

Together  
is better!

Dreamlike  
Neighbourhood  older people  
connect in their  
community

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# Stories of Dreamlike Neighbourhoods

## A Handbook





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hood  
.eu

All publications from the Dreamlike Neighbourhood project can be downloaded for free from our [website](http://www.dreamlike-neighbourhood.eu).

We need neighbourhoods that celebrate their inhabitants and make them visible. Neighbourhoods that invite each of us regardless of our diversity to connect meaningfully with each other, contribute our ideas and talents and co-create our (social) environment. Neighbourhoods that enable and empower us to live and age well and in place.

This Handbook is our contribution to such “dream” neighbourhoods. It aims to inspire and motivate those who would like to make this “dream” come true. It tells stories of the co-creating of supporting neighbourhoods. We have written and compiled it for all those who work with older people and are interested in creating supporting communities with them. This includes local organisations (e.g. municipality departments dealing with social issues and/or older people, neighbourhood centres, civil society initiatives, social work centres, etc.) with their staff and their volunteers as well as individuals and groups (e.g. policy-makers, adult education providers and influencers) acting as ambassadors. And more importantly, this Handbook addresses older people themselves who want to get to know

their neighbours, to come together and jointly develop their community. With this Handbook we want to raise interest and inspire. For those who would like to know more about the practical tools and methods mentioned in the following pages, we have compiled the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* Online Resource Kit. It provides a collection of activities to support people to come together and connect meaningfully. The last chapter provides a short glimpse of the Online Resource Kit.

This Handbook provides an insight into the two years of the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project. Two years of developing and testing various activities together with and by older people. Two years of coming together, sharing experiences and ideas, connecting with others, and creating communities together. These experiences have been collected by quite different groups in diverse settings in four European countries. In this Handbook, we tell the stories of the neighbourhood groups, some of the people behind them and the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project that provided the framework for so many meaningful and community-building encounters.



### Together is better

We all benefit from good neighbourhoods: they give us a sense of belonging, support our identity and offer security. They provide us with support – of different kinds – if needed, protect us from loneliness and contribute considerably to our wellbeing and health. Many older people – especially very old people – can benefit from them even more. For those with a higher probability of mobility issues, health-related restrictions and who live alone and are at greater risk of social exclusion, their local community can be a precious source of support. Local communities are near and within walking distance.

### In balance

Good relationships are based on reciprocity. Usually, humans strive for a balance between giving and receiving. Not only do older people

profit from good neighbourhoods, they can also contribute a lot if they feel welcome, appreciated and are given opportunities to participate.

*On Earth Day, participants in Prague did community work. It was not only the environment that benefited from this. The teamwork encouraged getting to know each other and chatting.*

Photo © Letokruh

If you would like to know more about the relevance of talents and about ways to empower older people to make their visible in organisations and communities, please check out the project **invisible talents** on: → [www.invisible-talents.eu](http://www.invisible-talents.eu)

## Attachment and social connections...

**... that are fostered and nourished in the neighbourhood are a valuable resource in old age: They improve the well-being and quality of life of older people and help them to fight against loneliness, stay healthy and live longer.<sup>1</sup>**

1 See for example: Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al.: Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review, in: PLoS Medicine 7/7, 1–20. (German only)

## With, not for

**“Our task is to create opportunities and enable people to engage.”**

—Dušana Findeisen,  
co-mentor of the Slovenian  
neighbourhood groups

The best opportunities for older people to participate are those set up by them and with them, rather than for them. People know best about what makes encounters and activities meaningful to them. In the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project we have asked participants about their views and conceptions of their “dream neighbourhood”. The answers were as diverse as the people asked, but some aspects kept coming up:

- ☁️ to be able to play an active role and participate holistically with interests, talents and perspectives
- ☁️ to gain positive experiences
- ☁️ to be inspired
- ☁️ to exchange with others and experience communities

## Multiple benefits

**“Volunteering is about connecting with others and being useful. The volunteering activities complete my life. It is such a pleasure to guide people around. People from all over the world come to visit our Botanical Garden. And also people from Ljubljana. They are my neighbours, but they didn’t even know that the Botanical Garden existed.”**

— Helena, volunteer in  
the Botanical Garden in  
Ljubljana

This is not only relevant for individuals, but it is also relevant for communities and society as a whole. While (older) people who engage in their communities bring benefits to their communities, they also get a lot in return. Communities that cater for the needs of an ageing population and include older people with their interests and talents, allow them to age well and in place, while diverse communities are life enriching for all generations.

## Ageing in place and locally

**“The neighbourhood of my dreams. We are ageing not only in our flats but in a system of meaningful places.”**

— Published in the News of the Federation of Pensioners' Association of Slovenia<sup>2</sup>

Ageing in place is the concept of living in our homes and communities – as independently as possible – rather than in institutional care settings. For many older people this is linked to a sense of attachment, continuity and social connections and a sense of security and familiarity – with their home as refuge and the community as a resource. Older people not only age at home but in a system of meaningful places within a community disposing of sufficient territorial

capital. Ageing in place requires environments that are ready for an ageing population and different phases of old age.

