



OLDER ADULT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES FOR AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES

POLICY BRIEF
JANUARY, 2022

This Policy Brief outlines citizen engagement guidelines for the inclusion of older adults in public sector practices and digital tool use for the co-design of public policy.

The guidelines have been generated by a European project called URBANAGE as part of its mission to support urban planners and policy makers in using new technologies to create inclusive, age-friendly cities. Input to the guidelines came from academic research and focus groups with 33 older adults in the cities of Santander in Spain, Helsinki in Finland and the region of Flanders in Belgium.



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NEED FOR AGE FRIENDLY CITIES

CHALLENGE

The number of older people in our societies is growing at a faster pace than any other age segment (source: Eurostat):

- In 2020 more than 20% of the EU population was 65 or over*
- In the next 40 years the number of people over 80% will double
- Working age populations are shrinking due to falling birth rates

Changes in demographics will have an effect on European social and economic systems from mobility and housing to healthcare and benefits. Governments and cities around the world need to prepare to find ways to provide for the needs of an older population.

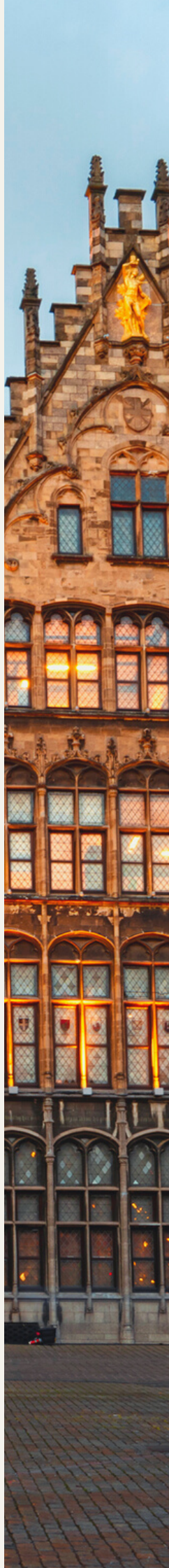
POLICY RESPONSE: USE DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES TO ENGAGE OLDER PEOPLE IN URBAN DESIGN

Horizon 2020 project URBANAGE has a mission to explore and experiment with new Digital Twin technology to enhance urban planning processes and help citizens enjoy a good quality of life into their old age.

Digital Twins are a synchronised, virtual representation of the real world, connecting and mirroring what is happening in near real-time. They provide a holistic understanding of situations and enable simulation modelling of the impact of different actions which can help urban planners and policy makers experiment safely with ideas and make optimal decisions about services, and policy actions.

Cities and governments have an opportunity to break down existing urban data silos, and build more inclusive and resilient European cities for all. With advances in technology, and political will, there is no reason why Digital Twins cannot support complex, multi-faceted, age-aware decisions. However, technology is not the means to an end. Engaging older people in the cocreation process using data to develop solutions to the challenges they face, rather than the challenges others assume for them, is the key to successfully generating sustainable outcomes. Yet older people face many barriers when it comes to policy participation.

This brief outlines a set of tailored guidelines for engaging older people based on URBANAGE's initial work with 33 older citizens in Helsinki, Santander and Flanders.



INCLUSIVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT GUIDELINES

The guidelines below may be adopted to create citizen engagement strategies which improve the participation of older citizens. They are structured as follows:

- General recommendations for older citizen engagement
- Recommendations regarding digital citizen engagement
- Recommendations regarding older citizen gamification techniques

OLDER CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

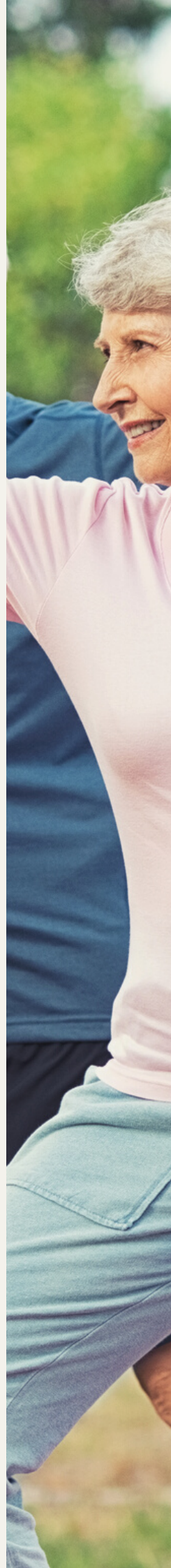
Guideline 1: Create an offer of engagement activities to which older citizens with different levels of commitment and engagement can contribute. The older adult needs to be free to choose whether they want to engage in inbound or outbound activities, or non-institutional or institutional activities.

Not all older adults want to contribute on an outbound and organizational level. While many older adults express a desire to contribute in general, they also note that they easily get demotivated when they are expected to commit on the long term. Additionally, intrinsic motivation and interest in the topics of the activities may also impact whether or not the older adult wants to contribute to these activities.

Guideline 2: When older adults engage in long-term commitments, offer a sufficient amount of consistency and structure in terms of structural support and financial resources.

Older citizens who were already engaged in neighborhood-improving activities in the past tend to get demotivated by bad experiences such as diminished or lacking structural support or financial resources, as they become increasingly burdened with responsibilities. Consequently, they may no longer want to commit to future engagement activities.

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Guideline 3: Promote self-efficacy. Show older citizens that their efforts to improve the neighborhood have a clear and tangible impact.

