



Empowering Older Adults for Collective Engagement

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Abbreviations

CEP	Citizen Engagement Plan
Col	Communities of Interest
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GA	Grant Agreement
REA	European Research Executive Agency
WP	Work Package

Executive summary

The Citizen Engagement Plan (CEP) provides a comprehensive framework for recruiting, engaging, motivating and retaining older adults (aged 65 and over) as active participants in the co-creation of physical activity interventions across the five pilot countries: Greece, Portugal, Serbia and Ukraine.

This plan outlines the project's approach to citizen science and its alignment with the Ten Principles of Citizen Science. It identifies two primary target audiences – older adults and mediators (family members, close friends, relatives and caregivers) – and specifies the means and best practices of engaging with and recruiting them as active participants in AGEFORCE.

The engagement strategies cover both offline and online channels. Offline strategies encompass community-based recruitment through deploying physical media (posters, brochures, flyers, etc.) and collaboration with existing municipal and community-based organisations. Online strategies leverage the project website, the Communities of Interest virtual platform, social media campaigns and other digital tools and platforms.

Risks and challenges are also assessed and addressed, including low participation rates, digital exclusion, language barriers and pandemic-related disruptions, together with evidence-based mitigation measures. The plan further elaborates on inclusion and diversity principles, ensuring representation across gender, socio-economic background, educational attainment and disability status in all prospective engagement activities.



Figure 1: AGEFORCE Logo

1 Introduction

1.1 The AGEFORCE Project

AGEFORCE implements a bottom-up, co-creative model putting citizen scientists at the center of the project, with the goal of generating positive impact on the physical activity levels of older adults. The project builds upon existing citizen science frameworks and programs involving older adults in the design and implementation of physical activities schemes. AGEFORCE will also build the foundations for the development of a Pan-European Citizen Science Hub on Active Ageing, by introducing the concept of the Communities of Interest into its work structure. During the co-creation process, older adults, mediators and other stakeholders will design innovative offline practices (counseling services, training programs, specialised gyms, organised excursions, etc.) and digital interventions (communication platform, virtual Communities of Interest, online booking systems, tele-coaching, etc.) based on older adults' needs and visions. Older adults will also be informed and motivated to develop informal action teams through a full series of informative seminars, so they can stay active through social inclusion.

The aging of the population is a long-term trend which began several decades ago in Europe. The population of the EU on 1 January 2022 was estimated at 446.7 million. Young people (0 to 14 years old) made up 15.0 % of the EU's population (see Table 1), while people considered to be of working age (15 to 64 years old) accounted for 63.9 % of the population. Older people (aged 65 or over) had a 21.1 % share (an increase of 0.3 percentage points (pp) compared with the previous year and an increase of 3.1pp compared with 10 years earlier). To compare, in 2021 the three population groups, young people (0 to 14 years old), working age (15 to 64 years old) and older people (aged 65 and over) represented, respectively, 15.1 %, 64.1 % and 20.8 % of the EU's population. (Eurostat 2023). People worldwide live longer. According to the WHO the proportion of the world's population over 60 years of age will nearly double from 12 to 22% between 2015 and 2050 (WHO Ageing and Health: 2018).

Strong evidence links regular physical activity in older adults to:

- Improved physical function, mobility, and independent living
- Reduced risk of chronic illness (morbidity) and premature death (mortality)
- Better mental health, mood, and overall wellbeing
- Reduced risk of falls and hospitalisations
- Stronger immune function and reduced social isolation

Loneliness compounds these risks: 32% of older EU adults live alone, and 9% of those aged 65+ report feeling lonely most of the time (Eurofound, 2016). Social isolation is independently associated with physical inactivity.

AGEFORCE is an EU-supported initiative designed to increase physical activity among adults aged 65 and over. Rather than imposing top-down interventions, AGEFORCE adopts a bottom-up, citizen science approach — empowering older adults to actively co-design the physical activity programmes that affect their lives. This participatory model is grounded in Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation and the principles of Open Science.

Key features of the AGEFORCE approach include:

- **Co-creation:** Older adults work alongside project partners to design and implement PA programmes tailored to their real needs and daily routines.
- **Accessibility & adaptability:** All activities are designed to be inclusive, regardless of individual physical ability or age-related limitations.
- **Collective intelligence:** Participants share lived experience to improve programme design, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement.
- **Communities of Interest:** Fostering teamwork and shared participation to combat loneliness and strengthen social bonds.
- **Pan-European ambition:** AGEFORCE aims to establish a Pan-European Citizen Science Hub on Active Ageing as a long-term legacy.

