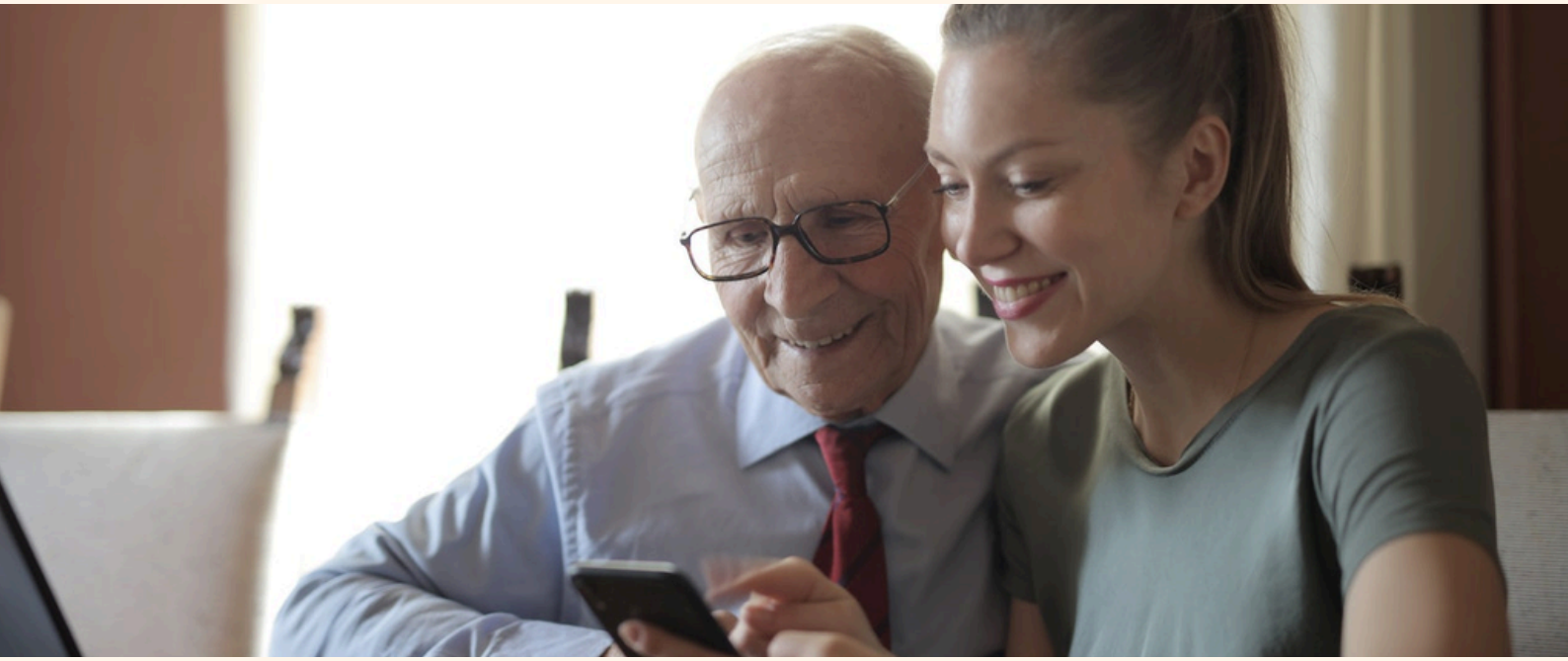
WHITE PAPER

FOR A DIGITAL TRANSITION BASED ON SOLIDARITY



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1. Presentation of the SKILLS TO CONNECT project

In a context of digital illiteracy among professionals working with the elderly and the elderly, the SKILLS TO CONNECT project, funded by the European Erasmus+ program, aims to enable two main target groups—current and future professionals who support seniors—to acquire basic digital skills, and then share them with them. A third target group also benefits from the project's activities and results: the elderly. The overall aim of this project is to participate in Europe's digital transformation by 2030.

The project brings together five partners from three European countries:

- **Croix rouge Competence Nouvelle-Aquitaine in France,** is a health and social training institute which aims to support people, in the development and acquisition of skills to allow them to achieve their potential and contribute to a more humanist society;
  https://www.croix-rouge.fr/croix-rouge-competence/nouvelle-aquitaine

- **POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ - PLS in Belgium,** a European "Think & do tank", which mobilises to defend and consolidate the European social model;
  https://pourlasolidarite.eu/

- **The Central Home Care and Services Centre (CSD) Brussels in Belgium,** which supports anyone who is losing their independence in their home;
  https://csdbxl.be/

- **Arbitryum in France,** a research and consultancy firm specialising in social innovation, which supports social and medico-social structures wishing to develop their organisation towards a more responsible future;
  https://www.arbitryum.fr/

- **ODPS (Obra Diocesana de Promoção Social) in Portugal,** a private institution for social solidarity based in Porto.
  https://www.odps.org.pt/

These five partners thus developed, during the 26-month project, from October 2023 to November 2025, three deliverables enabling both an understanding of the difficulties lencountered in the use of digital technology and the creation of relevant educational materials:

- An **online course** consisting of 16 educational modules on basic digital skills, and intended for people who support seniors in their use of digital technology;

ONLINE COURSE

- A **toolbox** made up of 16 thematic sheets which guide the elderly in their daily use of digital technology;

- This **white paper**, a document that highlights the problem of digital illiteracy and the factors that contribute to digital exclusion, is intended for decision-makers who are implementing digital policies for older adults, as well as anyone concerned by the issue.

