal conversation before and after activities;
- coffee or refreshment breaks;
- peer-led discussions;
- buddy systems;
- collaborative tasks;
- storytelling and experience-sharing;
- regular social gatherings linked to learning activities.

Educators should focus not only on whether people attend, but also on whether they feel welcomed, valued and connected to others. Learning should create opportunities for older adults to build relationships and become active members of a group.

5.4 Inclusive and Accessible Learning Environments

Learning environments should respond to the diverse physical, social, cultural and educational needs of older adults.

Practical considerations should include:

- accessible entrances and facilities;
- comfortable seating;
- good lighting;
- limited background noise and good acoustics;
- clear signage;
- accessible toilets;
- appropriate room temperature;
- seating arrangements that support interaction, such as circles or horseshoes;
- flexible scheduling that reflects participants' daily routines;
- consideration of transport and mobility barriers;
- face-to-face participation as a central option, complemented by hybrid formats where these genuinely improve access.

Educators should avoid treating older adults as a homogeneous group. Activities need to be adaptable to different levels of ability, confidence, digital competence, educational background, cultural experience and physical capacity.

Participants should be allowed to work at their own pace, ask questions without embarrassment and choose alternative ways of completing an activity when necessary.

5.5 Co-design and Active Participation

Older adults should be actively involved in shaping learning opportunities.

Providers can support this by:

- asking participants which topics they are interested in;
- using short surveys, conversations or informal interviews before planning activities;
- regularly collecting feedback;
- adapting programmes when interests or needs change;
- enabling participants to suggest or lead activities;
- creating opportunities for participants to become peer mentors, facilitators or contributors.

This approach helps ensure that activities respond to real needs rather than assumptions about what older adults should learn.

It also reinforces an important principle identified across the partner countries: older adults should be recognised not only as learners or recipients of support, but also as people with knowledge, experience and skills that can benefit others.

5.6 Digital Inclusion

Digital learning should be introduced carefully and with clear practical relevance.

Technology should not be presented simply as another subject to master. Instead, it should be connected to meaningful everyday activities such as communication, access to public services, cultural participation, navigation, hobbies or maintaining social relationships.

Educators should:

- use simple and accessible digital tools;
- avoid unnecessary technical terminology;
- provide clear step-by-step instructions;
- demonstrate tasks slowly and allow repetition;
- provide one-to-one or peer support where required;
- avoid relying exclusively on digital communication or online delivery;
- ensure that learners without devices or digital confidence are not excluded from participation.

Digital activities should strengthen autonomy and participation rather than create additional anxiety.

5.7 Continuity and Follow-up

Regularity is essential for building trust, maintaining motivation and strengthening social relationships.

Where possible, activities should form part of a continuing programme rather than consist only of isolated workshops. Weekly, monthly or otherwise predictable meetings can help participants develop routines and maintain social connections.

Providers should also:

- maintain regular communication between sessions;
- use reminders and follow-up contact;
- encourage participants to return to future activities;
- provide opportunities for groups to continue meeting;
- develop peer-support or buddy arrangements;
- follow up with participants who stop attending where appropriate and respectful.

Continuity is particularly important for people experiencing loneliness or social isolation, as relationships and confidence usually develop gradually.

5.8 Educator Skills and Professional Support

Educators working with older adults require a combination of educational, interpersonal and practical skills.

Particularly important competences include:

- patience;
- empathy and active listening;
- flexibility and adaptability;
- clear and accessible communication;
- willingness to repeat explanations when necessary;
- age-inclusive teaching methods;
- understanding of different learning styles and abilities;
- awareness of physical, cognitive and emotional changes associated with ageing;
- digital facilitation skills;
- cultural sensitivity;
- trauma-informed and non-judgmental communication;
- skills for facilitating heterogeneous groups.

Educators should also recognise the limits of their professional role. Participants may experience loneliness, bereavement, psychological distress, financial difficulties or other complex challenges that require specialist support.