AGEFORCE aligns with key EU and WHO policy frameworks, including the WHO Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Ageing in Europe (2012–2020) and the European Scaling-Up Strategy in Active & Healthy Ageing. It directly responds to the EU Council's recognition that physical inactivity rates among older people remain unacceptably high and require targeted, multi-sector interventions.

1.2 Description of WP5

Work Package 5 (WP5) is the dissemination and communications work package for the AGEFORCE project. This work package serves to raise awareness and increase the visibility of AGEFORCE to ensure maximum participation of citizens and the adoption of project outputs. Communication and dissemination activities will be implemented through the management of project social media channels, the development of physical and digital advertising materials, the development and management of project web tools and the organisation of a final event.

Beyond outward communication, WP5 plays a structural role within the project: it designs and manages the citizen engagement process that is central to AGEFORCE's participatory, citizen science approach. This includes establishing and managing the Communities of Interest and developing the digital infrastructure that supports their involvement.

Objectives

- Increase the visibility and public profile of the AGEFORCE project
- Design a coherent brand identity, including logo, visual language and communication materials
- Disseminate the project's results widely across relevant audiences and sectors
- Establish and maintain Communities of Interest
- Design and guide the citizen involvement and co-creation process
- Develop and maintain all web-based tools supporting the project
- Keep social media channels active and regularly updated

- Organise a final project event

Tasks

T5.1 – Dissemination, Communication and Exploitation

This task covers all outreach and dissemination activities throughout the life of the project. It encompasses the development of a brand identity — including the project logo, leaflet, and overall visual identity. Three online newsletters will be produced and distributed to Col members and the general public via the project website. Participation in external events, workshops, and forums is also included.

T5.2 – Communities of Interest (Col)

This task manages the recruitment, engagement, and ongoing participation of older adults as citizen scientists within AGEFORCE. It begins with the development of a Citizen Engagement Plan, which sets out a detailed, principled process for involving older adults in project activities — drawing on the 10 Principles of Citizen Science (Robinson et al., 2018) and the project's own framework for ensuring high participation levels. Regular in-person and online panel meetings are organised by consortium partners to further engage members, deepen their involvement in programme co-design, and motivate them to increase their own levels of physical activity. The Cols are a cornerstone of AGEFORCE's bottom-up, participatory model.

T5.3 – Development of Web Tools

This task is responsible for the design, development, and maintenance of all digital tools used in the project. The project website serves as the primary public-facing presence of AGEFORCE, providing access to results, news, and resources at different permission levels for partners and the general public. A dedicated Col virtual space functions as a collaboration platform where members can post ideas, comment on contributions, rate submissions, and interact with one another. A crowdsourcing platform — integrated into the website — enables registered users to submit ideas, comment on and rate existing submissions, and engage with other participants.

Table 1: Work package tasks

Deliverable #	Title	Due (month)	Type
D5.1	Communication Material	M12	Report
D5.2	Citizen Panel Manual	M4	Report
D5.3	Citizen Engagement Plan	M3	Report
D5.4	Web Tools	M24	Website / Digital

Table 2: Work package deliverables

2 AGEFORCE and citizen science

Citizen science is a form of research collaboration in which citizens — rather than professional scientists alone — are actively involved in collecting, analysing and applying knowledge to real-world problems. As a core facet of Open Science, it goes beyond simply informing the public: it repositions citizens as co-producers of knowledge. In citizen science, communities act as observers, contributors, and co-designers within a domain of scientific inquiry (Goodchild, 2007).

The rationale for applying citizen science in public health and physical activity contexts is well-established. Research consistently shows that interventions designed with — rather than for — their intended beneficiaries achieve greater uptake, sustainability, and impact. Older adults, in particular, are driven by intrinsic motivations: they engage more deeply when they feel their involvement genuinely contributes to society (Lakomy et al., 2020). This makes citizen science a natural fit for AGEFORCE.

