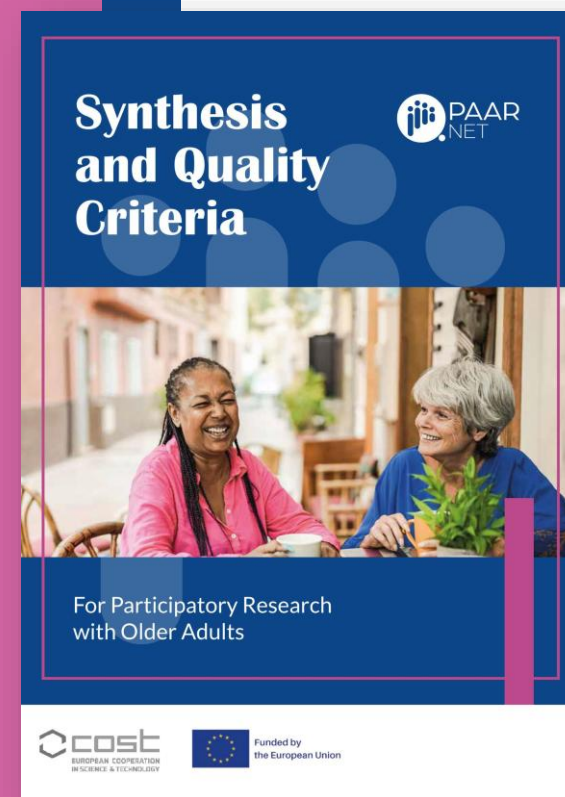




PAAR-Net White Paper 4

Health, Care & Support: Co-creating Research, Policy and Practice with Older Adults

Insights from White Paper 4: Synthesis and Quality Criteria



How this White Paper was Developed

- Based on an audit of various participatory initiatives in research and practice with older co-authors, WG4 provides examples of good practice for the benefit of all parties interested in meaningful involvement of older people (including those at risk of social exclusion) in participatory approaches to research, policymaking, or intervention designs.
- This White Paper outlines experiences from co-production with older adults in research, policymaking, and practice as a means of propelling social innovation across research, policy, and practice for inclusive ageing societies.



Co-creating Research, Policy and Practice with Older Adults

In many European countries, over 25% of older adults report feeling socially isolated (WHO, 2022).



Older migrants make up more than **10%** of the older adult population in several EU member states (Eurostat, 2023).



Indigenous and minority elders face significantly higher barriers to accessing community health and participation programmes (WHO, 2022).



While not statistical, WG4 distinguishes between horizontal empowerment (building trust and networks within communities) and vertical empowerment (influencing decision-making structures and policy).

What we learn in white paper four

Meaningful co-creation with older adults must be underpinned by clear quality criteria and supported by long-term structures. To move beyond tokenism, participatory approaches must empower older adults as co-creators, respect cultural and social diversity, and be embedded within interdisciplinary, well-resourced systems that can scale and sustain impact.

- ✓ What makes participatory research with older adults meaningful?
- ✓ Go beyond consultation — design with, not for.
- ✓ Make roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes explicit from the start.
- ✓ Ensure participation is continuous across the research cycle — from agenda-setting to dissemination.
- ✓ Use reflexive practices to interrogate your own assumptions, power, and influence.
- ✓ Be attentive to context and complexity — older adults are not a homogeneous group.
- ✓ **This White Paper argues that researchers must not only *include* older adults, but actively shift knowledge production to recognise their lived expertise.**



Co-creating Research, Policy and Practice with Older Adults

**Learning for
Practitioners and
Researchers**



→ Challenges



Lack of shared quality standards

There is no widely adopted framework to define what constitutes “good” participation with older adults in research, making it difficult to ensure consistency, credibility, or comparability across studies.



Risk of symbolic participation

Older adults are often invited to contribute without meaningful influence over research design, decision-making, or dissemination. This can reinforce tokenism rather than empowerment.



Power asymmetries in research teams

Researchers may unintentionally dominate participatory processes, especially in academic or clinical contexts, limiting the contributions of older adults and reinforcing traditional hierarchies.



Conceptual ambiguity and varied terminology

Terms like co-design, co-creation, and participation are used inconsistently across disciplines and countries, which complicates methodological clarity and reporting.

→ Opportunities



Establish shared quality criteria

Researchers can take the lead in co-developing clear, transferable standards for meaningful participation, including who is involved, how decisions are made, and what influence older adults hold throughout the research process.



Advance methodological innovation

White Paper 4 highlights diverse participatory methods, from future visioning to embedded co-creation in urban design, health, and digital contexts. These approaches offer new pathways for ethical, relevant, and impactful research.



Strengthen ethical and reflexive practices

Researchers have an opportunity to embed ongoing reflexivity and ethical reflection into participatory projects, improving integrity, transparency, and inclusion, particularly when working with marginalised older populations.



→ Challenges



Structural and institutional barriers

Research funding cycles, ethics approvals, and institutional norms are often not designed for co-creation. Participatory research methods may be viewed as less rigorous or harder to evaluate.



Limited support for interdisciplinary collaboration

Truly participatory approaches often require working across sectors and disciplines, but many researchers face structural disincentives or lack the networks, training, or tools to do so effectively.



Underreporting of participatory methods

Even when participatory approaches are used, they are often poorly documented in published outputs — limiting learning, accountability, and the development of an evidence base for best practices.

→ Opportunities



Expand interdisciplinary and international collaboration

The complex realities of ageing demand cross-sector approaches. Participatory research creates space for collaboration across disciplines (e.g. health, urban planning, education) and countries, especially through EU frameworks.



Influence systems beyond academia

Participatory research with older adults can shape not only publications but also public policy, service design, and innovation agendas, increasing the societal relevance and uptake of academic work.