Providers should therefore give educators access to practical information about local services, referral pathways and organisations that can provide appropriate health, social, psychological or legal assistance.

5.9 Community-Based Cooperation

Successful programmes should be embedded within the communities in which older adults live.

Adult education providers should develop practical cooperation with:

- libraries;
- community and intergenerational centres;
- senior organisations;
- municipalities;
- healthcare providers;
- social services;
- cultural organisations;
- faith-based organisations;
- local associations and civil society organisations.

Cooperation can support outreach, provide familiar venues, improve referrals, enable shared use of resources and make it easier to reach older adults who are not already connected to learning organisations.

The learning space itself can become a trusted local meeting point where education, social interaction and community support come together.

5.10 Core Principle for Practice

> Across all partner countries, the central practical message is consistent: successful adult education for older adults should be **relational, practical, flexible and community-based**.
>
> A successful activity should not be measured only by whether participants have learned something new. It should also consider whether they have felt respected, contributed their own experience, developed confidence, connected with others and found a reason to return.

> The strongest learning environments are therefore those in which older adults do not simply participate in an activity, but gradually become part of a community.



06

Policy Recommendations

6. Policy Recommendations

The findings across Slovenia, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France and Ireland point to a consistent policy message: community-based adult education for older adults should move beyond short-term project activity and become a recognised part of broader strategies for active and healthy ageing, social inclusion, lifelong learning and the prevention of loneliness.

Older adults face interconnected educational, social, health, digital, financial and mobility barriers. Effective policy therefore requires a coordinated response that connects adult education with health, social care, local development and community infrastructure. The following recommendations bring together the main policy priorities identified across the six partner countries.

6.1 Recognise Adult Education as Part of Active and Healthy Ageing Policy

Community-based adult education should be formally recognised as an important contributor to healthy ageing, social participation, wellbeing and the prevention of loneliness and social isolation.

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Local, national and European policymakers should:

- integrate learning opportunities for older adults into strategies for active and healthy ageing;
- recognise lifelong learning as a right throughout the life course;
- include community-based education within social inclusion and loneliness-prevention policies;
- strengthen the connection between adult education, preventive health and community wellbeing;
- recognise social participation and meaningful relationships as important outcomes alongside traditional educational outcomes;
- treat investment in learning and social connection as preventive investment rather than solely as a social or welfare cost.

Policies should acknowledge that educational participation can support autonomy, confidence, social connection and continued involvement in community life.

6.2 Move from Short-Term Projects to Stable and Structural Funding

One of the strongest messages across partner countries is the need to replace fragmented, short-term funding with more predictable and sustainable financial models.

Policymakers should:

- establish multi-annual funding streams for community-based adult education programmes for older adults;
- provide continuation funding for initiatives that demonstrate positive results rather than requiring organisations to repeatedly create entirely new projects;
- encourage municipalities and national authorities to co-fund successful local programmes;
- ensure that funding covers not only activities but also staff time, outreach, coordination, venues, transport, equipment and follow-up;
- provide dedicated support for small associations, volunteer organisations and community-based providers that often have strong relationships with older adults but limited administrative capacity;
- ensure fair and transparent allocation of public funding;
- simplify funding procedures where administrative requirements disproportionately burden small organisations;
- continue using European programmes such as Erasmus+ and structural funds to support innovation, cooperation and transnational exchange.

Funding frameworks should allow organisations to plan beyond individual project cycles and build lasting relationships with participants and communities.

6.3 Develop Meaningful Indicators and Long-Term Evaluation

Funding and policy frameworks should use indicators that reflect the real objectives of community-based learning.

Monitoring should not focus solely on participant numbers or short-term outputs. Relevant indicators may also include:

- reaching previously isolated or inactive older adults;
- continued participation over time;
- increased social connection and sense of belonging;

- participation in lifelong learning;
- improved confidence and autonomy;
- digital inclusion;
- development of new community relationships;
- successful referrals between education, health and social services.