AGEFORCE deliberately adopts the co-creation model — the highest representative level of citizen participation in scientific research. In this model, projects are designed by scientists and members of the public working together, with public participants actively involved across all aspects of the research process. This is in contrast to lower-level models such as contributory science (where citizens merely supply data) or collaborative science (where citizens help analyse data but don't shape design).

Concretely, this means older adults in AGEFORCE are not passive recipients of physical activity programmes — they help design them. The project is built on the principle of 'for the people, by the people and with the people', and implements a bottom-up, collective intelligence framework in which the lived experience of older adults is treated as a primary resource for programme design.

AGEFORCE structures citizen science engagement through four interlocking mechanisms:

1. **Citizen Panels:** Multi-country panels of older adults (minimum 70 participants per country per round) are convened at key stages of the project. These panels explore visions of physical activity provision, validate research findings, and contribute to the design of interventions. Panels follow a structured format guided by a Citizen Panel Manual developed in WP5.
2. **Communities of Interest (Cols):** Cols are sustained networks of older adult participants who engage with the project over time — both in person and via a dedicated virtual platform. Members can submit ideas, comment on contributions, interact with peers across partner countries, and book places on accompanied activities. The Col model is specifically designed to address loneliness and social isolation, which are closely linked to physical inactivity (Hawkey et al., 2009): 32% of older EU adults live alone and 9% of those aged 65+ report feeling lonely most of the time (Eurofound, 2016).
3. **Crowdsourcing Platform:** A digital crowdsourcing tool — accessible via the project website — allows registered participants to submit and rate ideas for physical activity schemes. This broadens participation beyond panel events, enabling asynchronous contributions from citizens who may face mobility or time constraints. All users can submit ideas, comment on existing submissions, and interact with other users.

4. **Mediators and family Inclusion:** Recognising that older adults are more likely to engage in physical activity when accompanied by family members (Smith et al., 2016), AGEFORCE uses a 'mediator' model in which relatives are actively welcomed to participate alongside older adult Col members, further extending the social network of engagement.

A comprehensive literature review (James and Buffel, 2022) of 27 research articles on participatory action research with older adults identified four categories of benefit directly applicable to AGEFORCE participants:

- Increased quality of experience — older adults gain a deeper, more meaningful connection with physical activity when they help shape it.
- Enhanced skills and networks — participation builds social capital and introduces members to new tools, peers, and communities.
- Positive influence on policy and communities — co-created evidence carries greater legitimacy with local authorities and policymakers.
- Social justice and empowerment — being heard and acting collectively addresses feelings of marginalisation that many older adults experience.

AGEFORCE is explicitly designed to go beyond a single project cycle and aims to establish the Communities of Interest, creating a permanent Pan-European Citizen Science Hub on Active Ageing. This hub would enable knowledge transfer across EU member states, allow Col experiences from five partner countries (Greece, Portugal, Poland, Spain, and Cyprus) to converge into a shared, transnational body of evidence, and serve as a replicable model for other countries and regions.

3 Target audiences

AGEFORCE is a co-creative project dependent upon the input and perspectives of the people it is working to provide innovative solutions for. This cooperative, grassroots approach is the core of the project and its main strength, so understanding who the project's partners are is vital to its success.

For the purpose of the project, citizen engagement focuses on two main groups:

- Individuals aged sixty-five and older (65+)
- Mediators

Each group plays distinct, albeit complementary, roles within the project and should be approached based on their identified motivations for participation and the needs of the project.

3.1 Older adults

As the main beneficiaries and partners of the project, engagement with older adults should be the main focus of recruitment activities. Individuals in this group are aged sixty-five and older and account for approximately one fifth of the EU population. This figure is consistent across the AGEFORCE pilot countries: Greece, 23.3% (2024); Portugal, 24.1% (2024); Serbia, 22.4% (2024); Ukraine, 17.6% (2023).^{1 2} Though these numbers reflect a broader trend, the individuals within them are by no means monolithic. Their local needs and challenges should be identified while crafting messaging and engagement strategies.