All deliverables are available in three languages, French, Portuguese and English, on the project website: **https://skills-to-connect.eu**.

2. Definitions of digitalisation and the fight against the digital divide

2.1. What is digitalisation?

Digitalisation refers to the process by which practices, resources and tools are converted into digital format, thus enabling their dissemination, use and preservation via connected electronic devices.

This change is part of a dynamic that began in the 2000s, made possible by the rise of digital technologies – computers, smartphones, tablets – and supported by the widespread availability of internet access.

A cross-cutting phenomenon, digitalisation impacts all sectors: public services, health, employment, housing, communication, culture, commerce, etc. This development concerns citizens, businesses and public institutions.

Example: a tax return can now be completed entirely online, without physical interaction.

Beyond the technological aspect, digitalisation represents a profound change in lifestyles, work, and social participation. It redefines human relationships, organisational structures, and access to information.

This movement accelerated with the Covid-19 health crisis, which encouraged the widespread use of teleworking and remote services.

However, this digital transition, while opening up new opportunities, also creates risks of exclusion for certain groups. Older people, as well as those living in rural or disadvantaged areas, may encounter difficulties in acquiring digital skills. Bridging the digital divide is therefore a priority for an inclusive and equitable society.

Finally, the intensity and pace of this transition are not uniform: they vary according to countries, regions, public policies, infrastructures and local initiatives in terms of digital inclusion.

2.2. What is the fight against the digital divide?

The digital divide covers various aspects: inequality of access and use, social inequality and lack of skills, and differents approaches depending on the European country.

2.2.1. Inequality of access and use

The digital divide refers to unequal access to and use of new information and communication technologies. This differential access can lead to social and economic inequalities between geographical areas and/or population groups.
Two factors explain this situation: difficulties in accessing and using new technologies. These factors can also be cumulative.
Regarding access, the problem primarily affects rural areas: many residents don't have the same equipment as those in cities. This stems from disparities in the deployment of Wi-Fi networks. Urban areas, thanks to their population density, are favored when it comes to infrastructure development. These gaps are also linked to socioeconomic inequalities: some households cannot afford a computer or an internet subscription.
Even among those with access and skills, usage varies. Some prioritise recreational activities, while others use digital technology for administrative procedures, job searches, or education. These differences in usage can reinforce social inequalities.

2.2.2. Social inequalities and lack of skills

In addition to inequalities in access and use, lack of digital skills appears as an inequality. People are simply helpless when it comes to new technologies and struggle to use them. This problem particularly affects older people who are overwhelmed by developments. In Europe, in 2023, 70% of 16-24 year-olds have at least basic digital skills, while only 28% of people aged 65 to 74 are digitally competent (Eurostat survey, 2024) [1].

[1] Skills Survey for the Digital Age. (2024, April). Eurostat.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?oldid=627685

They are also the least educated and most precarious. The new technologies now used in the field of work mainly benefit the most qualified workers. 80% of people with a high level of education have basic digital skills, compared to 34% of those with a low level of education, or even none (still according to the same survey).

Combating the digital divide therefore means combating a factor of social inequality. Reducing this divide means enabling everyone to participate in society, whether it's entering the job market, fulfilling administrative obligations, or obtaining information.

2.2.3. Converging towards more skills: diversity of trajectories in Europe

Conducting this fight in the European space poses the problem of the diversity of situations in the countries of the European Union.

In the Netherlands and Finland, around 82% of citizens have basic digital skills, while in Romania this figure is 28%. In France, Belgium and Portugal, between 55 and 60% of citizens have basic digital skills (Eurostat, 2024) [2]. There are also disparities in internet access. In the Netherlands, for example, 99% of households have access, in Greece it is 87% (Eurostat, 2024) [3].

Thus, not all Member States are at the same level in this fight. It is essential to target the most disadvantaged and deprived groups as well as the countries furthest behind.

[2] Digital skills of individuals (from 2021). (2024, December). Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/isoc_sk_dskl_i21__custom_9766545/bookmark/table?bookmarkId=e84f0d45-99d8-4a59-9aa4-c4d74fb38f52

[3] Level of access to the Internet - households. (2024, December). Eurostat. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tin00134/default/table?category=t_isoc.t_isoc_i.t_isoc_ici

3. Main challenges of digitalisation in Europe

Digitisation is an inevitable process that is profoundly transforming our societies. However, to ensure that it serves the public interest, it is essential that it be closely supervised and monitored by authorities and policymakers. This process raises several major issues that require special attention.