Indicators should be realistic, meaningful and proportionate to the capacities of community organisations.

Providers and practitioners should be involved in developing these indicators so that policy frameworks combine institutional objectives with practical experience from the field.

6.4 Ensure Equitable Access and Address Structural Barriers

Policy must address the practical barriers that prevent older adults from participating in learning and community life.

Particular attention should be given to:

- rural and geographically dispersed populations;
- older adults living alone;
- people with mobility or health limitations;
- low-income older adults;
- migrants and minority communities;
- people with limited digital skills;
- individuals who are already socially isolated or disconnected from community networks.

Support measures may include:

- accessible and affordable transport;
- transport vouchers or organised mobility support;
- free or low-cost participation;
- access to digital devices and internet connectivity;
- accessible local venues;
- multilingual provision where needed;
- funding specifically for outreach and engagement, not only programme delivery.

Without targeted outreach, programmes risk reaching primarily those older adults who are already active and socially connected.

6.5 Protect Digital Inclusion and Non-Digital Access

Digitalisation can increase access for some older adults but create new forms of exclusion for others. Policy should therefore promote digital inclusion without making digital participation a condition for access to essential services or learning opportunities.

Authorities should:

- invest in accessible digital-skills programmes for older adults;
- support ongoing one-to-one or community-based digital assistance rather than relying only on one-off courses;
- provide access to suitable devices and internet services where financial barriers exist;
- support simple, accessible and age-friendly digital platforms;
- maintain physical and telephone alternatives to digital public services;
- ensure that essential healthcare, social security and administrative services remain accessible to people without digital skills;
- simplify bureaucratic language and procedures so that older adults and small community organisations can navigate public systems more easily.

A "dual channel" approach — maintaining both digital and physical access — can help ensure that digital transformation increases autonomy rather than reinforcing dependence or exclusion.

6.6 Invest in Accessible Local Community Infrastructure

Learning opportunities should be embedded within existing local infrastructure rather than operating as isolated projects.

Local and national authorities should support the use of:

- public libraries;
- community centres;
- adult education centres;
- senior centres;
- intergenerational centres;
- cultural institutions;
- neighbourhood facilities;
- other trusted community spaces.

Where organisations face high rental costs, public institutions should consider reduced rental rates, free use of public premises or exchange arrangements in which organisations provide community activities in return for access to facilities.

Community-based learning should be incorporated into municipal service and development planning so that programmes become a visible and reliable part of everyday community infrastructure.

Local digital inclusion initiatives, drop-in support services and community learning hubs should receive stable support where they have demonstrated their value.

6.7 Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration

No single sector can adequately address the complex challenges associated with loneliness, ageing, digital exclusion and participation.

Policy frameworks should therefore promote structured cooperation between:

- adult education providers;
- healthcare services;
- social care services;
- municipalities and regional authorities;
- libraries and cultural institutions;
- community and voluntary organisations;
- housing organisations;
- senior organisations;
- faith-based organisations;
- the private sector where appropriate.

Healthcare providers are particularly important because isolated older adults may have regular contact with health services even when they are disconnected from educational or social organisations.

Policymakers should therefore explore referral mechanisms, including social prescribing approaches, through which healthcare professionals can connect older adults with community learning, cultural or social activities.

Practical referral systems should also be developed so that educators know where to direct participants who need specialised health, psychological, social or legal support.

Local or national resource maps, referral guides and integrated frameworks can help connect education with wider services for healthy ageing.

6.8 Support Community Networks and Partnership Infrastructure

Cooperation between organisations should be supported systematically rather than relying only on informal personal contacts.

Authorities could:

- establish local or national networks connecting organisations working with older adults;
- develop shared directories of services and expertise;
- create digital portals through which organisations can identify potential partners;
- encourage sharing of premises, equipment and specialist staff;
- support joint applications and collaborative programmes;
- facilitate cooperation between local, national and international organisations;
- promote exchanges of good practice across regions and countries.

