

AAV - Active Age Volunteering



Belgium Needs Assessment Report

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Project Number: 2025-2-LU01— KA210— ADU-000387284



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

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1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

This Needs Assessment Report has been developed within the framework of the European project AAV – Active Age Volunteering, a Small-Scale Partnership under the Erasmus+ Programme funded by the European Commission through the Luxembourg National Agency, Anefore.

AAV aims to strengthen the capacity of volunteering organisations to design, manage and sustain long-term programmes that engage older people as active volunteers, while reducing the digital divide and promoting lifelong learning, intergenerational solidarity and active ageing.

With this objective, and within the framework of Activity 2 of the AAV project, the three partner organisations have carried out needs assessment activities in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, collecting and analysing reliable first-hand information in order to identify existing capacities, challenges, specific needs and examples of good practice related to senior volunteering and digital inclusion.

This national report, together with those produced by the other project partners, will serve as the basis for the main outcome of Activity 2: the Benelux Needs Assessment Report, which will subsequently be translated into the main languages of the consortium: French and Dutch.

1.2 Methodology

This report combines different sources of information to provide an overview of the current situation regarding senior volunteering and digital inclusion in Belgium and an additional reference at European level. The methodology is based on:

- Desk research on the national context, including demographic trends, senior volunteering and digital inclusion.
- A European perspective in the fields of volunteering, active ageing, lifelong learning and citizen participation.
- A consultation carried out through an online questionnaire completed by nine organisations: seven Belgian organisations and two European organisations based in Belgium, providing a complementary European perspective, working in fields related to the project such as: volunteering, digitalisation, active ageing or adult education.

The consultation gathered both quantitative and qualitative information on existing challenges, training needs, motivations for volunteering and examples of best practice.

2. National Context

This section provides an overview of the current situation in Belgium regarding the main themes addressed by the AAV project. Drawing on public data, studies and policy reports, it aims to establish a contextual basis for understanding the challenges and opportunities related to active ageing, senior volunteering and digital inclusion, thereby supporting the effective design of the project's subsequent activities.

It is important to note that Belgium is a federal state composed of three regions – Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region – reflecting the country's cultural and linguistic diversity. As a result, demographic and social trends may vary across territories.

Demographic Trends

Belgium is currently facing an increasingly ageing population. According to Statbel¹ the proportion of people aged 65 and over increased from 17.19% in 2011 to 19.35% in 2021. This trend is particularly visible in Flanders, where the share rose from 18.29% to 20.69%, and in Wallonia, where it increased from 16.36% to 19.01%. A notable exception is the Brussels-Capital Region, where the proportion of people aged 65 and over slightly decreased from 13.63% to 13.04%. This situation is largely explained by the region's particular demographic profile and the continuous arrival of younger international migrants.

The ageing trend affecting most of the Belgian territory is expected to continue in the coming decades, creating important challenges in areas such as employment, retirement and social participation. As highlighted by The Brussels Times² Belgium's elderly population is growing faster than its working-age population and according to demographic projections from the Federal Planning Bureau and Statbel³, the ratio of people aged 67 and

¹<https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/census/population/age>

²<https://www.brusselstimes.com/1438721/belgiums-elderly-population-grows-faster-than-working-age-population>

³<https://www.plan.be/en/publications/population-outlook-belgium-older-population>

over to the working-age population is expected to rise from 28 per 100 in 2024 to 37 per 100 in 2040 and 43 per 100 in 2070. In practical terms, while there are currently around three to four working-age people for every older person in Belgium, by 2070 there will be just over two, which will pose major social and economic challenges.

Senior Volunteering

This section is based mainly on the V-CALC project factsheet developed by CEV (Centre for European Volunteering), which provides an overview of volunteering in Belgium⁴.

Volunteering plays an important role in Belgium's social fabric and is supported by a clear legal framework. Under Belgian law, it is defined as the free and unpaid contribution of time to a non-profit or public organisation, reflecting both civic engagement and structured solidarity.