The *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* partners agree that it is important to age in place and be a part of the community. Social inclusion counts: People want to be respected, to be understood and to have places that are visible and open to all generations, theirs included.

**“Public places should not exclude older people.”**

— Marija Vovk, architect

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2 [https://e-clip.pressclip.si/novi\\_eclip/article.aspx?SEED=7a7c9d49-c094-4805-95fe-9ff1380f7eaa826173134](https://e-clip.pressclip.si/novi_eclip/article.aspx?SEED=7a7c9d49-c094-4805-95fe-9ff1380f7eaa826173134) (31.05.2022)



*Ljubljana through their eyes and knowledge: Neighbourhood groups started learning about the urbanism of their neighbourhoods, current developments there, as well as the stakeholders responsible for conceptualising public space.*

Photo © Meta Kutin

## Situations Project in diverse contexts



In this chapter we would like to take you on a journey to four different cities and thus four different contexts. The *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project has been carried out in very different settings. Everywhere, these settings have shown their own logics and their specific resources.

*In Vienna, during regular “chats” about different topics participants revealed common and different perspectives, shed light on talents and interests or got to know others better in new and surprising ways*

Photo © queraum



In Austria, queraum cooperated with the Vienna Pensioners' Residences Funds (KWP). The KWP runs more than 150 older people's clubs in Vienna. Older people can meet at the clubs for coffee and cake and participate in the programme (e.g. dances, memory training, sports). The programme is organised by the club supervisors and a (volunteer) staff.

Lately, the KWP has been interested in bringing new activities, cooperations and target groups to the clubs and in actively involving club visitors in planning and organising activities together. The *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project has therefore been received with great interest.

Together with the group supervisors and managers, queraum started a neighbourhood group in the club Hofferplatz 3 in the 16th district of Vienna. This club only opened in summer 2020. However, due to COVID-19 and its associated restrictions, the club has been closed on and off for the past two years. This has made it difficult for visitors to get to know each other and connect.

For more information on the Vienna **KWP** see:

→ [www.kwp.at](http://www.kwp.at)

### Get together and connect

**„I am also visiting another club and play cards there. However, we don't talk, we just play. And I miss it. That's why I come here because I would like to talk, to share experiences and I would like to learn from others. And it is wonderful, I haven't laughed as much as I did today for a long time.“**

— Elfriede, member of the neighbourhood group in Vienna

Due to this initial situation, the idea of the neighbourhood group was to bring people together and support them in getting to know each other (better) as well as to make it easier for new visitors to connect and build a sense of belonging.

To build on the familiar and yet stimulate a new togetherness, queraum – in close cooperation with the club managers – decided to start the neighbourhood group as an “open walk-in chatting group” (“Plauderei”) – regular meetings dedicated to certain issues (e.g. travelling, pets, childhood, music and old films, etc.) and open to everyone interested.

**“It's a good way to bring people together. People get to talk to people they might not otherwise talk to.”**

— Helene, member of the neighbourhood group in Vienna

## Building up cooperations

queraum also cooperated with Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8. (“Sustainable Mindful 8th”).

In cooperation with Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8. a workshop for older people, stakeholders and people working with older people was organised to share experience, learn from each other and develop joint activities to promote the social inclusion of older people. Furthermore, in cooperation with Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8., queraum and participants of the neighbourhood group facilitated a public storytelling café at the Day of Mindfulness in the 8th district of Vienna.

**Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8.** is a project that promotes social support and solidarity among the residents of the 8th district of Vienna. Special emphasis is placed on supporting older people, and residents with dementia and their carers, to create a lively caring community. See: → [www.achtsamer.at](http://www.achtsamer.at)

**queraum. cultural and social research** was founded in 2004. Since then, the team has successfully planned, developed, coordinated, implemented, evaluated and supported projects at the local, regional, national and European level. The relevance and practical applicability of the (research and work) results are extremely important to queraum. Its working areas are as diverse as the people they work for and with, e.g. persons with diverse ethnic backgrounds, from different age groups (children, young people, older people), with and without disabilities. More information on: → [www.queraum.org/en](http://www.queraum.org/en)

## The Hague

In the Netherlands, the project partners cooperated with the foundation Woonservicewijken (living-care-welfare network) The Hague and the Stedelijke Ouderen Commissie (urban older people’s committee – SOC).

**The Stedelijke Ouderen Commissie (SOC)** is a platform for interest groups of older people in The Hague. The SOC aims to build a network of older peoples’ neighbourhood groups that bring up relevant issues regarding the neighbourhood themselves. For more information see: → [www.socdenhaag.nl](http://www.socdenhaag.nl)

The **Woonservicewijken Den Haag** is a network of housing corporations, care and welfare organisations and the municipality. Woonservicewijken mainly works in deprived neighbourhoods of The Hague Centre and The Hague Escamp, The Hague South-West. In so-called “inspirational meetings”, partners discuss the issues that are particularly important in the neighbourhoods. Many residents feel overlooked by the government and find it difficult to access services. The network tries to create combinations of housing, meeting facilities, integrated care and social networks to raise awareness and improve the self-reliance of residents. More info about the Woonservicewijken Den Haag on → [www.woonservicewijken.nl](http://www.woonservicewijken.nl)



*Preparing a Moroccan meal was a breakthrough towards more contacts in participants' neighbourhood of Transvaal. The neighbours really appreciated it.*

Photo © Loes Hulsebosch

## Two different neighbourhoods, two dynamics

**“I always feel fulfilled when I come here. I feel so recognised and heard.”**

—Paul, member of the neighbourhood group

After the exploratory phase, it was decided to work in two neighbourhoods, namely in Bouwlust (The Hague South-West) and in Transvaal (The Hague Centre).

