



3rd Newsletter – February 2026

# FRIEND: Building strong friendships together – from the piloting to sustainability

Friendships provide energy, enjoyment and support. Social contacts are particularly valuable for well-being and self-confidence in later life. However, forming new friendships does not come naturally to everyone.

That is why the FRIEND consortium is developing a practical toolkit to help strengthen friendships in later life. The programme combines scientific insights with concrete exercises that support people in establishing and deepening social contacts.

FRIEND builds on previously developed programmes by **Tamara Bouwman** (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and **Nan Stevens** (Radboud University), which focus on friendship and social connection.

## Current status

We previously reported on the development of the programme and the training of trainers in five countries: The Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Poland. FRIEND has now launched a pilot of 160 senior citizens in these countries, who are participating in the programme, consisting of seven meetings on the theme of friendship.

## Sustainable implementation of the programme

In January, 40 care managers, care workers, elderly care workers, volunteers, senior citizens and students from the five participating countries came together. The goal? To think together about how the FRIEND programme can be used sustainably.



Among other things, we discussed:

- How do we ensure that trainers remain well equipped and up to date?
- How do new participants find their way to the programme?
- How do we ensure that organisations continue to offer the programme on a structural basis?
- And how can the programme be financed in the future?

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## Discussions during World Café sessions

We used the **World Café method** for this research into sustainable implementation. Participants engaged in conversation in small groups in an informal café atmosphere. Three rounds were held to explore questions ranging from ‘how to reach lonely seniors’ to ‘how to finance the programme’.

The discussions gave valuable insights. As a result of the day, we formulated 22 concrete best practices for a sustainable future for the FRIEND programme.



## Enthusiasm and commitment

What became clear once again during the sessions is how much enthusiasm there is for this topic. Friendship may look different for everyone, but the need for connection is universal!

Bringing together people from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds resulted in a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives.

## What are the next steps?

The best practices are currently being compiled in a report. This report will be included in the trainer's manual and will be made publicly available.

The pilot with 160 senior citizens will run until the end of May. After that, the experiences and findings will be published.

Would you like to stay informed about developments? Then visit:

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

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