Data show that volunteering is widespread, with 9.2% of the population having volunteered at least once. Older adults are strongly represented, with people aged 60 and over accounting for 27.4% of volunteers, making them the largest age group. This confirms that older people already play a significant role in the Belgian volunteering ecosystem.

The system is supported by the 2005 Volunteer Law, regional support organisations such as the Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk and the Plateforme Francophone du Volontariat – both part of the consultation- and digital platforms connecting volunteers and organisations. Expense reimbursements under certain conditions also help reduce participation barriers.

However, volunteering is evolving towards more flexible and short-term engagement, alongside increasing administrative complexity. This highlights the need to adapt volunteering structures to ensure older adults can participate in an inclusive and sustainable way.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion remains a significant challenge in Belgium. According to Statbel,⁵ in 2025 61% of people aged 16 to 74 had at least basic digital skills, while retired people were among the groups facing the greatest difficulties, with only 39% reaching this level. The same source also highlights a clear decline in digital skills after the age of 45, as well as among low-skilled groups.

⁴https://www.europeanvolunteercentre.org/_files/ugd/3ec99c_c015c93bc8ff465a915f482e35252e57.pdf

⁵ <https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/two-out-five-belgians-lack-basic-digital-skills>

Several initiatives have been developed to address this issue. One example is the Digital Appropriation Plan (DAP)⁶, approved in 2021, which aims to strengthen the digital skills of Brussels residents, with a particular focus on supporting older people as a vulnerable group in the context of digitalisation. The plan is structured around four priority areas, 17 projects and 66 actions, reflecting the importance given to this challenge at policy level in Belgium.

3. European Context

Population ageing is one of the most significant demographic trends currently affecting Europe. According to a research report by Eurofound, the number of people aged 65–79 is expected to increase by more than 30% between 2010 and 2030⁷, while Eurostat estimates that the population aged 80 and over will grow by 57.1% during the same period⁸. By 2050, the median age in the European Union is projected to reach 48.2 years, an increase of 4.5 years compared to 2019, and the number of centenarians is expected to approach half a million. The 2024 Ageing Report further highlights that population ageing will continue to have major economic and social implications across the EU until at least 2070⁹.

In this context, European societies must adapt to these demographic changes by promoting active ageing and supporting the contribution of older people to civic life. As highlighted by the EU Red Cross Office in its publication *Volunteering and Intergenerational Connections to Promote Active Ageing*¹⁰, creating inclusive societies for older people requires encouraging active ageing from an early stage, including through volunteering and intergenerational learning opportunities.

Senior volunteering already plays an important role across Europe. According to Eurostat, around 40% of European adults participate in volunteering activities, with participation rates of 19.9% among people aged 50–64 and 17.8% among those aged 65 and over. European institutions also support civic engagement through initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and policy developments aimed at promoting the rights and participation of older people, including the 2023 opinion *European Strategy on Older Persons* adopted by the European Economic and Social Committee¹¹ and the 2020 Council Conclusions on *Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of*

⁶<https://be.brussels/en/about-region/values-budget-and-strategy/strategy-and-policy-priorities/digital-inclusion-review-digital-brussels/2021-2024-digital-appropriation-plan>

⁷<http://www.janwillemvandemaat.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Social-inclusion-Elderly-Eurofound.pdf>

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/80393.pdf>

⁹https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2024-ageing-report-economic-and-budgetary-projections-eu-member-states-2022-2070_en

¹⁰<https://redcross.eu/latest-news/volunteering-and-intergenerational-connections-to-promote-active-ageing>

¹¹<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/european-strategy-older-persons>

Digitalisation¹². Nevertheless, there remains a shortage of well-structured and sustainable volunteering opportunities specifically designed for older adults.

At the same time, the digital divide continues to represent a major barrier to the participation of older people, including their access to volunteering opportunities. According to Eurostat's 2023 survey on ICT use, only 28% of people aged 65–74 possessed at least basic digital skills, compared to around 70% of those aged 16–34¹³. The data also reveal a gender dimension, with digital skill gaps becoming more pronounced among older age groups, where men tend to report higher levels of digital competence than women.