Bouwlust is a post-war neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. Built in the 1960s, it is now due for renovation and renewal. In former times, it used to be a beautiful neighbourhood. Everyone knew each other. Today, many older people feel isolated.

*Dreamlike Bouwlust* is a new neighbourhood group (Droomwijk), created in the neighbourhood around a meeting centre. The group sometimes merged with an existing

group. The care organisation Saffier runs this centre and wants to transform it from a place for day care into a vibrant community centre for the neighbourhood. Initially the group met every 14 days and discussed different elements of “age-friendliness”. The participants decided together who to invite to speak to the group (e.g. police officer, community worker) and they also wanted to spend the time together doing creative activities.

**“It feels good when you can do something for and with each other and contribute to a better neighbourhood.”**

—Ine, member of the neighbourhood group

In Transvaal the community of migrants is relatively large. The older people with a migrant background mainly come from Surinam (they came to the Netherlands after

Surinam's independence), Turkey and Morocco (migrant workers of the 1960s and 1970s). New residents are mainly migrant workers from Romania, Poland and Bulgaria. The older inhabitants fear that their values are not shared and this creates a feeling of insecurity. But the older people are also keen to contribute to the neighbourhood.

The Dreamlike Mandelaplain group met at the Mandelaplain community centre in the Transvaal district of The Hague. It consisted of older men with a Moroccan background, an existing group that was already linked to the Mandelaplein community centre. One specific aim of the participants was to learn. This group "installed" a contact person that spoke for the group. The group met every week. This "activity group" – as the participants preferred to call it – met for some time as an open "walk-in" in the Mandelaplein community centre.

**"We talk to each other about everything, about worries and about beautiful things. It helps to make us freer and stronger."**

—Chref, member of neighbourhood group

In both neighbourhoods, the project team worked with the train-the-trainer principle, with the training-on-the-job method. Moderators were trained to support the groups independently after the project period. Innovative forms of working were used to inspire the group participants to broaden their views, learn, connect with others, and share their experience and knowledge.

During the course of the project, a third group was started in another district of The Hague.

**AFEdemy** is a private limited company based in Gouda, the Netherlands. It was founded in May 2017 and since then, AFEdemy has been successfully involved in European networks and projects. AFEdemy was founded to address the challenge of implementing the WHO holistic concept of age-friendly cities and environments. Therefore, AFEdemy's mission is to build the capacity of national, regional and local stakeholders in the field of smart, healthy and age-friendly environments (SHAFE). The main target groups for SHAFE training and advice are older adults, public authorities, architects, health care institutions, research and ICT development agencies. For more information check out: → [www.afedemy.eu](http://www.afedemy.eu)

In *Dreamlike Neighbourhood*, the AFEdemy team cooperated with Loes Hulsebosch (expert in community building and member of the board of Woon servicewijken The Hague), long-term care organisation Saffier and community centre Mandelaplein.

## Prague

The main setting in Prague is Letokruh, a well-established non-profit organisation and its senior volunteers.

### A rich variety to pick from

The neighbourhood group of Letokruh met regularly in different places, external experts (e.g. architects) were invited. They walked through the historical parts of the city (the tour was prepared and guided by one of the participants), visited a virtual reality room or met in a modern gym and had a chance to learn the basics of yoga for older people. The idea behind all this was to offer a variety of activities, perspectives and information so that everyone could pick something that was of interest to them.

The group was characterised by its comfortable atmosphere – it was safe to share memories and personal experiences – and it grew continuously. There were around 15 active participants. Interestingly, the participants formed their own group and enjoyed various activities (e.g. theatre, walks) together. “Since we started, we see that the group is very close. At the beginning we brought them to different places and now they start their own activities and invite us.” (Project team of Letokruh)

**“The neighbourhood group opened the world again for us. Now it is a different world for us. We start living again.”**

—Marta, member of the neighbourhood group in Prague

The **Letokruh** senior volunteer group consists of people who are interested in helping others, e.g. by reading to kids in kindergarten and school, visiting and supporting lonely older people, helping out in the library or in an animal shelter or tour guiding others. They are familiar with some sort of community life in the neighbourhood. The primary meeting location for the volunteers is Dobroklub, the new clubhouse of the organisation. Dobroklub was created as a place for the Letokruh community. It is a place where they can meet, inspire each other and motivate themselves, take part in educational activities (e.g. language, presentations about history, politics and culture) and be part of a variety of events. Their involvement in the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* programme was a way to discover the neighbourhood more and to connect more among themselves and with other people. For more info about Letokruh and its field of work see: → [www.letokruh.eu](http://www.letokruh.eu)

## Building up cooperations

Letokruh cooperated with the Passerinvest Group, which has become an important project partner for Letokruh. Thanks to their support the project team were able to realise a number of meetings of the group in various spaces – visiting the tallest commercial building Filadelfia, organising meetings in the Bethany community centre, in the Brumlovka sports centre. They facilitated meetings with urban planners and architects of the district where the clubhouse is located and

where the older people live. The older people thus had the opportunity to give their opinions on what they would appreciate in a future development in terms of cultural and leisure activities.