Many older adults express a desire to have impact on improving their neighborhood. Hence, making this result tangible and visible for them and other neighborhood inhabitants may create an extra layer of motivation for contributing to their neighborhood. Local institutions are encouraged to provide a consistent bottom-up feedback loop, for instance by providing prompt answers to questions, or by allowing citizens to follow up on the status of their input. This feedback loop is preferably provided on a communicational, executive and policy level, e.g., by clearly communicating the potential impact of future engagement activities in advance.

DIGITAL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Guideline 4: When applying new technologies in citizen engagement activities, clearly state the added value of these new technologies.

Older adults do not refuse the use of technology, but they attach great importance to its practical added value. There needs to be sufficient reason to turn away from the more traditional modes of communication and engagement in neighborhood activities. Answering the question why it cannot be done in a traditional way or explaining the advantages of the new technology over the traditional alternatives is therefore recommended. This can be done by informing them about the practical benefits or the ease of use, and by helping them understand the technology (especially when the technology is still in the early adoption phase).

Guideline 5: When applying new technologies to engagement activities for older adults, communicate transparently about why local policy makers want to apply this technology.

Older adults tend to be skeptical towards new technologies, in part because of a distrust of the underlying motivations inspiring policy decisions or of the underlying economical paradigms. By informing them in a clear and transparent manner on the reasons behind these decisions, older adults can be expected to better understand and accept the new technology.



Guideline 6: Apply dual-track policies. When applying new technologies for neighborhood-improving activities, also offer non-digital alternatives for older citizens who will not, or cannot, use these new technologies.

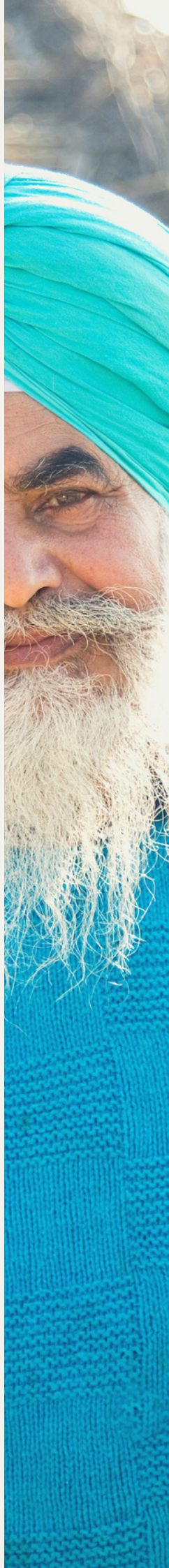
Not all older adults are capable of using new technologies because of barriers that cannot easily be lifted. These barriers can be practical (no access to an ICT-device) or psychological (resistance to learning new skills, insufficient cognitive capacities or a lack of a supporting social network to assist them in acquiring the necessary skills). By offering only the new technology as a gateway to participation, a significant number of older adults may be excluded or discouraged to participate. The same reasoning can be applied to modes of communication with older adults. Being informed is an important factor in increasing the engagement among older adults, but not all older adults use digital channels. Proper communication flows therefore include both digital and traditional media and channels (e.g. brochures, physical maps, screens in busses, local newspapers, etc.)

GAMIFIED CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Guideline 7: Social influence & relatedness should be at the center of the engagement strategy for older adults, as they are the strongest motivator. In contrast, ownership & possession can be disregarded as a core motivational driver.

The findings from the focus groups indicate that the need for social contact is the strongest motivator for engagement in games and activities. Thus, it is strongly recommended to introduce and implement these elements in a gamified design for engagement. However, it must also be noted that the social component should not be presented as a necessity or requirement for participation, as this may exclude a minority of older adults who prefer to contribute to a shared goal without needing explicit social interactions.

Conversely, ownership & possession should not be considered a core component for designing a strategy for engaging older adults, as results indicate that older adults generally care very little about this driver. Instead, they voice feelings of detachment from materialistic objects, which they consider increasingly meaningless or valueless.



Guideline 8: In developing an engagement strategy, collaboration towards a shared goal is preferred as a driver over strong competition

While light competition, such as one experiences when playing certain card or board games, is not rejected by older adults, forms of stronger competition are not considered feasible or desirable by them. Older adults prefer game mechanics that promote collaboration, preferably in dyads or small groups. In addition, their preferred strategy seems to be one where they work together on a path towards a clear, shared goal.

Guideline 9: In setting goals, it is necessary to find the right balance between attainability and challenge difficulty.

Older adults prefer to collaborate towards a shared goal. While there is room for strategic mechanics or creative output as means to reach this goal, it is important to balance the resulting level of difficulty with the right level of attainability so as to not discourage participants. In this respect, we recommend keeping the difficulty level suitable low and limiting the game mechanics to a few easy-to-understand principles to ensure long-term engagement among older adults.

Guideline 10: To keep older adults engaged, it is necessary to highlight the greater cause and to communicate the impact of their input.

Older adults like to contribute to a greater cause, on the condition that the cause is clear and that their impact or contribution to the cause is made explicit. Communicating about the potential impact they may have can therefore bolster their sense of usefulness and increase motivation levels. Additionally, regular updates about the impact of their input or feedback may close the loop and is strongly recommended for ensuring long-term engagement. Lastly, it is important to consider that older adults may experience personal issues (e.g. health or family-related) or time constraints that can prevent them from committing to previous or desired levels of engagement. Thus, we advise to apply flexible and adaptable strategies with respect to time commitments, as well as an inclusive approach to potential health or mobility-related issues.

To view the full research supporting this policy brief visit urbanage.eu