Older adults in the EU as a whole face a series of challenges and obstacles that define their day-to-day and long-term lives:

- Shortages in healthcare, care workforce and social services
- Costs and access to residential and home care
- Limited access to care in remote and rural areas
- Pension system sustainability issues as populations age
- Rising demand for care services creating financial sustainability concerns for health and social coverage systems
- Transitioning from traditional retirement to continued working and active engagement later in life
- Age discrimination in the labor market that limits opportunities for older workers
- Shifting retirement ages
- Barriers to full participation in social, cultural, and community life
- Health challenges that limit independence and quality of life
- Digital divide issues that affect access to information, services, and social connections

The factors should be taken into consideration during engagement activities, but should not be the sole scope through which the activities are filtered.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_structure_and_ageing

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_in_European_Neighbourhood_East_countries

It is important to keep in mind the role of older adults within AGEFORCE.

- Provide perspectives and feedback on project activities and outcomes
- Co-design the framework for increasing physical activity (counseling services, training programs, specialised gyms, organised excursions, etc.)
- Co-design the Col platform
- End users of project outcomes

3.2 Mediators

Mediators play the role of motivators and a support network in AGEFORCE. This group is composed mainly of younger family members, close friends and relatives of older adults interested in participating in AGEFORCE and/or increasing their levels of physical activity. Research has consistently shown that older adults are more likely to initiate and sustain participation in physical activity when encouraged by members of their close social networks (Smith et al., 2016; McPhee et al., 2016; Uijtdewilligen et al., 2017). They are likely motivated to participate out of altruism and a personal connection to the project topic and participants or participant groups. Though they are not the main beneficiaries of AGEFORCE, their perspectives and support are nonetheless valuable to the co-creative process.

People in this role provide assistance to the project by:

- Serving as a conduit to motivate/recruit older adults to participate
- Serving as a conduit to recruit other mediators
- Filling the communication gap (they tend to be younger, more online and mobile, and more likely to come across advertisements for AGEFORCE activities)
- Assisting older participants in attending project meetings and events in person and online
- Providing perspectives on physical activity framework
- Providing perspectives on Col platform

4 Engagement strategies

4.1 Recruitment

The AGEFORCE engagement strategy is designed to address the full participant journey, from initial awareness and recruitment through active participation in citizen panels and Communities of Interest, to sustained involvement during the intervention implementation and evaluation phases. The strategy draws on established frameworks for volunteer motivation in citizen science (Clary et al., 1998; Finkelstein, 2008) and is informed by the advocacy model for citizen engagement commonly cited in the literature (Bruyere and Rappe, 2007; Measham and Barnett, 2008; Haklay, 2021).

The advocacy model structures engagement along a continuum of increasing intensity: Inform → Consult → Involve → Collaborate → Empower. In AGEFORCE, the early phases (WP2) operate primarily at the Inform and Consult levels, while the co-creation activities in WP3 and WP4 progress through Involve and Collaborate to reach the Empower stage, at which older adults take ownership of the interventions they have co-designed.

Recruitment is the critical first step in the engagement process. AGEFORCE will deploy a multi-channel recruitment campaign that combines offline community-based outreach with online digital engagement, recognising taking into consideration the diverse media landscape, consumption habits and access levels.

Several key factors must be considered when engaging with citizen participants and volunteers:

- Ensure that messaging is clear
- Be transparent about the needs, outcomes, effort and time involved required of participants, and be prepared to manage expectations
- Keep any promises made to participants
- Identify barriers not just to communication, but to participation
- Use simple, non-academic language when communicating with participants
- Use a centralised feedback system (something as simple as one email address), for handling and processing participant questions, concerns, feedbacks, etc.

4.1.1 Motivating participants

Understanding what motivates older adults to participate – and to remain engaged over time – is essential to the success of the recruitment campaign. The literature identifies a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, with research indicating that older people are generally more driven by intrinsic factors (those originating from within the individual) than by extrinsic rewards (Lakomy et al., 2020).

Participants will likely feel motivated to contribute to AGEFORCE if it addresses one of their needs or interests. It is necessary, then, to take a comprehensive approach when attempting to identify those needs and interests, keeping in mind that while being active and living healthily is the main goal of the project, it may not be the singular or even main driving force for their participation. Other factors such as boredom, loneliness or interest in being a part of or building something may also be a prominent motivating factor. This should be kept in mind when crafting messaging and recruitment narratives.

When exploring avenues to motivate people in the 65+ group, it is important to keep in mind that '65+' is a category that has been constructed with the purpose of identifying a target group, but it is itself not an identity. Appealing to people in this group primarily from the perspective of their age may yield limited results and hinder the design and implementation of pilot activities. Every person expressing interest in collaborating with AGEFORCE has existing interests and experiences and likely identifies more with those than their status as an elderly person, and may even resent the idea of being classified as such.