Another major supporter of the non-profit organisation Letokruh and the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project was the Municipality of Prague 4. Together an ecologically oriented event with our group of older people was organised.

**Passerinvest Group** is a purely Czech investment and development company, which was founded in 1991 and since then has gained a lot of experience in the construction of office and commercial buildings as well as residential buildings mainly in Prague.

See more: → [www.passerinvest.cz/en](http://www.passerinvest.cz/en)

## Ljubljana

The setting of the neighbourhood groups in Ljubljana was the Slovenian Third Age University (U3A). The groups mostly consisted of older architecture and urbanism students, and some newcomers from other study groups.

The neighbourhood groups facilitated by the U3A were organised in the format of “study circles.” Participants met once a week. The mentors used and encouraged different types of learning (e. g. study excursions, group discussions with some prompts such as newspaper articles,

**Slovenian Third Age University (U3A)** is both an umbrella organisation and a nationwide network which currently stands at 57 third age universities. It pursues research, offers adult and older adult education, and organises intergenerational learning. Slovenia’s U3A firmly believes that for older people, learning is a means to remain included in society, improve their quality of life and enhance intergenerational cooperation and dialogue. Both education and culture in later life should be inclusive, engaged, and a guarantee for older people’s decent way of living. Therefore, the third age education provided by the Slovenian U3A goes hand in hand with active ageing, volunteering and diverse civic activities within the community. More information is available on: → [www.utzo.si](http://www.utzo.si)

pictures or videos, interviewing experts, meeting urbanists and decision-makers, etc.). Participants focused on different aspects of older peoples' living in a limited city area (neighbourhood) and discussed issues, such as "How does the city and the neighbourhood impact them and how do they impact the city?" This approach was supplemented by team-building methods and other activities to encourage exchanges between participants.

**"Our participants tell each other their personal stories of living in the town or their neighbourhood. Once they entrust each other and other people with their story, they cannot be strangers anymore."**

—Dušana Findeisen,  
co-mentor of the  
neighbourhood groups

## Visibility and being heard

The aim of the neighbourhood groups first and foremost was to be seen, listened to and heard as a group which is usually pushed to the edge of society. Their aims, however, went beyond just the groups' interests. They were interested in impacting attitudes and behaviour in relation to neighbourhoods and town, alleviating social ageist stereotypes, changing mentalities, adjusting services and structures, contributing to the adjusting of public policies and programmes.

One of the two groups worked on concrete projects, such as a research project on the Poljanska area, an outdoor exhibition *Visions 2021* which displayed their views on their urban living, and on *City 65+, Between Retreat and Urbanity* an exhibition in the central city gallery, and a film about older people's needs and aspirations in relation to their neighbourhoods and the city.



*"Together is better", a round table within a neighbourhood group's international event. In cooperation with the magazine Outsider members of one of the Ljubljana's neighbourhood groups organised an open-air round table where they shared their thoughts, beliefs and findings on quality neighbourhoods as well as their recommendations. The event was opened to both an invited audience and passers-by.*

Photo © Janez Marolt



*In the Hague, participants in the neighbourhood groups learned from each other by exchanging their dreams and wishes.*

Photo © Loes Hulsebosch

### Idea

The *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project was dedicated to facilitating and supporting neighbourhood groups of/with older and very old people. In such groups, the participants meet regularly and support each other (re-)detecting and bringing in their ideas and talents. They make meaningful connections with each other, empower each other and actively contribute to the group and the local community.

The idea was to either support older people to set up new groups or work with existing groups that wanted to integrate new approaches and ideas or new target groups. The community building is supported by joint activities but is based on the perspectives and wishes of the older people themselves. We have collected, further developed and tested many methods and tools (“activities”) that help to bring people together.

### Incentives

**“We have to provide the context and supervise while staying behind.”**

— Dušana Findeisen, co-mentor of the Slovenian neighbourhood groups

### Why is this kind of support for establishing communities needed?

- ☁ Neighbourhood groups usually need some sort of structural support, e.g. places to meet and mentors or facilitators, who “push the carts” and get the groups going.
- ☁ Most people need some incentives or “occasions” to meet with others, e.g. an issue to talk about, an activity or programme to participate in or to initiate.



Storytelling cafés are a nice icebreaker and establish new and deeper connections between people.

Photo © Letokruh

## Orientations

Neighbourhood groups depend heavily on the participants, their contexts, their abilities and values and those organisations in which they are active. They also need facilitators. Each of these elements is a resource and provides a certain dynamic that makes each group unique.

The groups in the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project were thus very diverse and have found their own ways of building communities and participating. Some preferred to tell stories, others were interested in listening to them, still others researched together and explored public space. In short: There are many ways to be together, to create together, to support each other and participate. Let's have a look at the various ways of establishing neighbourhood groups:

## Older people get together and connect

Bringing people together and forming an active group with them cannot be taken for granted. The experiences from the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project show that there are some approaches or methods that help to break the ice and establish (new and deeper) connections between people.