To address this challenge, the European Union has established ambitious objectives through the Digital Decade Policy Programme, aiming for at least 80% of adults to possess basic digital skills by 2030. However, progress remains limited, as only 55.6% of the EU population currently meets this threshold¹⁴.

Beyond technological barriers, societal attitudes towards ageing can also affect the participation of older people. The World Health Organisation defines ageism as the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination directed towards individuals based on age. A research¹⁵ has shown that ageism can reduce older adults' sense of belonging and willingness to engage in civic and community activities, highlighting the importance of creating inclusive environments that recognise and value their contribution to society.

4. Survey Results

To complement the desk research presented in the previous section, an online consultation was conducted among belgian organisations active in volunteering, active ageing, senior engagement and digital inclusion. The aim was to gather first-hand insights on the main challenges, needs, motivations and opportunities related to senior volunteering, as well as to identify good practices and priorities for future capacity-building actions.

A total of 9 belgian organisations participated in the consultation: 7 organisations providing perspectives grounded in the national context, and 2 organisations contributing a broader European dimension. Together, they cover areas such as volunteer management, senior engagement, older people's representation and support to volunteering organisations.

The organisations consulted were:

¹² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11717-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

¹³ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240222-1>

¹⁴ https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/digital-decade-2024-report-calls-strengthened-collective-action-2024-07-03_en

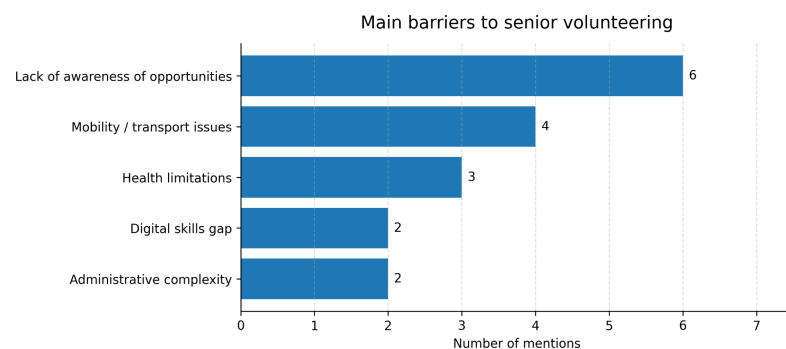
¹⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2024.2348611>

- **Ondernemers voor Ondernemers (OVO)**, a Leuven-based organisation that mobilises experienced professionals and entrepreneurs to support development initiatives and social entrepreneurship projects.
- **Exchange vzw**, based in Antwerp, which engages senior experts and retired professionals in volunteering activities supporting entrepreneurship and economic development.
- **Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk**, based in Antwerp, the Flemish support centre for volunteering, providing guidance, resources and advocacy for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations across Flanders.
- **Plateforme Francophone du Volontariat (PFV)**, the main support and coordination body for volunteering in the French-speaking part of Belgium, based in Brussels and Namur.
- **Vlaamse Ouderenraad**, the Flemish Council of Older People, based in Brussels, representing the interests and participation of older adults in policy-making processes.
- **Belgian Senior Consultants**, a Brussels-based organisation bringing together older people who contribute their expertise to non-profit organisations and social initiatives.
- **OKRA vzw**, one of the largest organisations for older people in Flanders and Brussels, promoting active ageing, social participation and volunteering.
- **Centre for European Volunteering (CEV)**, based in Brussels, the European network representing volunteering organisations and volunteer centres across Europe.
- **Connect International**, based in Brussels, a European network specialised in digitalisation, education, social inclusion and capacity building.