3.1. Contribute to the reduction of social inequalities

First, digitalisation must be accompanied by particular attention to social inequalities. As previously stated, it is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people who are affected by the digital divide. Since this divide exacerbates socioeconomic disparities, digitalisation must be accompanied by concrete efforts to reduce inequalities.

This issue is also taken up by the European Union, notably in the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles which states that “Technologies should unite, not divide, citizens. Everyone should have access to the internet, digital skills and digital public services and benefit from fair working conditions.” [4]. Europe’s Digital Compass sets the target for 2030 of at least 80% of adults having basic digital skills and at least 20 million ICT specialists should be re-employed in the European Union (EU), including a greater number of women [5]. The differences between Member States should also not be neglected so that the digitalization process is relatively uniform within the EU.

[4] Europe's Digital Decade: Targets for 2030 | European Commission. (n.d.). Commission European. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en

[5] Illectronism in Europe, A digital and social divide, Studies and files from POUR LA SOLIDARITÉ - PLS, Léa Renard, 2023 ed-2023-illectronism_in_europe_-_a_digital_and_social_divide_0.pdf

3.2. Protecting citizens' privacy

Digitalisation raises serious concerns about privacy and fundamental freedoms, particularly for older people, who find themselves vulnerable in a complex and constantly changing environment. As personal information is increasingly recorded, shared, and analyzed by online platforms, the issue of data protection is becoming a crucial issue for this age group.

Older adults, who are often less comfortable with digital tools, may have difficulty understanding the extent of the data collected when they use the internet: browsing history, social media interactions, banking details, personal addresses, and even health data. This lack of knowledge exposes them to greater risks of commercial exploitation, fraud, or intrusive surveillance.

Added to this is the complexity of understanding confidentiality policies or effectively securing their access, which can lead both carers and elderly people to risky behavior: nearly 40% of carers surveyed use the same password for all their access, and nearly 44% do not know how to check the security of an online shopping site [6] – statistics that can be extrapolated to a senior public even less trained in these issues.

Although the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), in force since 2018, marked a significant step forward in the defense of digital rights, it remains difficult to access and understand for a significant portion of the elderly population. In this context, older people can become the weak links in a system of algorithmic surveillance and advertising based on massive data collection.

[6] According to the survey carried out as part of the SKILLS TO CONNECT project conducted in November and December 2023 in France, Belgium and Portugal with 121 people.

3.3. Combating isolation in the digital age: a vital issue for the elderly

Social isolation is a major public health issue today, particularly for older people, who often face loneliness, withdrawal, and even marginalisation in an increasingly digital world. The harmful effects of isolation are well documented: the mortality risk associated with loneliness is comparable to that of obesity or smoking, and it is correlated with a deterioration in mental health, a decline in cognitive abilities, and even the onset of diseases such as Alzheimer's.

In this context, digital technology can be a powerful lever for recreating social ties, promoting intergenerational communication, breaking domestic isolation, and facilitating access to services or social and cultural activities. However, this requires careful consideration of the realities of seniors, their level of comfort with technology, but also their desires and their autonomy.

The accelerated digitalisation of our society is producing a worrying phenomenon: a growing digital and social divide between hyperconnected individuals and those who remain on the fringes of digital tools. This polarisation generates a risk of social disintegration, where older people can find themselves isolated both physically and symbolically, no longer having access to certain administrative procedures, information, or services (health, mobility, leisure, etc.), nor to spaces for expression or civic participation.

However, it is imperative to emphasize that digital technology should not replace human relationships: it must complement and enrich them. Digitalisation can in no way become a substitute for physical connections, visits, shared activities or neighborhood exchanges. Actions of social cohesion, conviviality, local volunteering or local animation must not only be maintained but strengthened [7].

[7] Interview – Stéphane Sheymans, Director General of CSD Brussels, analysis note FOR THE SOLIDARITY, 2023 ed-2023-illectronism_in_europe_-_a_digital_and_social_divide_0.pdf

3.4. Lack of digital confidence among older people: a major obstacle to inclusion

Beyond technical or economic obstacles, it is the lack of confidence that constitutes one of the most significant barriers to the adoption of digital technology by older people. According to data from the survey conducted as part of the SKILLS TO CONNECT project [8], nearly 70% of seniors surveyed said they did not want to access a digital device, citing fear of the unknown and a lack of knowledge of the practical uses that these tools can provide them.

This same survey highlights a series of recurring obstacles that seniors encounter in their relationship with digital technology, such as a lack of basic skills (using a smartphone, browsing the internet, managing passwords); a lack of regular assistance or support, leaving them alone when faced with interfaces deemed complex; age-related limitations, including vision problems, difficulties with fine motor skills or even cognitive fatigue; but above all a lack of self-confidence, with 47% of respondents saying they do not feel capable of mastering these tools.