Partnership infrastructure can be particularly important for smaller organisations that may have valuable expertise but limited resources or difficulty identifying suitable partners.

6.9 Build Public–Community–Private Partnerships

The findings also support broader partnership models in which different sectors contribute according to their strengths.

A coordinated model may involve:

- **public authorities**, providing funding, policy support, infrastructure, premises and coordination;
- **community and third-sector organisations**, providing trusted relationships, outreach, local knowledge and programme delivery;
- **private-sector partners**, contributing equipment, materials, technical expertise, sponsorship or other in-kind resources.

Such cooperation should complement, not replace, stable public investment.

Community and voluntary organisations should be recognised as strategic partners because they often have the strongest direct relationships with older adults who are difficult to reach through formal institutions.

6.10 Invest in Educators and Sustainable Human Resources

Policy support should recognise that high-quality adult education depends on skilled people, not only on educational materials.

Funding should therefore include:

- stable staffing;
- professional development for educators and facilitators;
- training in age-inclusive pedagogy;
- digital inclusion and digital facilitation;
- trauma-informed and empathetic communication;
- understanding of ageing and emotional vulnerability;
- cultural and linguistic inclusion;
- community networking and referral skills.

Programmes should not depend excessively on unpaid volunteers. Volunteers remain an important resource, but sustainable provision requires appropriate professional coordination and staffing.

At the same time, peer facilitators and older adults themselves can be supported to take on roles as mentors, digital guides, group facilitators and activity organisers.

6.11 Involve Practitioners and Older Adults in Policy Development

Policies affecting older adult learning should not be developed exclusively from an institutional perspective.

National and local authorities should actively involve:

- adult education providers;
- community organisations;
- educators and facilitators;
- organisations representing older people;
- older adults themselves.

Practitioners can contribute evidence from implementation and examples of good practice, while older adults can provide direct insight into the barriers, interests and needs that policies are intended to address.

Combining policy-level planning with practical and lived experience can produce more relevant, realistic and sustainable strategies.

6.12 Develop National Frameworks while Allowing Local Adaptation

A shared national framework or resource hub can support the wider use of approaches such as Social Circles by providing:

- guidance for educators;
- adaptable learning resources;
- training materials;
- referral information;
- examples of good practice;
- monitoring tools;
- opportunities for professional exchange.

However, national frameworks should not impose a rigid model. Rural, urban, culturally diverse and economically different communities face different challenges.

Policy should therefore combine common quality principles with sufficient flexibility for programmes to adapt to local realities.

6.13 Strengthen the Local–National–European Connection

The sustainability of community-based adult education requires alignment between different levels of policy.

At the **local level**, authorities should support accessible venues, transport, outreach, local partnerships and integration into community services.

At the **national level**, lifelong learning for older adults should be embedded within policies for ageing, health, social inclusion, digital inclusion and community development, supported by stable funding and national coordination.

At the **European level**, continued support should enable:

- innovation and piloting of new approaches;
- transnational exchange of good practices;
- joint educator training;
- development of adaptable methodologies;
- cross-sector cooperation;
- stronger links between European priorities and implementation in rural and underserved communities.

European programmes can play an important role in enabling experimentation and cross-border learning, while long-term sustainability must also be secured through national and local systems.

6.14 Core Policy Principle

Across all six partner countries, the central policy recommendation is clear: community-based adult learning for older adults should no longer be treated as a temporary or optional intervention.

It should become part of a coordinated, adequately funded and accessible system that connects **lifelong learning, social participation, digital inclusion, community development, health and social care**.

The long-term objective should be to create conditions in which older adults can continue to learn, participate and contribute to their communities regardless of income, location, digital ability, mobility or social circumstances.

Such investment supports not only individual learners but also stronger, more inclusive and more resilient communities.