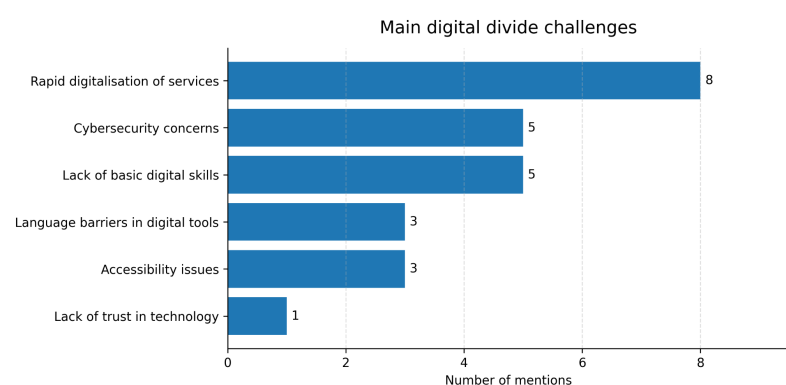
4.1 Main challenges: Main Barriers obtained, including the digital divide

The consultation identified **lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities** (6 times) as the main barrier to older people's participation in volunteering, followed by mobility and transport difficulties (4), health-related limitations (3), administrative complexity (2) and digital skills gaps (2). In addition, organisations highlighted barriers not included in the predefined response options, such as lack of previous volunteering experience, uncertainty about how to contribute, volunteering opportunities not always adapted to older people's capacities, competing personal priorities and caregiving responsibilities, as well as the impact of longer working lives and economic pressures on seniors' availability to volunteer.

Regarding the digital divide, respondents identified the **rapid digitalisation of services** (8) as the main challenge, followed by lack of basic digital skills (5) and cybersecurity concerns (5). Accessibility issues (3), language barriers in digital tools (3) and lack of trust in technology (1) were also mentioned as factors affecting older people's digital participation.



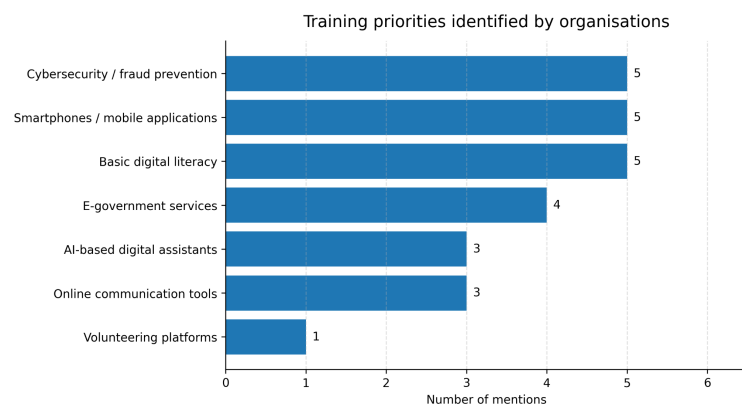
Source: AAV Belgium consultation responses, 2026. Multiple-choice question; respondents could select up to three options.



Source: AAV Belgium consultation responses, 2026. Multiple-choice question; respondents could select up to three options.

4.2 Main needs - Training Priorities

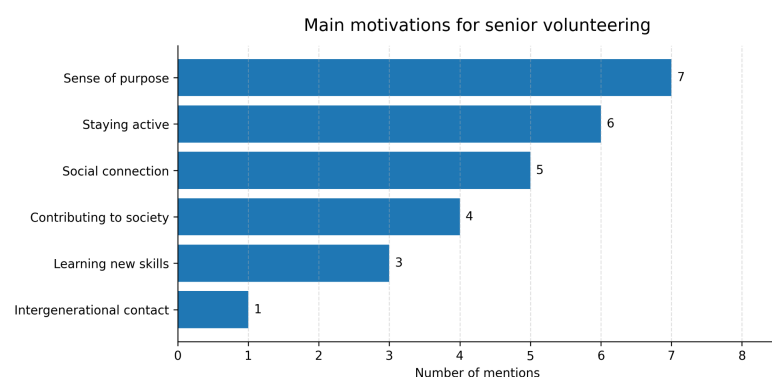
Participating organisations identified digital competence development as the main training priority for older people. The most frequently mentioned needs include **basic digital literacy** (5), **the use of smartphones and mobile applications** (5), **cybersecurity and fraud prevention** (5), online communication tools (3) and access to e-government services (4). Several organisations also highlighted the importance of training on emerging technologies such as AI-powered digital assistants (3) and volunteering platforms (1). Regarding delivery methods, respondents showed a preference for face-to-face and small-group learning formats, complemented by peer-to-peer approaches and practical, hands-on exercises.



