

Pilot fiche O2.5

# Combatting Loneliness

## Part 1: The pilot

## **Pilot name: Combatting loneliness**

Located: The Belgian Coast, West Flanders, Belgium



Figure 5: Map of the province of West Flanders

### *Operational context*

The province of West Flanders covers an area of 3,197 km<sup>2</sup> and is made up of eight administrative districts that contain 64 municipalities. West Flanders has a population of 1,195,796. Over 43% of those living on the Belgium Coast are over 55 years of age and the number of older residents has been growing over the last decade. Within the area the number of second homeowners is around 40% and an estimated three quarters of second homes are owned by someone aged at least 55 years old.

Westtoer, the organisation that develops the tourism strategy and the promotion of recreational activities, divides the province into four regions, one being The Coast. During 2016, Westtoer undertook research into what impact second residents were having on the region. This identified that 41% of second homeowners would like to have more contact with local residents. Research indicated that many second homeowners first came to the area in the mid to late 50s when they could afford to buy a property and wanted to enjoy time, mainly weekends at the coast. As they progressed towards retirement some decided to move to the area permanently. Although familiar with the area geographically from their regular visits many had not made social connections locally and this led to a sense of loneliness particularly if a partner died in later years. Recent research had also picked up a trend that second homeowners seemed to visit their

properties less often which had the potential to impact economically on the area unless the trend was reversed.

### *Overview of the pilot*

The key role for Westtoer in the pilot and which the pilot manager was directly involved in developing were new methods of communication to reach and engage second homeowners. Westtoer also worked with local municipalities and made them aware of the opportunity each had to obtain financial support to deliver an event or series of activities to promote social connection. These events had to facilitate social interaction between the older residents and other older people who had either moved to the area or were frequent visitors as a result of owning a second home in the area. Alongside these two activity strands other specific ideas were considered such as offering incentives a loyalty or discount card that could be used across the region and provided older people visiting any municipality within the region with savings or unique opportunities and would draw them to the area more. However, this particular idea never came to fruition due to the reasons outlined above.

The pilot manager did experience difficulties in engaging second homeowners and several options that were explored could not be realised. As a result, the pilot began to collaborate and share information with the pilot based in Ostend.

Over the course of the SAIL project a number of one-off events were developed by some of the ten municipalities that Westtoer worked with. The feedback from second homeowners about these events was very positive. The pilot has highlighted to the municipalities that it is important to fund events which engage second homeowners and encourage them to visit more regularly as this brings economic benefits to the area. As a result, the municipalities which engaged are reflecting on how they can build upon SAIL and are actively developing a range of events to encourage second homeowners to visit more frequently or stay for longer periods of time.

### *Key issues for the pilot*

The pilot found that it was difficult to engage second homeowners as there was no direct way of contacting them such as mailing them to their holiday home. Also, municipalities initially wanted to draw in their own second homeowners and encourage them to stay

and spend within their municipality. This meant that areas could end up competing against each other for tourists as it was not unusual for two different municipalities to arrange an event on the same day. This reluctance to collaborate with neighbouring areas on bigger tourism initiatives had an impact on the pilot. For example, an idea to introduce a regional discount card, which some municipalities already had, failed because of concerns that such a regional scheme might draw tourists away from their area.



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Events arranged as part of Combatting Loneliness Pilot.

## Part 2: Evaluation

## PILOT 10 OSTEND: COMBATING LONELINESS

### *Introduction*

While Move at sea was meant to encourage physical activation among elderly, second project started in Ostend in 2018 was meant to help them to relocate. The target group of this project were people with mobility problems. Out-of-home mobility is necessary for making use of neighborhood facilities, and participation in meaningful social, cultural, and physical activities. From psychological point of view, mobility issues are linked to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Project such as Move at sea are helping to increase muscle strength in this way also improve mobility, however for those people who have difficulties relocating from one room to another, this initiatives will not help. Project Combating Loneliness has addressed this issue by introducing cycle rickshaw (nl. Fietstaxi) which brings daily around 15 people to the meeting center and back home. By doing so, people who have difficulties walking, for instance as a result of a recent hip surgery, can get to places where they can meet with others, have lunch together or participate in group activities.

### *Results*

Relocating has been an unaddressed issue due to an underestimation of the problem. In fact, there is public transport or taxis in Ostend city, so for those who really want to stay active, it should not be an issue. However, for elderly who experience lots of psychological (feelings of loneliness, social isolation) and physical (mobility problems) obstacles in motivating themselves to go out, these solutions seem not quite feasible. The results of the project show, that the users of fietstaxi's were pleased to be able to take part in this initiative. Not only would they admit that a fietstaxi is a "nice way of relocating", but they finally had a "plan for a day", they had "an activity to fill their day with", they had "a possibility to see and spend time with others".

### *Sustainability*

An important role in the project plays the chauffeur of the fietstaxi. Initial idea was to have volunteers driving the fietstaxi, however, according to the project manager of Combating Loneliness, it was

important that the driver is a person who is willing and skilled in communicating with seniors. As the drive itself is an social activity for elderly with mobility issues, the chauffeur plays an important role in the success of this initiative.

Similar to Move at sea, the project Combating Loneliness has enjoyed lots of press attention in Ostend, as well as outside of the city. According to the project manager, cities such as Kortrijk, Gent and Bruges have heard about this idea and are willing to introduce it in their cities to make elderly meeting centers more accessible for people with mobility issues.