It is a real challenge to make digital technology accessible to all generations, and to offer skills development systems that value the experience of older people while respecting their learning rhythms.

[8] Survey carried out between September and November 2024 as part of the SKILLS TO CONNECT project with elderly people from Portugal, France and Belgium for the construction of the toolbox.

3.5. The ecological cause should not be neglected

At a time when digital transformation is shaping every aspect of our lives, it is becoming urgent to question its growing environmental footprint. Long perceived as immaterial and clean, digital technology is now recognized as a sector with a high ecological impact, located at the crossroads between technological innovation and ecological transition. Digital uses (online communication, videoconferencing, cloud, streaming, artificial intelligence, connected objects) rely on complex physical infrastructures: data centers, networks, terminals (smartphones, computers, tablets), the production and use of which are extremely resource-intensive [9].

The trend is not towards digital sobriety: The carbon footprint of digital technology already represented 3 to 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions in 2022 [10], it could reach 14% by 2040 [11].

However, the carbon footprint is not the only debate. The life cycle of equipment also generates the depletion of abiotic resources (minerals, rare metals, fossil fuels), the acidification of environments, and the accumulation of electronic waste, a small proportion of which is recycled.

Thus, while digital technology is often presented as a lever for social connection for seniors, it is essential to also address environmental impacts in order to guarantee intergenerational sustainability.

[9] White Paper on the Associative Ecological Transition, European TEDDA Project, November 2023 https://www.tedda.eu/en/resources/result-4-a-white-paper-for-the-ecological-transition-of-associations/

[10] ADEME & ARCEP. (2022). Evaluation of the environmental impact of digital technology in France and analysis prospective. In ARCEP. https://www.arcep.fr/uploads/tx_gspublication/etude-numerique-environment-ademe-arcep-note-synthese_janv2022.pdf

[11] Supporting the green transition. (2020). In European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/862091/Supporting_the_green_transition_en.pdf

4. Recommendations

4.1. For support workers, organisations caring for seniors and training centres

Recommendation No. 1: Offer digital learning activities to older people in order to reduce social inequalities

Digital transformation must be accompanied by an effort to reduce social inequalities, as the European Union highlighted in its Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.

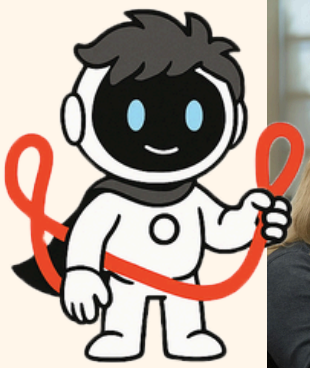
Indeed, the digital divide particularly affects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people, thus exacerbating socio-economic disparities. To address this challenge, it is essential to offer free, accessible digital learning activities for all, particularly in nursing homes, community social action centres (CCAS) and residential establishments for dependent elderly people (EHPAD). These spaces often accommodate people in situations of social vulnerability and are ideal places to initiate appropriate training activities.

These training courses should **prioritise content related to the concrete needs of seniors**, such as completing administrative procedures online, medical monitoring, and maintaining family ties, rather than focusing on less useful digital content. To strengthen social inclusion and intergenerational ties, **partnerships with media libraries could be established**, offering cultural workshops where young people and seniors discuss the use of digital tools. Furthermore, to promote accessibility, it is crucial to **develop visual aids adapted to their needs**, allowing for a better understanding of online procedures.

Face-to-face workshops are preferred. Our experience with the SKILLS TO CONNECT project has taught us that human support is vital for an elderly person, in order to reassure them about their inhibitions and lack of confidence, and to use appropriate supports.

Workshops should not neglect the ecological issue, and it is necessary to raise awareness of eco-responsible digital practices such as the rational use of devices, email management to avoid cluttering inboxes, or the use of reconditioned devices.

By supporting these initiatives, caregivers for older people will not only contribute to the fight against the digital divide, but also to achieving the 2030 objectives of Europe's Digital Compass, which aims for 80% of adults to have basic digital skills. Thus, the development of digital skills among older people must be seen as a lever for autonomy and civic participation, while promoting equal access to digital services.



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The CCAS: “It offered traditional workshops (computer skills, keyboard, word processing), but also open sessions, where participants came with their own equipment to solve specific problems.” “The on-call model works well. It allows for more flexibility and individualized support. The slots are filled very quickly. This shows the importance of these systems, even if they are not always well known.” [12]

“There is also a dedicated place: the “Maison des seniors”, which acts as a gateway to digital services. Advisors are available there. We meet a very diverse public there: some just want to learn how to use an email account or make a video call, others need support with their administrative procedures.” [13]

La Maison des Ursulines: “The Num@tic project, a training course that takes place four times a year in their home: The training will focus mainly on the use of smartphones.”