Participants may engage more through the perspective of their current or past career roles, family roles, hobbies, political movements, cultural affiliations, artistic interests or activities or other possible factors. Therefore, a more productive approach would be to minimise the focus on the age aspect of participants, and focus on the benefits of the project activities and goals: improving health, building a community and relationships, fighting boredom, helping others, trying something new or rediscovering physical activity, or even the desire to be part of an effort to build or create something, i.e. finding a purpose.

AGEFORCE will embed the following motivational principles into all recruitment communications and engagement activities:

Motivation	Description
Altruistic contribution	Emphasise that participants' input will benefit their peers and communities. Research on health and volunteering confirms a positive link between older adults' well-being and community contribution (Musick et al., 2003; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003).
Meaningful use of time	Frame participation as a productive, purposeful activity. Older adults value the feeling of spending their time in scientifically meaningful ways (Commun, 2016).
Social interaction	Promote the social dimension of citizen panels, café sessions and the Col platform. Socialisation is a powerful motivator for older adult engagement (Lee et al., 2017; Agnello et al., 2020).
Learning opportunities	Highlight the chance to learn about physical activity research, digital tools and co-creation methods. Older adults are keen to engage with new and interesting topics, including technology (Ingensand et al., 2018).
Recognition	Offer acknowledgement through certificates, naming in publications and social media recognition. Ego enhancement has been identified as a retention factor (Lee et al., 2017).
Family involvement	Invite mediators to participate alongside older adults. Family-oriented activities (e.g. intergenerational competitions, shared excursions) strengthen motivation (Smith et al., 2017; Uijtdewilligen et al., 2017).
Practical relevance	Show how citizen input directly shapes the interventions that will be available to them. The 'for us, by us' principle increases ownership and uptake (Tuckett et al., 2018).

Table 3: Participant motivators

4.1.2 Offline engagement

According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), only 1-in-4 people over the age of sixty-five have ‘basic digital literacy skills’.³ This low-level online presence for the key AGEFORCE group means that effort and resources need to be placed in traditional, physical forms of advertising and recruitment. Offline engagement is also necessary to fill gaps in online activities, due to the wide variety of online platforms available and decentralised distribution and consumption of information. Commonplace offline recruitment activities include hanging posters in public areas, printing postcards, flyers or pamphlets to be distributed, purchasing advertisements on public transportation and placing advertisements in print news publications.

Unlike online advertising campaigns, which can be designed to reach specific audiences and require no on the ground effort, physical advertising requires more planning and a greater time, and potentially financial, investment. Prior to producing or purchasing physical materials or advertising space it is important to identify:

1. Who is the target audience (age, socio-economic status, sex and/or gender, geographic location, etc.)?
2. What percentage of the target audience is present/active online?
3. Where can members of the target audience be found during working hours (8:00-18:00)?
4. When and where do members of the target audience spend their leisure time?
5. What are the commercial habits of the target audience (i.e., where do they buy the things they want/need)?
6. What are the transportation habits of the target audience?

These criteria can help narrow down the most effective means of recruiting desired participant groups, as well as defining how much effort should be placed in offline versus online engagement efforts. For instance, people in the 18-25 year age range may be more easily reached via social media ads as opposed to people in the 65+ category, and require less offline engagement. Likewise, the spending and leisure habits of different groups may influence where to place advertisements in order to reach them.

Once these criteria have been defined, it should be easier to identify the locations for offline recruitment and their accompanying format. For instance, if the goal is to recruit mediators aged 18-25, you may opt to place AGEFORCE postcards in cafes near a university campus, hang posters near gyms, in high traffic shopping areas, or hand out flyers at a flea market, based on what prior research and local knowledge of the population dictates. However, if the goal is to recruit older adults for informative seminars, it may prove more prudent to visit assisted living homes to speak with care givers, hang posters at swimming pools or physical therapy centres, leave postcards or flyers at grocery stores, etc. When designing offline recruitment activities, it is crucial to keep in mind that it should be tailored locally and remain dynamic.

