



# Stories of Social Activities

Exploring the experiences of older people  
who participate in social activities

[www.innosi.eu](http://www.innosi.eu)

**innosi**  
Innovative Social Investment  
Strengthening communities in Europe



This project has received funding from the European Commission  
Horizon 2020 Programme Societal challenges: European societies  
after the crisis under grant agreement no. 649189

## Overview

The Government Programme for the Elderly Social Activity (ASOS) is one of the contributing programmes to the senior policy in Poland. The main objective of the programme is to improve the quality and standard of living for the elderly, and to dignify aging through social activity. It has four key priority areas: education of older adults; intergenerational social activities such as recreation activities for grandparents and grandchildren; participation of older adults in social activities such as gardening, interaction through learning, physical exercises with a group; and recruiting older adults as volunteers to support others within their community. The programme is a response to the challenges faced by this age demographic and the social pressures in Poland. The population boom in the 1950s means that many of people born in this era are entering the 60+ age bracket and therefore this policy is designed to enable them to age well.

Working with a group of older people who accessed different provision as part of the Association of Towarzystwo Edukacyjne Wiedza Powszechna's elderly social activities programmes, we gathered stories about their experiences of what such activities were like. In their stories, the people describe the variety of classes available (i.e. Nordic walking), how accessing such classes has changed their perceptions, and the benefits of such activities (i.e. health.). The stories also explain the key influencers in engaging older people in these activities (i.e. the teacher) and also what barriers they have experienced in getting other older people involved in their communities.

## Changing perceptions

A key theme to emerge from the stories is that participating in activities such as educational classes and fitness sessions has changed how the participants see themselves. For example, talking about a language class that they access, [a woman and man](#) explain that many in the group did not expect to learn much at their age, but they did and they surprised themselves. As [Jerzy](#) explains, he didn't "*suppose that at this age [he could] still learn and expand [his] knowledge*". Similarly, [Wanda](#) who is also involved with the ASOS scheme describes how it has given her a new lease of life. Wanda has had the opportunity to take part in different activities such as language lessons, financial and legal aid sessions and physical exercise activities. The experience has enabled her to develop new hobbies and discuss different topics during the sessions. Similarly, [Elzbieta](#), who attends cultural activities and takes part in debates through the ASOS programme, details how such opportunities enable her to share her opinions with others.

event". Aila is happy to be a part of this, as she believes that *"culture brings wellbeing and it belongs to everyone"*.

In terms of physical activities, [Barbara](#) describes how before attending the Nordic walking classes that she didn't do any sport, but now she has become a big fan of sport. She explains that when she has a "day off" she now goes [Nordic walking independently](#). Talking about her involvement in the initiative, [Elzbieta](#) has also tried out new sporting activities such as the Nordic walking and other group physical exercise classes. She describes how this has made her more active. Similarly, [Helena](#) describes how it has had a great *"influence on her life"* and that having a purposeful activity to participate in has motivated her to be more active. A key part in these people gaining the confidence and motivation to try new things can be attributed to the facilitators of the activities. As [Barbara](#), [Helena](#) and [Jerzy](#) outline, it is with support and encouragement from their tutors that have spurred them on in their pursuits.

## Increasing social inclusion

In addition to providing new learning opportunities and the chance to be more physically active, the stories suggest that the ASOS initiative is also about providing spaces for people to interact. A [woman](#) describes that whilst the activities help to keep her health in a good condition, another important part of the programme for her is that it gives her contact with other people and this is helping her to be more tolerant and patient. In her story, [Elzbieta](#) describes how she moved to Gdansk in 2013 and had no friends. Through the Internet she found out about the range of classes available and in these classes she has been able to meet *"wonderful people"*. As a result, both her [fitness and mental wellbeing](#) has been improved. Similarly, [Jola](#) explains how getting involved in local initiatives has enabled her to meet new people. In essence the participants of the programme in Gdansk have fostered strong social connections and a network of support amongst themselves that they encourage others, including their own families, to become a part of.

As other 'User Voice' collections also demonstrate, such as Stories of Co-Design and Stories of Our Neighbourhoods demonstrate, providing spaces in which people can meet helps to strengthen communities. One of the [women](#) in Gdansk describes how having initially took part in a project for seniors who wanted to spend time being active and creative that she then went on to voluntarily organise activities herself. She describes how she participated in intergenerational community integration workshops in how to make jewellery and glass painting, and has since organised meet-ups, such as cinema trips, for retirees in the area. This blurring of the line between a consumer of service to someone who is helping deliver a service or informal community support for themselves and others, is something that is evident in [Juhani's](#) story from Kainuu, Finland. In this story he describes how he originally went to a clubhouse at a time when his wellbeing was not too good, and after receiving support there from other people he is now mentoring new members.

## Barriers to strong communities



Whilst most of the stories reference a strong sense of community, a couple of the contributions acknowledge the barriers to engaging people in supporting their community and its members. For example, one [woman](#) recalls a situation in which a member of her community needed some assistance after breaking a hand. Whilst other residents were aware of this, none were happy to help her for the 2 months that it took to heal. Similarly, another [woman](#) wanted to make better use of a communal basement but struggled to engage people living in the building in this idea. This highlights that providing provision for people to access is only one step of the journey to creating stronger communities, efforts must also be made in supporting people to support themselves.

[Click here](#) to view the extracts from these stories and [click here](#) to view the feature story.

## InnoSI Themes

The ASOS programme is the first public intervention made by central government in Poland, in order to improve the seniors' quality of life by encouraging them to be more active and better integrated into the society. The programme is a Government initiative that is implemented **at regional and local levels** by a range of actors such as public institutions, non-Governmental organisations and community groups. The stories gathered detail a range of activities that the programme provides, suggesting that **personalisation** is a key aspect. The diversity of activities on offer to the older people in these stories provides them with different **choices** concerning the types of support provision and opportunities that they would like. The delivery of the programme is in some ways similar to how the 'Youth Guarantee' is being delivered in Finland (as explored in Stories of Finding Work); whilst it is a top-down, Government programme, key to it is individual choice and options for the people it is supporting. More so, the ASOS programme in some cases it seems to have been the impetus behind people becoming more involved in their communities [through volunteering and providing activities for others](#) within their communities to engage with.

## Summary of Insights

-  **Providing new opportunities:** A key message from these stories is that the activities of the ASOS programme have provided the people who have shared their stories with us, the opportunity to try out new experiences.
-  **Creating stronger social ties:** Whilst the activities being provided have many benefits such as gaining new skills and better health, one thing that links all of the activities together is that they provide older people with opportunities to [meet other people](#). This reduces social isolation.