07

Conclusion and Key Messages

7. Conclusion and Key Messages

Conclusion

The findings gathered across Slovenia, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France and Ireland demonstrate that community-based adult education can play an important role in reducing loneliness and social isolation among older adults while strengthening confidence, wellbeing, participation and a sense of belonging. Across all national contexts, successful engagement was found to depend not only on what is taught, but also on how learning opportunities are created and how relationships are built around them.

Older adults should not be treated as a homogeneous group or as passive recipients of services. Their interests, abilities, life experiences, social circumstances and learning needs vary considerably. Effective programmes therefore need to be flexible, practical, accessible and responsive to participants' expressed needs. Small-group learning, peer interaction, storytelling, hands-on activities, micro-learning, cultural and community activities, and opportunities for social connection can create low-pressure entry points into learning and help participants build confidence over time. Co-design is particularly important: older adults should be actively involved in shaping activities and, where possible, take on meaningful roles as mentors, facilitators, organisers or contributors.

The findings also underline that trust and belonging are fundamental. Reaching people who are socially isolated, digitally excluded, living in rural or underserved areas, experiencing mobility difficulties or facing linguistic and socio-economic barriers requires more than general promotion. Personal invitations, trusted local intermediaries, familiar community spaces and continuous communication are particularly important. Programmes should therefore be rooted in local communities and adapted to different national, regional and local realities rather than implemented as rigid, standardised models.

Educators play a central role in creating these environments. Alongside educational skills, they need patience, empathy, flexibility, strong listening skills and the ability to adapt activities to different levels of confidence and ability. At the same time, educators should not be expected to respond alone to complex social, psychological, health or welfare needs. Appropriate training, referral pathways and stronger links with health, social care and community services are needed to support them.

Long-term sustainability remains one of the strongest common concerns across all partner countries. Short-term project funding and dependence on voluntary work can limit continuity, staffing and the ability to build lasting relationships with older adults.

Sustainable implementation therefore requires stable and multi-annual funding, accessible community spaces, continued investment in educator training, and stronger cooperation between adult education providers, local authorities, healthcare services, social services, libraries, community organisations and other relevant actors.

At policy level, adult education for older adults should be recognised not simply as an enrichment activity, but as an important component of active and healthy ageing, social inclusion and preventive wellbeing. Investment in learning and social connection can contribute to stronger, more resilient communities and support older adults in remaining socially connected, active and involved in community life. Embedding community-based learning within local, national and European strategies on ageing, health, social inclusion and lifelong learning would provide a stronger foundation for sustainable and scalable approaches.

Overall, the Social Circles experience suggests that the most effective model is not a fixed programme but a flexible and evolving community-based approach. Its strength lies in combining learning with relationships, participation and local cooperation, while recognising older adults as active members of society whose knowledge, experience and contribution remain valuable throughout the life course.



Key Messages for Educators

- Start with the individual rather than assumptions about age. Older adults have diverse needs, interests, abilities, experiences and circumstances.
- Build trust before focusing on educational outcomes. A safe, welcoming and respectful environment is essential for meaningful participation.
- Treat learning as a social experience. Conversation, storytelling, peer interaction and shared experiences can be as important as the educational content itself.
- Use practical, accessible and flexible learning methods, including small-group activities, hands-on tasks, micro-learning and community-based experiences.
- Co-create activities with participants and allow older adults to contribute as mentors, facilitators, organisers and active members of the group.

- Maintain regular communication and follow-up, especially with participants who may be at greater risk of isolation.
- Adapt activities to different levels of confidence, digital ability, mobility and previous educational experience.
- Recognise the limits of the educator's role and use appropriate referral pathways when participants require social, psychological, health or other specialist support.
- Focus not only on participation, but on creating a genuine sense of belonging.