The CCAS on the ecological impact: “We are starting to promote reconditioned equipment, or computers running Linux, to extend their lifespan. But we need to structure these sectors. We thought about working with Emmaüs Connect.” [14]

As part of its Mobile Digital Brigade project and in partnership with the Brussels Home Services and Care Centre (CSD), the Libraries Without Borders association has been offering a service dedicated to Brussels residents struggling with digital tools since June 2024. "Elderly people have the opportunity to call on free digital support at home provided by a team of motivated student volunteers: the Digital Buddies."

The European Commission: “One of the important initiatives highlighted is the Good Practice Accelerator, which includes examples such as Mobile Heroes in Slovenia. This project consists of mobile digital classrooms that move around villages to provide training in basic and advanced digital skills to older people.” [15]

[12] Extract from the interview conducted online with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, representatives of the Centre Communal Social Action (CCAS) of Limoges on April 15, 2025. Chapter 5 of the White Paper

[13] Extract from the interview conducted in person with Arne KENIS from the Ursuline Rest Home in Brussels, 6 May 2025. Chapter 5 of the White Paper.

[14] Extract from the interview conducted online with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, representatives of the Centre Communal Social Action (CCAS) of Limoges on April 15, 2025. See Chapter Solutions and testimonials.

[15] Extract from the online interview with DG CNECT of the European Commission, CNECT Unit B2 “Coordination of the digital decade” on May 13, 2025

The Porto Reforme Association: "We organise regular courses, that is, weekly courses on the theme of digital literacy, with groups of seniors. The objective is to assess the level and involvement of seniors in the digital world, in order to adapt the content.
We offer courses ranging from the most basic level—such as sending photos, saving contacts, or sending a simple message—to more advanced levels, which evolve over time. For example: reading QR codes, sending emails, etc.
There is also the whole issue of access to medical services via digital means. We often explain how automated telephone calls work, where you have to press 1 for a certain service, 2 for another, etc. We try to demystify these processes, because they are increasingly present in everyday life. [16]

Recommendation No. 2: Train staff in digital technology

To best support older adults in acquiring basic digital skills or taking steps for them based on their abilities, it is essential to **train professionals themselves in advance**. Ongoing training is essential to enable them to stay up-to-date with rapidly evolving technologies. This training must cover essential topics such as the **use of everyday digital tools, managing security settings,** and **protecting personal data**.

Particular attention must be paid to **digital security issues**. Caregivers must be made aware of the risks associated with sharing personal data on digital platforms, as well as best practices for securing the information of those they support. This **includes password management, two-factor authentication, and identifying online scams**. Training caregivers to **detect and prevent cyberattacks** helps ensure more peaceful and responsible digital use.

To ensure quality support, it's a good idea to work with **digital advisors** who can support staff in setting up activities and workshops. These professionals can also lead **awareness sessions for seniors**, while training caregivers on best practices.

Investing in **support worker training** strengthens the ability of institutions to meet the digital needs of older adults while also securing their learning journey. This is an essential lever for ensuring sustainable and responsible digital inclusion.

[16] Extract from the interview with Carina Oliveira, representative of the Porto Reforms association on May 28 2025. See Chapter 5 Solutions and Testimonials.

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The SKILLS TO CONNECT project has developed an online training course for caregivers of older people, available in three languages (English, French, Portuguese): https://skills-to-connect.eu/en/online-course/ . This training is available free of charge.

Maison des Ursulines: “We have two social workers involved in digital support, and a person from the fund who is also interested in these issues. However, even among staff, digital skills vary: some are only proficient with their smartphone or Facebook, but not in sending emails. We must be aware of these limitations to avoid adding mental load to residents and staff.” [17]

Recommendation No. 3: Strengthen local partnerships to create digital support networks

To ensure sustainable digital support tailored to the needs of older people, it is essential to develop support networks at the local level. These partnerships make it possible to pool resources, diversify teaching approaches, and ensure ongoing support, even after initial training. This could include, for example:

- Work with media libraries, mutual aid associations, social centers and accommodation establishments for the elderly to co-construct digital workshops.
- Involve volunteers (young students) in support systems to provide intergenerational support.
- Collaborate with local communities to raise awareness of digital issues and obtain funding for training.
- Organise digital events to raise awareness among the general public and promote the skills acquired by seniors.

[17] Extract from the interview conducted in person with Mr. Arne KENIS from the Maison de Repos des Ursulines on May 6, 2025. See Chapter 5 Solutions and Testimonies.