Offline recruitment activities can be either active or passive. **Active efforts**, such as handing out flyers or organising information sessions, are time-intensive, but have the benefit of receiving

³ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2023/ensuring-access-public-services-older-people-digital-societies>

immediate feedback and putting a face on the project. **Passive efforts**, such as leaving printed materials to be collected at cafes or dropping flyers in mailboxes, require an up-front time investment to place the materials in their locations, but not a sustained presence. Choosing which recruitment activities to pursue should be based on recruiter capacity and resources, though implementing a combination of the two approaches is the most effective option.

In the same way that online social media posts can be boosted through other user profiles, offline engagement can also be done in cooperation with other organisations and groups. It is worth exploring the different community groups, NGOs, municipal authorities, social welfare organisations and other associations active in a target area and exploring if they are able to help with outreach. These types of actors often have existing networks, and most importantly have already established trust in the circles within which they operate, helping to overcome the skepticism barrier of potential participants.

It should be noted that there are two main drawbacks to offline engagement that should exclude it from being the sole avenue for recruitment. First, all offline recruitment efforts require financial investment, sometimes a significant one, either to produce the physical materials or to rent the advertising space. The second drawback is the limited geographic reach of offline engagement.

4.1.2.1 Advertising formats

Offline advertising/recruitment formats can be broken down into three categories based on the way in which people interact with them: dispersive, static, and hybrid. All three categories can and should be linked to the digital elements of the AGEFORCE project – social media channels, website, online registration tools, etc. – via QR codes, listing social media handles and web addresses and displaying hashtags where necessary.

Dispersive advertisements are physical media elements such as postcards, pamphlets, flyers, newspapers and magazines that are able to be distributed from a physical location and potentially passed along to multiple individuals. This advertising format has the benefit of a wider geographic reach than a static advertisement, as it can be placed in a location (e.g., a cafe) that is located in a different part of a village, town or city than the reader may live. Dispersive elements may also be passed on to other members of the initial reader's social circle. A drawback to this kind of recruitment format is that the physical elements are limited in number, and once they have been taken or sold out they must either be replenished or the recruitment campaign at that locale must cease.

Static advertisements are physical media elements that remain fixed in a location permanently or for a predetermined period of time. Elements such as posters, stickers and banners fall into this category. The main benefit of this format is that the elements can be placed in prominent, high traffic areas where they can be viewed repeatedly without diminishing. However, there is a risk of the elements being covered by other advertisements or being destroyed or removed via vandalism or weather events. There may also be local regulations on where and what kind of things may be placed in public spaces. Checking with municipal authorities before beginning this type of campaign is advised.

Hybrid advertisements are hybrid in both how people interact with them, and also through the medium in which they are displayed. An example of a hybrid advertisement would be public transportation ads. Depending on the public transportation infrastructure, these ads can be displayed on video screens or monitors in buses, trams, subways, trains or at public transport stops; or they can be posted in a fixed location, such as posters at bus, tram, or subway stop, or placed as an overlay on the back windshield of buses or on a side panel. Ads such as these are subject to a contract/leasing agreement with the appropriate public or business authority which will determine how long they will remain visible. The mobile nature of these ads have the benefit of reaching people in a broader geographic distribution, both for transit users and passersby.

When designing engagement materials, the project's visual identity will be applied consistently across all materials. These will feature the AGEFORCE logo, the EU emblem with the required funding acknowledgement, gender-neutral language, large and readable fonts and appropriate colour schemes. Materials will be produced in English and serve as templates to be translated into the local language of each pilot site.

Possible materials formats include:

Posters and banners: Designed for display in high-traffic locations frequented by target groups at locations discussed in section 4.1.2.2.

Brochures and flyers: A double-sided A5 brochure provides an overview of the project, explains what participation involves, describes the benefits for participants and provides contact information for the local partner.

Local media: Press releases, advertisements and announcements can be sent to local newspapers, community magazines, radio stations and which remain important information sources for older populations.

Personal letters and invitations: In collaboration with municipality and community organisations, personalised invitation letters may be sent to registered members of senior clubs, retirement associations and municipal care services.

4.1.2.2 Recruitment locations

Recruitment activities will be carried out in locations where older adults, mediators and other stakeholders naturally congregate, increasing the likelihood of engagement and positive feedback and embedding the project within existing community structures. Table 4 provides an overview of possible locations to carry out engagement and recruitment activities.