Build a stronger participatory evidence base

By documenting processes, challenges, and outcomes, researchers can contribute to a growing body of practice-based evidence — helping to establish participatory research as both credible and necessary.



Implementation Imperatives

To make these opportunities real, practioners and researchers can ...



Co-develop quality criteria: Work with older adult collaborators to define what meaningful participation looks like — including clarity on roles, timing, influence, and outcomes. Use these criteria to guide both practice and evaluation.



Embed participation across the project lifecycle: Involve older adults from project scoping to dissemination. Don't limit engagement to isolated workshops or feedback sessions. Build long-term, iterative involvement into your methodology.



Design for inclusion, not just access: Use formats and methods that accommodate different languages, literacy levels, cultural contexts, and digital confidence. Go beyond “open invitations” to actively reduce barriers.



Practice ethical reflexivity: Continuously reflect on your own role, power, and positionality. Build time for this into team meetings and project milestones, and ensure ethical frameworks are not only approved, but actively applied.



Document and share participatory methods: Publish the how, not just the what. Include processes, adaptations, and lessons learned in your reporting — to support replication, critique, and system-wide improvement.



Build partnerships that outlast projects: Nurture relationships with community organisations, peer researchers, and older adult networks that extend beyond project timelines, creating sustainable pathways for future co-creation.



Co-creating Research, Policy and Practice with Older Adults






Learnings for Policymakers



→ Challenges

-  **Lack of Common Standards for Participation**
There is no shared EU-wide framework guiding what quality participation looks like. This leads to inconsistency in how older adults are involved in research, policy, and programme development.
-  **Tokenistic Participation**
Older adults are often consulted but not empowered. Without formal roles, clear influence, or accountability structures, their participation risks being symbolic, particularly in policymaking contexts.
-  **Limited Institutional Support and Infrastructure**
Many participatory initiatives remain project-based and short-term. The absence of permanent structures (e.g. funded national councils, intersectoral working groups) hinders sustainability and scaling.
-  **Power Asymmetries and Gatekeeping**
Unequal power dynamics — between institutions and communities, or between professionals and older adults — can exclude marginalised voices and prevent co-creation from shaping outcomes meaningfully.
-  **Cultural and Contextual Barriers**
One-size-fits-all approaches do not account for diverse realities of ageing across Europe, including regional disparities, migration background, poverty, gender, and disability.
-  **Fragmented Legal and Governance Landscapes**
Co-creation is not consistently embedded in national policy systems. Some countries (e.g., Italy) have structured frameworks, but others lack the legal or strategic basis to fund or implement participatory ageing policy.

→ Opportunities

-  **Establish Quality Standards for Participation**
There is a clear opportunity to develop national and EU-level guidelines on what meaningful participation with older adults looks like, including who is involved, at what stages, and with what influence. This would bring consistency, credibility, and transparency to participatory ageing policy.
-  **Fund Permanent Participatory Structures**
Policymakers can move beyond ad-hoc projects by investing in long-term infrastructures, such as senior councils, citizen panels, or thematic working groups, that give older adults stable, resourced roles in shaping public policy.
-  **Embed Co-Creation in Policy Cycles**
Co-creation can be integrated into the design, delivery, and evaluation phases of ageing-related policy. This would help ensure that services are responsive to lived realities and reduce policy failure or resistance.
-  **Enable Cross-Sector Collaboration**
Policies can promote and fund interdisciplinary working across health, housing, transport, digital inclusion, and urban planning — reflecting the complex, cross-cutting nature of ageing.
-  **Create Inclusive Frameworks for Diverse Older Adults**
There is scope to lead in developing intersectional ageing policy, ensuring that co-creation includes older adults from rural areas, migrant backgrounds, low-income groups, and those with limited digital access.

Implementation Imperatives

To make these opportunities real, practioners and researchers can ...



Adopt inclusive participatory practices in all health, care, and support research. Use PAAR-Net's toolkits, case studies, and cross-country insights to design evidence-based, co-created policies.



Engage older adults as co-creators in policy, research, and practice development and not just as consultees or test audiences.



Mandate inclusive language and anti-ageism training in all publicly funded health and care contexts.



Allocate sustained funding for participatory research and co-creation initiatives—moving beyond project-by-project dependence.









Require intersectional impact assessments for new health, care, and support policies to account for diversity in age, gender, class, and ethnicity.



Require transparent reporting on how older adults' involvement changes outcomes in projects and policies.

WP4 Country Case Study Matrix



Country	Theme 1: Synthesising Knowledge & Quality Criteria	Theme 2: Power Dynamics & Ethics	Theme 3: Inclusive & Culturally Sensitive Practices	Theme 4: Quality Criteria & Infrastructure	Theme 5: Interdisciplinary & Multi-Level Collaboration
 Bangladesh	Cultural Dialogue Empowerment	Cultural Dialogue Empowerment			
Balkan Countries	Older Patients' Perspectives	Older Patients' Perspectives	Older Patients' Perspectives		
 France	PARAGE Project & Delphi Study	PARAGE Project & Delphi Study	PARAGE Project & Delphi Study	PARAGE Project & Delphi Study	PARAGE Project & Delphi Study
 Poland	PROGRESSIVE Project and Aktywni+ Multiannual Program			PROGRESSIVE Project and Aktywni+ Multiannual Program	
 Denmark	Future Creating Workshops	Future Creating Workshops		Future Creating Workshops	Future Creating Workshops
 Italy	National Active Ageing Coordination				National Active Ageing Coordination
 United Kingdom	Uncertain Futures	Uncertain Futures	Uncertain Futures	Uncertain Futures	Uncertain Futures