Source: AAV Belgium consultation responses, 2026. Multiple-choice question; respondents could select up to three options.

4.3 Main Motivations for Volunteering

The consultation confirms that volunteering is perceived as an important means of promoting active ageing and social participation. The main motivations identified by organisations include a **sense of purpose** (7), staying active (6) and social connection (5). Respondents also highlighted the desire to contribute to society (4), continue learning and developing new skills (3), and foster intergenerational contact (1).



Source: AAV Belgium consultation responses, 2026. Multiple-choice question; respondents could select up to three options.

5. Analysis & Key Needs

The consultation results provide a clear picture of the current situation of senior volunteering in Belgium. The following section interprets these findings while also highlighting the good practices that could inform the development of the AAV project.

5.1 Interpretation of Results

The responses show that digital inclusion is an important enabling factor for senior volunteering, but not the only barrier affecting participation. Most organisations assessed older people's digital skills as basic or intermediate, and several indicated that seniors often need assistance to use key digital services. This suggests that the main issue is not only access to technology, but also autonomy, confidence and the ability to navigate increasingly digitalised services.

Digital barriers appear to affect volunteering especially when opportunities are promoted, managed or followed up through online tools. However, they should be understood as part of a broader set of obstacles. Lack of awareness of volunteering opportunities, mobility and transport difficulties, health limitations and administrative complexity also influence participation. Some organisations also stressed that volunteering opportunities are not always adapted to seniors' time, capacities or personal circumstances.

At the same time, the motivations identified in the consultation show the strong potential of volunteering as a tool for active ageing. Older people are mainly motivated by remaining active, feeling useful, maintaining social connections and contributing to society. These motivations are closely linked to the reasons why some seniors stop volunteering: health issues, lack of support, feeling no longer useful, transport difficulties or reduced motivation.

The findings therefore point to a central need: **senior volunteering opportunities must be visible, accessible, flexible and meaningful**. Organisations need support to design roles that recognise the **diversity of older people**, rather than treating seniors as a homogeneous group. **Digital training should also be practical and linked to real-life needs**, but it should be combined with broader strategies for inclusion, recognition and retention.

5.2. Best Practices Identified

The consultation provided useful insights into existing practices used by organisations to support senior volunteering and digital inclusion. Overall, respondents highlighted a preference for face-to-face sessions, small group workshops and peer-to-peer learning, supported by local proximity, trusted trainers, practical examples and enough time for repetition and practice. Recruitment and retention practices should combine digital and non-digital channels, including word of mouth, newsletters, local communities, websites, social media, volunteer platforms, open calls and direct personal contact.

Two specific good practices were identified. Ondernemers voor Ondernemers vzw shared its experience with intervision sessions for volunteers, combined with events and

face-to-face meetings. These sessions create a space where volunteers can exchange experiences, reflect on their role and remain connected to the organisation. According to the respondent, the practice is successful because it helps keep volunteers involved, especially after the COVID-19 period, and because it includes informal and enjoyable elements, such as social meetings, which make volunteering more engaging and rewarding.

The Plateforme Francophone du Volontariat presented its 2024 campaign on volunteering and intergenerationality, developed with partners and integrated into its activities and training offer. The campaign targeted the general public in Brussels and Wallonia, volunteer managers and policy makers, and aimed to promote an intergenerational perspective in volunteering practices. Its success was linked to working with experts and partners in order to integrate the intergenerational perspective into volunteer management and organisational practices.