In Prague and Vienna, storytelling cafés proved to be very helpful to make common and different perspectives visible, to shed light on talents and interests or to get to know others better or in new and surprising ways.

In Vienna, the storytelling café was based on the active contributions of participants, such as the stories they prepared for the meetings. During regular "chats" about different topics (e.g. childhood memories, cinema, neighbourhood) commonalities, different perspectives and personal experiences

became visible. To attract new people to the chats, the “outcomes” were continuously documented and exhibited in the club. “I really like the posters from us hanging up there on the wall. They are nice and colourful.” (Hans, member of the neighbourhood group in Vienna)

In Prague, a storytelling café around Christmas opened up the opportunity to talk about and experience traditions together (see also [next chapter](#)).

In Slovenia, the issue of “old age” and prompts (e.g. videos, articles, study excursions, exploratory learning, exchanges with experts) stimulated

lively discussions about age(ing), social fairness on different levels, retreat or urbanity of older people, the impact of older people on the environment and vice versa, different models of ageing going beyond the so-called safe model, preferring the social and cultural one, images of old age and barriers faced by an ageing population.

Creative activities, such as storytelling based on drawings or reciting own poems (see one of the neighbourhood groups in The Hague), can also be a great incentive to get a group going and to help participants connect at various, sometimes very personal, levels.



*In creative activities, such as storytelling based on drawings or reciting own poems, people connected at various, sometimes very personal, levels.*

Photo © Loes Hulsebosch

## Older people express their perspectives, contribute their knowledge, and raise awareness

In the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project, participants had the chance to express their perspectives, to be seen and heard and thus raise awareness for the presence and contributions of older people in the various activities. This may be realised via the media, at meetings with stakeholders, at events or in the public space.

The neighbourhood group in Ljubljana – in cooperation with the Association of Architects of Ljubljana – was involved in preparing *City 65+. Between Retreat and Urbanity*, an outdoor and an indoor exhibition. The participants contributed both to the concept and the development of the exhibition that also included a detailed overview of organisations and institutions dealing with older people, older people's views on urbanism as well as examples of older people's participation.

The documentary *City 65+* was screened at the opening of the exhibition and benefited a lot from the group participants who were interviewed about their ideas, needs, thoughts of their neighbourhoods and age-friendly cities.

The film **City 65+** can be watched in Slovenian with English subtitles on

→ [www.vizjeso16.com/videoportreti-english](http://www.vizjeso16.com/videoportreti-english)

Furthermore, the participants of U3A shared their ideas for a “dream neighbourhood” at a public street event organised by Outsider magazine.

In The Hague, the neighbourhood group in Bouwlust had a dialogue with municipal policymakers and spoke out about the things needed in the neighbourhood.

The group in Prague visited one of the highest and biggest commercial buildings and met the developer and architects afterwards. The group had the chance to propose some ideas for the future development of the city district.

The neighbourhood group in Vienna transformed their chats (“Plauderei”) into a public chat (“Öffentliche Plauderei”) at the “Day of Mindfulness”, organised by the project *Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8*. Together with the group participants, the project team prepared inspiring questions and little stories and invited visitors to the Day of Mindfulness to join them. It was organised as an open format – everyone who was interested could stop and listen and/or sit down and join the discussion. In this way, the “Plauderei” became a public event and reached out to people in another district.

## Older people explore their neighbourhood and involve others

There are various ways of exploring the neighbourhood with or without others. The neighbourhood group at Letokruh, for example, explored different places in Prague and learned about new developments in the urban environment. For example, the group visited one of the highest and biggest commercial buildings and met the developer and architects of the location afterwards. At this meeting, the participants took the chance to propose some ideas for the future development of the city district. But the group also walked through historical parts of the city – on a tour that had been prepared and was guided by one participant of their own group.

Another excursion led them to a Virtual Reality game room. This visit was a completely new experience and the basis of a lengthy and lively discussion afterwards. On Earth Day, the participants went to a nearby forest to collect garbage to improve their neighbourhood. Their activity benefited the environment, but also themselves. Even with this activity there was room for socialising, getting to know each other and chatting.

The U3A group in Ljubljana chose research as another way to explore the neighbourhood: The research project focused on the past, present and future of a neighbourhood.



*Every day you can live another reality. Jirka “jumping from a skyscraper”.*

Photo © Letokruh

The participants consulted archive materials, collected old postcards of the area, searched for audio-visual material and walked through the neighbourhood while discussing the physical and social environment and identifying the most valuable views in the area. After that, the group interpreted the research results.

## Older people learn and support each other

Neighbourhood groups are a great ground for learning – from each other and from external experts. The Mandelaplain group in The Hague, for example, explicitly wanted to learn, e.g. about health care, digital skills, financial supplies, and to connect with each other. For their “activity group”, the participants preferred fun and hands-on activities (e.g. cooking, games, working with digital devices) and not too much talking, mainly because their language skills are low. The men interpreted among themselves, if needed.