INSPIRATION CORNER

The CCAS: "**We must also see digital technology as a lever for social, even intergenerational**, connections. We have ideas for cohabitation between seniors and young people, or cultural projects linked to media libraries. In Limoges, certain photo workshops or radio projects already make this possible. Digital technology must not be seen as an obstacle, but as a tool for creating connections." [18]

La Maison des Ursulines: "Our approach is not limited to **visits from relatives**. We also organise **events open to all**, such as **monthly concerts** and **classes given by the Royal Conservatory**. We also have a **large 1,600 m² vegetable garden**, maintained by a local association, which encourages exchanges."
The idea is for the **nursing home** to be a **dynamic place**, where even those who have no connection with the residents can come for activities. We also allow **local partners** to use our premises for meetings or events.
For example, **students** can come and study in our spaces, and **associations** can organise activities in our garden. This openness is reflected in the **architecture**, with **common spaces** that extend Rue des Ursulines into the building. [19]

4.2. For decision-makers

Recommendation No. 1: Support the social and solidarity economy as a solution to digital inclusion

The digital inclusion of older adults represents a major challenge in our increasingly digitalised societies. To meet this challenge, the **social economy (SE)** offers an innovative and sustainable response. By mobilizing committed actors on the ground and fostering cooperative dynamics, the SE makes it possible to implement personalised support systems, adapted to the specific needs of seniors.

[18] Extract from the interview conducted online with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, representatives of the Centre Limoges Municipal Social Action Centre (CCAS) on April 15, 2025

[19] Extract from the interview conducted in person with Mr. Arne Kenis from the Maison de Retraite des Ursulines on May 6, 2025. See chapter 5 Solutions and testimonies.

Social Economy (SE) organisations, such as associations and cooperatives, **place people at the heart of their work.** By creating local jobs and promoting the digital skills of young people, **the SE fosters an intergenerational dynamic that benefits seniors.** Thanks to their local roots, SE stakeholders can offer accessible digital training, aligned with the daily realities of older people.

To strengthen the impact of the SE on the digital inclusion of seniors, it is essential to **support local initiatives and pilot projects** that mobilise SE structures, but also to **promote good practices** from SE projects to encourage their replication in other European regions and territories. It is therefore important at the political level to recognize the value of the SSE and to make it a priority. According to the European Commission report [20], although the social economy is present in all Member States, its degree of recognition varies greatly. A better understanding of its role and improved data collection would strengthen its impact and development across Europe.

Recommendation No. 2: Centralise digital tools into a simple and understandable tool

Faced with the growing complexity of online administrative procedures, it is becoming urgent to rethink the accessibility of public digital services. Today, citizens, particularly the elderly and those in digital precarity, are faced with a multitude of platforms, logins, passwords, and interfaces that are often not very intuitive. This fragmentation increases the digital divide and limits the autonomy of the most vulnerable.

One possible solution would be to **centralise digital tools** into a simple and understandable tool with **clear navigation** and **simplified vocabulary**. Because the digital transition cannot be abrupt, the development of this tool must be accompanied by parallel access to printable formats and physical support (e.g., supported digital counters, local relay structures), so as to leave no one behind.

Models like "**FranceConnect**" or "**Mon Espace Santé**" in France demonstrate that a single, secure interface can significantly simplify citizens' procedures, while ensuring traceability and data protection. These examples could inspire the creation or improvement of a harmonised European portal or more accessible national initiatives.

[20] European Commission, European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency, CIRIEC, Euricse, Spatial Foresight, Carini, C., et al., Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy : improving the socio-economic knowledge of the proximity and social economy ecosystem, EU publications, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2826/880860

This centralisation would reduce the digital divide and improve access to rights. This measure would benefit the entire population, while targeting those most in need, such as the elderly and those in situations of social and economic vulnerability.

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The Ursuline House: "The first option would be for the government to centralize its digital tools into a single, simple and understandable tool. Today, we are faced with a multitude of applications and platforms for administrative or medical procedures.

For example, when a resident goes to the hospital, information is often put on their ID card or transmitted virtually, and we are not always aware of it. Sometimes, residents also do not understand what has been done.
The challenge is to make these tools more accessible and adapted to the real needs of older people." [21]

Recommendation No. 3: Support the sustainability of digital advisor positions

Digital advisors are defined as professionals whose mission is to support citizens in their daily digital uses, such as consulting a doctor or working remotely, but also to raise their awareness of digital issues and to support them in carrying out their administrative procedures. [22] In Europe, several countries have developed funding plans for digital advisors, such as France as part of its national digital inclusion policy, or Belgium with its digital inclusion plan aimed at equipping digital mediators in their mission.
The initiative to deploy digital advisors was a major step forward in the fight against the digital divide. France had 19,638 trained digital advisors as of February 1, 2025 [23].

[21] Extract from the interview conducted in person with Mr. Arne Kenis from the Maison de Retraite des Ursulines May 6, 2025

[22] Written Question No. 2656. (February 4, 2025).
https://www.assemblee- nationale.fr/dyn/17/questions/QANR5L17QE2656

[23] Continue free digital support. (February 1, 2025). info.gouv.fr.
https://www.info.gouv.fr/politiques-prioritaires/batir-de-nouveaux-progres-et-refonder-nos-services-public/digital-advisors-free-support-for-mastering-everyday-digital-technology

This dynamic can only bear fruit if it is sustained over time. France has seen its funding for digital advisors decrease [24] and this could have consequences in the fight against the digital divide. For the elderly, the presence of a digital advisor constitutes much more than technical support: it is a human reference, a source of trust and a facilitator of autonomy.