6. Conclusions

6.1 Recommendations drawn from the needs assessment

The Belgian needs assessment confirms that future AAV activities should address **senior volunteering and digital inclusion as closely connected dimensions**. The desk research shows that older people already play an important role in volunteering in Belgium, while demographic ageing and the digitalisation of services are increasing the need for more inclusive, adapted and sustainable forms of participation. The consultation further shows that organisations require practical tools to recruit, support and retain senior volunteers, while also helping them overcome digital barriers.

More specifically and connected to the future activities of AAV, the recommendations based on the main findings are:

- **For the Capacity Building**

1. **Train LSC and SPDH to adapt senior volunteering models to different senior profiles.** The Belgian consultation shows that seniors differ widely in terms of digital skills, mobility, health, language, motivation and availability. Future activities should therefore avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.
2. **Provide practical tools for recruitment and retention.** Lack of awareness of opportunities was the main barrier identified, while seniors may stop volunteering when they feel unsupported or no longer useful. The capacity building should

therefore focus on clear role communication, regular contact, recognition and flexible engagement.

3. **Use peer exchange and intergenerational practices as examples of engagement.**

Belgian good practices highlighted intervision sessions and intergenerational volunteering as useful ways to strengthen motivation, social connection and sense of purpose.

- **For the Digital Inclusion**

1. **Focus digital training on practical everyday tools.** The main training needs identified were basic digital literacy, smartphones and mobile applications, online communication tools, e-government services, cybersecurity and fraud prevention, volunteering platforms and simple AI-based tools.
2. **Use accessible and trust-based learning formats.** Respondents preferred face-to-face sessions, small group workshops and peer-to-peer learning, supported by trusted trainers, practical examples, repetition and sufficient time for practice.
3. **Keep non-digital communication channels available.** As many seniors still need assistance with key digital services, future activities should combine digital tools with phone contact, newsletters, local networks, word of mouth and direct personal contact.

- **For the Pilot Actions**

1. **Adapt pilots in Luxembourg and the Netherlands to their local contexts.** The Belgian desk research shows that volunteering ecosystems can differ significantly by territory, language, institutions and demographics. LSC and SPDH should therefore adapt pilot activities to their own local realities.
2. **Make participation clear, flexible and socially meaningful.** The consultation identified lack of awareness, mobility, health limitations and administrative complexity as barriers, while social connection, staying active and sense of purpose were key motivations.
3. **Integrate simple digital support into the volunteering experience.** Since digital barriers were considered to limit volunteering opportunities fully or partially by most respondents, pilots should include support for the digital tools needed to participate, communicate and access information.

6.2 Conclusions

The Belgian needs assessment confirms the relevance of the AAV project in a context marked by population ageing, regional diversity and persistent digital inclusion challenges. Belgium's federal structure, with different demographic, linguistic and institutional realities

across Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region, is important for understanding senior volunteering. While Brussels has a younger demographic profile, older adults play a particularly significant role in volunteering in the other regions.

The report also highlights the existence of a structured volunteering ecosystem, with key reference organisations such as Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk, Plateforme Francophone du Volontariat and CEV at European level. Their knowledge and resources, together with materials shared during the consultation, such as CEV factsheets and OKRA's report on older people's digital skills in Belgium, helped enrich the analysis.

The consultation confirmed that senior volunteering has strong potential, but depends on visible, accessible, flexible and meaningful opportunities. Digital barriers can limit participation, especially when recruitment and communication rely mainly on online tools, but they interact with other barriers such as lack of awareness, health and mobility limitations, administrative complexity and the need for adapted roles.

An additional positive outcome of the consultation was the favourable reaction of participating organisations towards the AAV project. Several respondents expressed interest in remaining informed, contributing to dissemination, acting as advisors or exploring further involvement in the project.

Overall, the report provides a practical basis for the next stages of the AAV project. For CESES, it offers clear guidance for the design of the capacity-building workshops and its support role towards the pilot partners. For LSC and SPDH, it identifies key elements to consider when developing local pilot actions that are inclusive, realistic and relevant to senior volunteers and their communities. Furthermore, the needs assessment has also helped strengthen links and engage with relevant Belgian stakeholders in the fields of volunteering, ageing and digital inclusion.

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