Location	Category	Effort type
Adult learning centres	Educational	Active/Passive
Assisted living homes	Social	Active/Passive
Cafes	Commercial/Social	Passive

Community centres	Social	Active/Passive
Friendship clubs	Social	Active/Passive
Grocery stores	Commercial	Passive
Hospitals	Health	Passive
Libraries	Educational	Active/Passive
Mailboxes	Service	Passive
Museums	Cultural	Passive
Physical therapy centres	Health/Recreational	Passive
Places of worship (churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.)	Cultural/Social	Active/Passive
Public transportation	Service	Passive
Schools	Educational	Active/Passive
Senior centres	Social	Active/Passive
Shopping centres	Commercial	Active/Passive
Sport clubs	Recreational	Passive
Street markets	Commercial	Active/Passive
Swimming pools	Recreational	Passive
Universities	Educational	Active/Passive

Table 4: Recruitment locations

4.1.3 Online engagement

Online communication serves as a direct, dynamic, targeted method to reach a wide audience with minimal cost or effort. In the four AGEFORCE pilot countries, the percentage of the population that is connected to the internet exceeds 85%, complemented by approximately 58-75% of the population using various social media platforms.⁴ For the purposes of AGEFORCE, online engagement activities will be used to compliment offline activities, raising awareness with digitally active older adults, as well as mediators and other stakeholders. Online communication can be targeted to reach specific demographic profiles in a certain location during specified hours over a predefined period, with the option to extend targeted campaigns with ease.

⁴ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-greece>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-portugal?rq=digital%202026%3A%20portugal>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-serbia?rq=digital%202026%3A%20serbia>; <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-ukraine?rq=digital%202026%3A%20ukraine>

4.1.3.1 Platforms and tools

Based on a review of the most commonly used social media platforms in the AGEFORCE pilot city countries, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have been identified as key tools for engagement and recruitment.

Facebook is widely used in all pilot countries, especially with the 65+ demographic and should be the focus of digital recruitment efforts for older adults. Instagram is widely used among younger social media users in all pilot countries except for Ukraine, which sees YouTube as the second most popular social media platform.

Digital and social media recruitment campaigns would benefit from a localised approach, disseminating messaging not only in the local language but also using localised social media accounts (pilot institution channels or an AGEFORCE Greece profile) to better connect to local participants.

Online platforms and tools
Project website: The AGEFORCE website serves as the central information hub. It will feature an accessible design with large fonts, clear navigation, high-contrast colour schemes, audio/video content and content available in all partner languages. The website provides public access to project news, deliverables, event announcements and registration forms.
Communities of Interest (Col) platform: An online collaboration space integrated into the website will enable registered members to interact, post news and ideas, share articles and exchange experiences. The platform is designed as a user-friendly virtual community space, drawing on research demonstrating that older adults value virtual social interactions when the platform is intuitive. Registered users will be able to submit ideas, comment on and rate existing ideas, and interact with other community members.
Social media: AGEFORCE will maintain active profiles on Facebook and LinkedIn. A dedicated project hashtag will be used consistently across all platforms. Content will include project progress updates, participant testimonials, event announcements, physical activity tips and educational infographics. Given that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform among older adults in the EU, it will receive the highest investment of content and engagement effort.
Newsletters: Three online newsletters will be produced over the project duration and distributed to Col registrants and partner networks. Each newsletter will summarise recent activities, present citizen panel outcomes, share participant stories and announce upcoming events.
Crowdsourcing platform: Developed in WP4, the crowdsourcing platform will enable older adults from across Europe to submit, comment on and rate ideas for physical activity interventions. The platform will be designed according to accessibility criteria for older users, including simple navigation, large interactive elements, clear instructions and multilingual support in all partner languages.

Table 5: Online platforms and tools

All digital tools will follow the principles outlined in the AGEFORCE methodology for adjusting digital tools to the needs of older adults, prioritising ease of use, acceptance levels and participatory dynamics in a simple manner (Hidalgo et al., 2021).