This personalized support not only allows you to acquire basic skills, but also to regain a form of independence in interactions with administrations or loved ones.

Therefore, in order to guarantee the long-term impact of this public policy, it is crucial to **ensure the sustainability of digital advisor positions** throughout Europe, beyond one-off or experimental funding. This involves, in particular, ensuring stable funding for the communities, associations, or facilities that employ them; professionalizing the role through ongoing training; and fully integrating these professionals into local social, medico-social, educational, and cultural systems.
By continuing to fund digital advisors, decision-makers are investing in a key lever for a more inclusive, fairer and more resilient society in the face of technological transformations.

INSPIRATION CORNER

CCAS of Limoges: “We must continue to fund digital advisors. In France, they are subsidized by the State, but some local authorities are ending their contracts due to lack of budget. These positions are often the first to disappear in the event of restrictions, even though they are essential.” [25]

[26] Digital advisors: the State specifies its financial support. (January 6, 2023). INTERCOMMUNALITIES FROM FRANCE. https://www.intercommunalites.fr/actualite/conseillers-numeriques-letat-precise-son-soutien-financier/

[25] Extract from the interview conducted online with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, representatives of the Centre Communal Social Action (CCAS) of Limoges on April 15, 2025. See Chapter 5 Solutions and testimonials.

4.3. For citizens

Recommendation No. 1: Take ownership of the digital learning tools made available by the SKILLS TO CONNECT project

To become an active and independent digital citizen, it is essential to have simple, accessible tools that are adapted to one's real needs. The SKILLS TO CONNECT project was designed precisely with this in mind: to offer practical results to help everyone, especially older people, take the first steps towards digital inclusion.

The SKILLS TO CONNECT online course will help you improve your digital skills. It features **16 learning modules.** Each module is presented as a micro-course with different chapters (videos, reading, listening) and ends with a knowledge test.

Whether you're a beginner or looking to strengthen your basic skills, **the SKILLS TO CONNECT toolkit** guides you step by step. It includes **clear, illustrated flashcards covering essential everyday topics**: making a medical appointment, booking a train ticket, or making a video call. They can be used independently, with the help of a loved one, or in group workshops. You can use this toolkit to share your own knowledge, using accessible visual aids specifically designed for older adults.

By sharing these tools, you're helping to strengthen digital solidarity within your circle and community. These resources are a starting point for a better understanding of digital technology, but also **a lever for regaining control over its uses**. Using these tools also means being able to question technologies, exercise your rights online, participate in public debates, and access information.

Recommendation No. 2: Be aware of the ecological impacts of digital equipment

While digital technology offers many opportunities to improve our daily lives, **we must not neglect its environmental impact**, which is often invisible but very real. Currently, the curve is not moving in the direction of digital sobriety: the carbon footprint of digital technology already represented **3 to 4% of global GHG emissions in 2022** [26], it could reach **14% of emissions by 2040** [27].

As citizens, we all have a role to play in adopting more sustainable digital practices. Here are several recommendations to reduce your environmental impact:

- Use refurbished equipment rather than new equipment and avoid changing devices too often;
- Recycle your used equipment at collection points or donate it to charitable organisations;
- Regularly sort and delete your emails and online files to relieve server load.

Everyone can talk about it to raise awareness, especially among the elderly; or take part in workshops on digital ecology.
Adopting a responsible and conscious use of digital technology means protecting our environment while continuing to enjoy its benefits. Taking care of your devices, limiting unnecessary consumption, and sharing these habits with others are all simple but powerful steps toward **a more responsible digital world**.

INSPIRATION CORNER

CCAS Limoges: “We are starting to promote refurbished equipment, or Linux computers, to extend their lifespan. But we need to structure these sectors. We thought about working with Emmaüs Connect, but it is not yet in place.” [28]

[26] Assessment of the environmental impact of digital technology in France and prospective analysis, ADEME and Arcep, January 2022, https://www.arcep.fr/uploads/tx_gspublication/etude-numerique-environnement-ademe-arcep-note-synthese_janv2022.pdf
[27] Supporting the green transition - shaping Europe’s future, European Commission, February 2020.
[28] Extract from the interview conducted online with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, April 15, 2025

5. Concrete solutions: interviews and testimonials

5.1. France

5.1.1. Interview with Christelle Roulet and Xavier Ribière, from the Limoges Communal Social Action Centre & Digital Inclusion of Seniors

Interview date (online): 15 April 2025

Christelle Roulet, Deputy Head of the Seniors Unit at the CCAS of the City of Limoges.

Xavier Ribière, coordinating secretary of the social action centre at the CCAS of the City of Limoges.