Key Messages for Policymakers

- Recognise community-based adult education as an important element of active ageing, social inclusion, wellbeing and preventive care.
- Move beyond short-term project funding and provide stable, systematic and multi-annual support for programmes working with older adults.
- Ensure that initiatives are not dependent primarily on unpaid volunteers and provide resources for sustainable staffing and professional support.
- Invest in accessible local learning and community spaces, particularly in rural, remote and underserved areas.
- Address structural barriers including transport, digital exclusion, financial constraints, mobility limitations and unequal access to services.
- Strengthen cooperation between education, healthcare, social care, local authorities, libraries, community organisations and other relevant services.
- Support training for educators in age-inclusive facilitation, digital inclusion, emotional support, cultural sensitivity and appropriate referral practices.
- Embed lifelong learning and social participation for older adults within wider local, national and European strategies on healthy ageing, loneliness prevention, community development and social inclusion.
- Recognise older adults as active contributors to community life rather than solely as recipients of support.
- Treat investment in social connection and lifelong learning as a long-term investment in individual wellbeing, community resilience and sustainable public services.

8. Cross-Country Comparison Matrix

The matrix consolidates the country-specific columns from the six submitted national comparison matrices. Wording is retained as submitted, with formatting normalised for readability.

Category	Slovenia	Sweden	Germany	Italy	France	Ireland
Participants	5 (5 women), urban and rural	9 all women	6–8 per session; adult educators, community workers, senior volunteers; Berlin-based practitioners; hybrid format (2025–2026)	9 (7 women, 2 men), urban area	6 (5 women, 1 man), urban participants	18 (16 women and 2 men)
Key Barriers (Outreach)	the geographical dispersion of the population, inaccessibility (lack of appropriate transport, finance, age, motivation, accessing people with the information about education (lack of a 'herold'), digital literacy	Transport , The elder can not be reach	Digital exclusion; mobility limitations; language diversity; fear of formal education; financial insecurity	Digital literacy, IT device availability, heathcare commitments	Large city anonymity, transit difficulties, too many actors, language (for senior migrants).	Transport, digital literacy, low confidence, weak referral routes
Cultural Attitudes	education perceived as being for younger people only, also with the terminology used for education (e.g. »university« for Slovenian Third Age University)	Older adults are expected to remain self-sufficient as long as possible	Adult education respected but some older adults perceive it as "not for them"; trust and informality critical	Passive approach to education, with a preference for trips, games, and arts and crafts.	Professional connotation of training, self-censorship/ageism, tech jargon.	Fear of embarrassment, Learning is for "Younger people". Negative past school experiences

Category	Slovenia	Sweden	Germany	Italy	France	Ireland
Effectice Practices (Engagement)	Effective outreach combines personal communication, practical learning, inclusive teaching, local partnerships and well-trained educators	Microlearning & personal invitations	Micro-learning; personal invitations; peer mentors; neighbourhood outreach; Digital-Zebra drop-in model	Microlearnings and their adaptations to the association's members	Small groups, experience-sharing combined with new practical knowledge.	Practical activities, social atmosphere, personal invitations
Inclusivity Strategies	Local, practical and welcoming learning works best for older adults. Strong partnerships, personal outreach and ongoing support are essential.	Collaborating with various organisations	Multilingual support; low-pressure entry points; community ambassadors; hybrid formats	Identifying specific responsibilities for setting up study groups focused on the microlearning modules selected as the most applicable and successful.	Flexible curriculum, cultural/outdoor excursions, constant communication.	Clear instructions, Mixed-ability adaptations, low-tech options.
Tools That Worked	word of mouth, local newspapers	Microlearning resources in various formats	Learning festivals; small-group sessions; storytelling and hobby-based activities; community coaching	Meeting minutes by email, key topics, open discussion, shared planning	Infographics, Kahoot, microlearning videos.	Micro-learning formats, Facilitator-led demonstrations
Challenges Faced	finances, motivation, too old for education	Hesitation to join because they don't know anyone else	Recruiting isolated seniors; uneven digital literacy; hesitation toward mixed-age groups; multilingual needs	High average member age, health problems, bereavements	Simplistic true-or-false quiz tools, digital divide anxiety, senior isolation/distress.	Digital literacy gaps, Reaching isolated adults
Educator Training Needs	no more working on voluntary basis, more education available for the educators	Workshops on identifying and utilizing community resources and services that can benefit participants.	Digital facilitation; trauma-informed communication; intergenerational facilitation; age-inclusive methods	Low professional interest in older adult education, predominance in this field of social and healthcare workers	Soft skills (patience, flexibility), psychology, referral pathways training.	Trauma-informed practice, mixed-ability facilitation