4.2 Risks and challenges

Efforts to engage with and recruit citizen scientists over an extended period are presented with a number of risks and challenges. The following table presents the key risks, their likelihood and impact assessments, and the mitigation measures that AGEFORCE will implement.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Measures
Lack of online visibility	Medium	Medium	Close monitoring of reach of online communications campaigns and adjust as necessary. Comprehensive offline activities.
Lack of general interest	Medium	High	Sustained engagement efforts, evaluation and refinement of engagement activities.
Participant attrition over time	Medium	High	Maintain regular contact through the Col platform, newsletters and informal café sessions. Provide feedback on how participants' input has been used. Offer recognition through certificates and social media acknowledgement. Use mediators as retention anchors.
Digital exclusion	High	Medium	Prioritise offline engagement channels. Provide digital literacy support sessions. Ensure all online tools follow accessibility guidelines for older users. Offer telephone-based alternatives where possible.
Language and cultural barriers	Medium	Medium	Produce all materials in local languages. Use simple, jargon-free language. Employ culturally sensitive visual materials. Train moderators in intercultural communication.
Health or mobility related issues	Medium	Low	A robust online strategy will be implemented to reach older adults who may be less able to travel distances necessary to come across offline engagement activities.

Table 6: Risks assessment and mitigation measures

5 Inclusion and diversity

AGEFORCE is committed to implementing a participatory approach that ensures the representation of diverse socio-economic, geographical, gender and ability groups. Inclusivity is not an afterthought but a structural design principle embedded in the project's methodology, recruitment strategy and communication activities.

The citizen panel quota specifies a 50/50 gender balance among participants. Gendered considerations will be integrated into panel preparation, resource design, the crowdsourcing platform and the collaborative space. AGEFORCE will encourage participation from marginalised and hard-to-reach groups and will use gender-neutral language across all project materials and communications.

The educational level quota (equal representation of low, middle and high educational attainment) serves as a proxy for socio-economic diversity. Partners will actively recruit from economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, social housing communities and groups at risk of poverty. All educational materials will be written in simple, comprehensible language and supported by simple visual aids.

Given the growing proportion of older adults with a migration background in several partner countries, AGEFORCE will make deliberate efforts to include culturally and ethnically diverse participants. This could involve partnering with migrant associations, cultural organisations and faith-based communities, translating key materials into additional languages where needed and exploring training possibilities for moderators in intercultural facilitation.

AGEFORCE emphasises the adaptability and accessibility of its activities to ensure the participation of all interested individuals, regardless of personal abilities or limitations that may arise with age. Citizen panel venues will be selected for physical accessibility (wheelchair access, adequate lighting, hearing loop systems where available). Digital platforms will follow web accessibility standards (WCAG 2.1). Informative seminars will incorporate audiovisual aids, and written materials will use large, high-contrast fonts.

To reduce practical barriers to participation, AGEFORCE will organise citizen engagement activities around the availability of participants, including weekend and morning scheduling options. Venues will be selected to minimise travel distances. Transport assistance or reimbursement is an option to consider based on pilot organisation capacity and resources.

6 Conclusion

This Citizen Engagement Plan provides the strategic and operational framework for involving older adults and their mediators in the AGEFORCE project. Rooted in the principles of citizen science and participatory co-creation, the plan outlines a multi-channel, community-embedded engagement strategy that recognises the diverse needs, motivations and barriers of the target population.

The recruitment approach combines offline, face-to-face outreach – through trusted local institutions, personal networks and printed materials – with online engagement via the project website, Communities of Interest platform, social media channels, digital storytelling, podcasts and a crowdsourcing platform designed for older adult accessibility.

Motivational strategies are grounded in the scientific literature on volunteerism and citizen engagement, addressing both intrinsic motivations (altruism, learning, social interaction, meaningfulness) and extrinsic incentives (recognition, certificates, acknowledgement). The innovative inclusion of mediators extends the engagement beyond the individual older adult to their immediate social environment, aiming for more sustained and transformative behavioural change.

Inclusion and diversity are embedded as structural principles. A systematic risk management approach identifies key challenges – including low participation, digital exclusion, cultural barriers and pandemic disruptions – and sets out evidence-based mitigation measures.

The plan is designed as a living document that will be reviewed and can be updated when necessary, informed by feedback from participants, the project team and the practical experience gained from each successive citizen panel round. In this way, AGEFORCE's engagement strategy remains responsive, adaptive and firmly grounded in the realities of working with older adults across diverse European contexts.

By empowering older adults as genuine partners in the co-creation of physical activity interventions, AGEFORCE strives not only to increase their physical activity levels but to foster a broader culture of citizen participation, social connectedness and active ageing that can be replicated and scaled across Europe.

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