**“I want to learn, and I want to get to know residents from other neighbourhoods.”**

– Jamal, member of the neighbourhood group



*The visit to a virtual game room opened up a completely new subject area for participants from the neighbourhood group in Prague. An experience that was later the basis of a lengthy and lively discussion both in the group and in their communities.*

Photo © Letokruh



*Participants supported each other by sharing knowledge and their life experiences.*

Photo © Loes Hulsebosch

## Older people stay in contact even in times of “physical distancing”

The pandemic was a challenge – not only for the project, but also and especially for the neighbourhood groups. The teams had to search for new ways of making contact and staying in touch – ways that may also be helpful in the future (without a pandemic).

In Vienna for example, the idea of storytelling cafés had to be postponed due to COVID-19. But how could the project team possibly stay in contact with the participants and involve them actively? The team chose the telephone as the best option and had talks about “traveling stories” with people who were interested in participating. Together, these stories were transformed into short articles that were used in the face-to-face storytelling cafés as soon as it was possible again to meet in person.

In Prague, the participants stayed in contact via WhatsApp and the project team also organised online activities (e.g. online gym). The project team observed that a group can “grow together” via digital means and use this momentum in “real life” to make closer connections and get active together. This is also confirmed by the experiences in The Hague: one participant has been sending an inspiring saying to the whole group via WhatsApp every day and thus brightening up everyone’s start to the day.



As you have seen so far, our project is composed of quite different settings, organisations and people. Despite all this diversity, we share similar experiences that we would like to pass on to all those interested in starting community activities together with older people.

*At the Day of Mindfulness project participants facilitated a storytelling café and encouraged an inter-generational exchange on “dream” neighbourhoods on a lively square in the 8th district of Vienna.*

Photo © queraum

### Words matter

Words are important. Simple and inspiring words send out the message: “Don’t worry, you can do it! You are welcome here!” activities together with older people.

### Examples

- 🌐 The German word “Plauderei” – used as the name of a group activity – means “informal chat” – something everyone can take part in.
- 🌐 In the Netherlands, the word “Droomwijk” was used to announce the project. This aroused curiosity among many people: “Why Droomwijk?” This term was in a sharp contrast to neighbourhoods that are usually not considered “dreamlike”. But it triggered many questions and reactions: “Can it become a dream neighbourhood?”, “Can we do anything about it?”, “How nice to look at the neighbourhood and the people in such a positive way!” (Ria, participant in The Hague)

## Structures help

Sometimes it is tempting to start something new. From our experience, it is in fact very helpful to use the existing structures (e.g. groups) where people meet and bring new incentives and ideas to these contexts. Small “content bites” or informal chats in the warm-up phase help to build up trust in/of the existing groups.

But “structure” may also refer to something smaller – e.g. things or activities – “to hold on to” in a new situation, as can be seen from an experience in Prague:

## People connect via stories

### “Every theme contains the entire world.”

— Gert Dressel, cooperation partner in Austria, project manager of Nachhaltiger ACHTSAMER 8. and expert of Caring Community Network

Storytelling formats help participants to discover common ground as well as differences. The topic is (almost) secondary.

Topics that are, in general, shared by everyone but in very different ways (e.g. childhood, travelling, food) are very useful starting points for storytelling formats. Current events also provide interesting themes, for example the introduction of the COVID QR code, the war in Ukraine,

## Example

 In The Hague Transvaal there has been an open drop-in group of older migrants from Morocco for years. According to the people in the community centre, they did not ask for anything. When we provided them a platform within *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* to share their stories and learn together about their health, language and digital skills and their knowledge of the city, they actually wanted a lot! In our group, they felt acknowledged and found space for themselves as individuals: “I have a lot of stress, by participating here I feel taken seriously.” (Abbas, participant in The Hague) The group has now become a regular activity group within the The Hague Encounter programme (Haags Ontmoeten).

## Example

 In Prague, the first meeting of the group obviously needed some sort of structure or “common thread”. To this end, participants were asked to bring childhood pictures. These photos turned out to be perfect starting points for a lively discussion, because the participants felt safe and opened up to others.

the renewal of the district, events in the neighbourhood or personal experiences in the past week. “From the point of now you get further to the point of memories and the point of later, our future.” (Bea, participant in The Hague)



*What's the place to go to in Ljubljana? The exhibition of the neighbourhood groups on one of Ljubljana's main squares. The outdoor exhibition enabled both professional and general audiences to become familiar with the quality of the urban environment in the eyes of older people, according to both their experience and their own research findings. The event was a part of the Slovenian U3A's public campaigning and therefore heavily covered by the national media.*

Photo © Meta Kutin

## Examples

- 🌐 **In the Netherlands, the participants of the neighbourhood group in Bouwlust were very diverse, with many different (cultural) backgrounds and interests. Each story was the starting point for a lively dialogue about life's themes. For example, a lady talked about the books she had written and a gentleman about his drawings and paintings. The participants asked questions with interest and respect. In these talks, they didn't shy away from difficult subjects and moments of vulnerability. "It gives me so much satisfaction, I am so much looking forward to it." (Paul, participant in The Hague).**
- 🌐 **When the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face meetings in Vienna impossible, telephone talks about travelling were the method of choice for staying in touch with participants. The talks usually started with memories of travelling but led to many other relevant issues (e.g. how to discover new things in daily life).**

## Traditions bring people closer to each other

Traditions, such as specific ways of celebrating, cooking or dancing, can bring people closer to each other – either because they share the same traditions or – on the contrary – because they do not know much about other traditions but are interested in learning from each other and detecting common ground in spite of diversity.