Category	Slovenia	Sweden	Germany	Italy	France	Ireland
Policy Gaps Noted	some insufficiently trained project staff, unequal access to funding opportunities, insufficient local networking and coordination, lack of independent local coordination, unstable short-term project funding, no continuity for successful projects	Cooperation is missing sometimes	Insufficient continuity funding for community adult learning; urban-rural disparity in digital support; limited multilingual provision	Policies for older people focused on health and social care, with scarce resources for social integration and psycho-physical well-being, including education	Centralised frameworks leaving gaps, lack of accessible free public spaces.	Short-term funding, weak cross-sector coordination
Recommended Policy Actions	provide continuous multi-year funding, extend funding for successful projects, simplify project indicators, train mentors and providers regularly, offer affordable access to premises, include practitioners in policy design, set realistic goals and indicators, ensure transparent and equitable funding, create an online partnership portal	Integration and cooperation between different organisations	Sustain DigitalPakt Alter expansion; guarantee Digital-Zebra continuation funding; link loneliness strategy to adult education policy	Digitalisation: Maintain an in-person service desk for public services. Social connection: Increased support for older people's centres and local volunteering organisations	Continuous funding (Erasmus+/local), free community spaces, cross-sector integration.	Multi-annual funding, rural transport support and investment

Category	Slovenia	Sweden	Germany	Italy	France	Ireland
Cross-sector Collaborations	project-based cross-sector parnerships, international cooperation between organisations, shared use of premises, expert sharing between organisations, local and national partnerships	Library, Seniors activity leaders	Libraries (Digital-Zebra); AWO / Silbernetz e.V.; Volkshochschulen; senior health outreach; housing associations	Municipality V, older people centres, local associations	Education, health, and social services integration (e.g., WHO ICOPE framework).	Shared referral pathways, health-education partnerships
Sustainability Suggestions	meaningful goals, clear indicators, project sustainability, stable funding, fair allocation, funding transparency, stakeholder cooperation, strategic planning	Include the material in daily activities at senior care centres	Embed senior-friendly modules in public library and VHS programmes; long-term mentoring beyond project cycles	Creating inclusive social, cultural and educational initiatives at a neighbourhood level	Establish free public learning assets, cross-sector networks, long-term funding.	Alignment with ageing strategies, ongoing educator training
Messages for Educators	recognize diversity among older learners, design programmes around individual needs, understand participants' life circumestances, treat every participant with respect, create safe and inclusive spaces, prioritise practical learning	When older adults feel seen, heard, and connected, learning happens naturally—and more meaningfully.	Allow observation before involving. Build trust.	Engaging in older adult education fosters the art of listening, enabling us to appreciate the rich breadth of experience of which they are custodians	“Be patient, listen to learners, and adapt to their needs”.	Build trust first, keep it simple and social

Category	Slovenia	Sweden	Germany	Italy	France	Ireland
Messages for Policymakesr	recognize educators' reliance on volunteering, provide stable, systematic funding, consequently enable organisations to employ staff, reduce dependence on unpaid work, treat older adult education as investment and therefore support quality of later life, cooperate with social work centres and residental care homes (improve outreach to these vulnerable groups)	Community-based adult education can act as preventive care, not just enrichment	Recognise the importance of accesible adult education for older adults as preventive care, not optional enrichment.	Education as a right of citizenship at any age Strengthening policy co-design with voluntary associations and the community	"Provide long-term funding and free spaces to support senior wellbeing".	Invest in long-term community learning, support rural access

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