## Example

- 🌐 **In Prague, a storytelling café was created around Christmas and New Year traditions. It took place in Dobroklub in December. Participants shared their Christmas memories, Christmas traditions and the different ways of celebrating it with their families and in the places they lived in those days. Together they baked Christmas cookies and sang carols, accompanied by a harmonica. One of the participants even wrote a poem for this occasion.**

## Spontaneous ideas may break the ice

It is of course helpful to prepare and bring some prompts and ideas to the groups. But sometimes, spontaneous ideas born out of the moment are worthwhile and help to bring people together.

## Groups meander and grow

**“It was a very interesting experience to see the groups grow!”**

— Loes Hulsebosch, project partner in the Netherlands

Building up new communities, renewing existing ones or bringing in people not familiar with playing an active role in a group is not a sprint but sometimes a long and winding hike. A hike that consists of many small, yet precious steps. Let the group guide you!

Many older people feel that they no longer matter, that they are no longer of significance. It takes a lot of patience to show them that they do really matter and are of added value to others in their environment, their neighbourhood. The process of being able to develop and share their insecurities is very important and requires time and a safe environment for discussion.

## Example

 In one of the storytelling afternoons in Prague, a spontaneous idea gained wonderful momentum: A discussion about travelling in times of communism led to participants sharing memories and laughing, as their experiences were so far removed from today's situation. In discussing their memories, the participants detected a common past.

## Examples

-  The partners in The Hague sometimes felt discouraged when the group did not seem to be interested in the programme or only just a few people showed up. At one point, the participants started to bring in their own issues and it showed that they were spreading the information on the group to their communities.
-  In all neighbourhood groups some time and several meetings were needed before participants expressed the idea of going out, getting to know other neighbourhoods and getting in touch with other people. They had to build up confidence and after a few meetings they were ready to take the step outside and meet others.

## Snowballs roll

Working with a group means working with a lot more people than those actually in the group. Many participants act as multipliers and share their experiences or new information obtained at group activities with friends, family members, other neighbours, workers in the community and the municipality. The group activities may thus have a “snowball effect”, which means they get “bigger” and have more impact as they “roll”.

## Examples

- 🌐 In Ljubljana, an older member of the neighbourhood group, raised awareness of the “taboo issue” of public toilets (in terms of quantity, distribution and accessibility). She encouraged her family to keep a close eye on their neighbourhoods. Consequently, her son sent her photos of some age-friendly toilets in Canada. In Ljubljana again the older members of the groups were invited by *Outsider* magazine to express their opinion on the issue of green surfaces in the city.
- 🌐 In Prague, based on her own good experience, one of our *Letokruh* volunteers, who takes care of a physically disabled lady, brought her to one of the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* meetings and involved her in the group.
- 🌐 In Vienna some participants actively promoted the “*Plaudereien*” by calling club visitors and inviting or even convincing them to come. “She [one participant] called me today and said I had to get out of my loneliness and come here. She’s right, it’s good for me!”, said Eva, one participant of the neighbourhood group in Vienna.
- 🌐 In The Hague, the members of the neighbourhood group in *Transvaal* act as multipliers in their community. They inform family members, friends and neighbours about the issues discussed in the group (e.g. health, support services). In *Bouwlust*, the group still meets at the local meeting centre. People that had been living in the neighbourhood for 40 years but had never been to the meeting centre before joined the group.

## Visibility empowers and inspires

The visibility of the neighbourhood groups also has several functions: First, it shows that older people are a visible and important part of civil society and that they have opinions on the development of the world we live in. Second, it also inspires and empowers others to join. The presentation of group activities on social media channels (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn) spreads information very easily to relevant communities. But there are many other ways to become visible, e.g.

articles in local newspapers, flyers, short videos, sessions in public space (see above) or exhibitions.

And last but not least, being seen is relevant as sometimes the gaze of others is necessary to truly see yourself. Visible “products” (e.g. exhibitions, videos) or media coverage help to be seen by others – e.g. peers, families, friends, stakeholders, policymakers – and boost the self-confidence of the group.



*Participants of the neighbourhood group at the pensioners club Hofferplatz in Vienna sharing their perspective on the “Plaudereien” (chats) in a short video. After initial scepticism, they visibly enjoyed the video shoot. See the video here: [→ www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlrLJ-\\_jcKY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlrLJ-_jcKY)*

Photo © queraum

## Example

- 🌐 At the beginning of the project, participants in Ljubljana and Vienna were uncertain if their neighbourhood perspectives were relevant for others. But watching “their” videos, seeing “their” portraits exhibited in public places, reading their stories in the local newspaper and the interest of national media in “their” story made them feel proud.

## Public space shifts perspectives

Joint activities in public are not only helpful for exploring the neighbourhood but also for developing a sense of community and group strength. Furthermore, these kinds of activities contribute to more visibility of older people in the public space which is highly relevant for developing age-friendly cities.

## Examples

- 🌐 In Prague, excursions to public places and new districts led participants to perceive themselves as “visible” and part of society. For many older people, it is not usual to spend time in public space, to go to (new and fancy) restaurants or explore new city districts. In a familiar group, however, they feel confident enough to try new things and contribute their views.
- 🌐 In The Hague, participants broadened their horizons by joining another neighbourhood and by participating in a new place in their own neighbourhood. The experience that there are other groups who welcome you warmly and appreciate you for who you are is very valuable.
- 🌐 As the participants in Ljubljana are interested in the public space as an issue to think and talk about, they exchanged their experiences as regards places, stairs, public toilets or green surfaces in the city. In this context, they have also discussed gender and age equality in public spaces.

## Encourage and empower

Being together with others and being seen and heard, is a prerequisite for active participation and a willingness to contribute. In addition to this general approach of the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project, the project teams have actively created opportunities for participation.

## Example



In Prague, the neighbourhood group met with one of the architects of a large commercial building near the clubhouse. A lively discussion about the older people's ideas for the neighbourhood emerged in this meeting. The ideas were passed on to a local developer afterwards. Some of the ideas: Mixture of uses of new buildings (to have a lively public space), green space with benches, trees, etc., a training park for older people, quiet corners with refreshment facilities, an improved signage system with embedded digital support and information provisions.

## Be flexible and dare to try something new

When co-organising and/or facilitating a group, openness and flexibility are crucial. The facilitators and participants may have totally different ideas of an interesting activity. Groups should be supported in finding "their" activities and that fit their interests and needs. In this way, the participants get to know each other better, take on the role as co-creators and learn from each other.

*In Prague, participants visited a new-built part of the city and shared their ideas for the neighbourhood with the architects. Due to exchanges like these they feel more visible, respected, and heard.*

Photo © Letokruh



## Examples

- 🌐 In Austria, the initial idea about how to start the neighbourhood group had to be given up entirely: Instead of organising an information event, presenting a poster on our project and collecting initial ideas about what could be done, we drank coffee together, had some small-talk and came closer to the issues that were of interest to participants. The idea to start with storytelling cafés was born.
- 🌐 In The Hague, the roles within the group changed each time. Sometimes it was the moderator who came up with ideas, other times it was the participants who suggested a theme or a way of working. As a moderator, you have to be flexible and give space to the participants. In The Hague, participants like to bring something to talk about, for example a poem they have written, a painting they have made or an object in their house that has a story attached to it.
- 🌐 In Prague, one of the participants takes others on city tours, especially to historical areas of the city. She took the lead naturally and prepared an itinerary for future visits. The way, the participants discover the city together is easy-going and encourages others to join.

## Let go

Ideally, a group can exist sustainably after some time – without the support of an (external) organiser and/or facilitator. If this happens, consider your work a success, even if letting go is not always easy.

A very common way for a group to secure sustainability is to “anchor” within an organisation or movement that can provide process support. As many groups need this kind of support, but also a moderator and a safe and comfortable meeting environment, this solution is great.

## Examples

- 🌐 In The Hague, both neighbourhood groups are now included in the municipality’s Haags Ontmoeten programme. This means that structural funding is available to them. As a result, a new group started in a new neighbourhood during the project (Benoordenhout).
- 🌐 In Prague, a group of people started to be active without the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* facilitator because they want to see each other more often. They use different communication channels (email, phone, WhatsApp) to go to the theatre, organise a city tour or a knitting lesson for others.

## Tools and target groups

In the previous chapters, there was repeated mentions of different tools and activities that helped us to co-create lively neighbourhood groups together with older people. In our Online Resource Kit we describe them more in detail and would like to offer them to people and organisations that want to:

- ☁ bring (older) people together, or
- ☁ support participants to bring in their ideas and perspectives,
- ☁ motivate them to (re-)discover their neighbourhood,
- ☁ inspire them to connect meaningfully, and
- ☁ empower them to start and participate in new activities based on their interests.

As mainly older people participated in the *Dreamlike Neighbourhood* project, these tools have been developed and tested together with this target group. However, they are also suitable for intergenerational groups.

## Our approach

The Online Resource Kit is based on the experiences we had the chance to collect in our project. All the tools and activities were co-created by the project teams and the neighbourhood group participants. We tried to transform these experiences into practical “tips and tricks” that help.

The partners and the settings in our project were rather diverse, and this diversity is reflected in the tools of our Online Resource Kit. We have grouped them according to different objectives:

### Activities or methods to

- ☁ invite people to get together and connect,
- ☁ empower to express perspectives, contribute their knowledge, and raise awareness,
- ☁ explore the neighbourhood and involve others,
- ☁ learn and support each other and
- ☁ stay in contact – even in times of “physical distancing”.

www.  
dreamlike-  
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hood  
.eu

*Our Online Resource Kit is available in English, German, Slovenian, Dutch and Czech on the project website.*



## The Dreamlike Neighbourhood Partnership

*Dreamlike Neighbourhood* is an Erasmus+ project. It was realised from December 2020 to November 2022. The project was carried out by partners in five European countries:

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