Can you introduce yourself and explain to us in a few words what a CCAS is?

Christelle Roulet

I have been at the "Pôle seniors" since April 2025, and I am still discovering the overall operation. The Pôle Seniors brings together 4 establishments housing dependent elderly people (EHPAD), 3 municipal independent living residences, a Senior Leisure Activities service, as well as a Seniors' House. It is through these structures that we address the issue of digital technology for seniors. To clarify a little, the CCAS (Communal Social Action Centre) is a service of the city of Limoges which implements social assistance for vulnerable groups, particularly seniors.

Xavier Ribière

My name is Xavier Ribière, and I joined the CCAS in 2021 as a digital advisor. I've led numerous digital mediation initiatives, particularly with seniors. I now hold the position of coordinating secretary for the social action division. Although I have less direct contact with seniors, I remain the digital inclusion advisor. Another digital advisor has taken over my former duties, and a second is expected to join the team this year.

Christelle Roulet

On the digital front, the Leisure Activities department offers workshops. They are often led by professionals or volunteer facilitators. There are also individual meetings called "debugs" to provide occasional assistance with their digital efforts.

Xavier Ribière

Indeed, on the Seniors Centre side, a facilitator launched digital support several years ago. She quickly understood that it was necessary to adapt the content according to the audience. She offered traditional workshops (computer skills, keyboard, word processing), but also open sessions, where participants brought their own equipment to solve specific problems. She also set up thematic workshops around digital culture (PDF, security, etc.). She was able to distinguish the audiences according to their motivation and skills. Some seniors are very curious and engaged, others are only looking for occasional help, such as learning how to do a video call to talk to their grandchildren.

personal equipment to solve specific problems. She also set up thematic workshops around digital culture (PDF, security, etc.). She was able to distinguish between audiences based on their motivation and skills. Some seniors are very curious and engaged, others are only looking for occasional help, such as learning how to do a video conference to talk to their grandchildren.

Do you support the development of digital skills in the older people you care for? If so, in what ways? What activities do you undertake?

Xavier Ribière

We can generally distinguish three profiles of seniors:

- The very elderly, with little digital skills.
- The dynamic, curious, often invested in associations.
- Those requesting access to rights (administrative, health, etc.).

We have to adapt our formats: group workshops, individual meetings, and on-call sessions. Personally, I've led sessions in nursing homes, but it was more difficult. The level of autonomy there varies greatly. We now prioritize more independent groups in residences. The on-call model—where people come and go freely—works well. It allows for more flexibility and personalized support. The on-call slots fill up very quickly. This demonstrates the importance of these programs, even if they aren't always well known. We also welcome people referred by the town hall or other services.
Everyone finds a format that suits them: some prefer group workshops, others individual sessions. And sometimes, what's appealing isn't so much the digital aspect as the social dimension of the group.

Christelle Roulet

There's also a dedicated space: the "Maison des seniors," which acts as a gateway to digital services. Digital advisors are available there. The audience is diverse: some simply want to learn how to use an email account or make a video call, while others need administrative support.
For example, the "Senior Leisure Activities" service has 1,000 members in a city of approximately 130,000 inhabitants. Not all of them participate in the digital workshops, but many have needs in this area.

In your opinion, what could be some ways to combat the digital divide for the elderly?

Christelle Roulet

Funding for digital advisors must continue. In France, they are subsidized by the state, but some local authorities are canceling their contracts due to lack of funding. These positions are often the first to disappear in the event of restrictions, even though they are essential.

Xavier Ribière

Another crucial point: equipment. Many seniors have inadequate equipment, often due to a lack of information. We see people with the latest iPhone who don't know how to send an email.

We're starting to promote refurbished hardware or Linux computers to extend their lifespan. But we need to structure these channels. We've considered working with Emmaüs Connect, but it's not yet in place.

Finally, we must also see digital technology as a lever for social, even intergenerational, connections. We have ideas for cohabitation between seniors and young people, or cultural projects linked to media libraries.

In Limoges, some photography workshops and radio projects already make this possible. Digital technology should not be seen as an obstacle, but as a tool for creating connections.

5.1.2. Interview with Martine Gruère, Vice-President of the OLD'UP association

Interview date (in writing): 23 May 2025

Can you describe your association?

The OLD'UP association brings together people past retirement age who, with their minds still alert, want to share their knowledge and their long life experience.

It is a place for reflection, sharing, action and meeting, a network of exchanges and proposals with regional and international ramifications.

OLD'UP is moving forward on three legs: workshops and discussion groups (talking about ourselves and the world, exchanging, building relationships), surveys and research work (observing, describing, analyzing, proposing), communication actions (giving a voice to the elderly, publishing).

Our ambitions: to give meaning and usefulness to the extension of life, to commit to and contribute to advancing the cause of the "old" in society, to show that living life fully has no age limit.

What are your struggles, your methods for defending the rights of the elderly?

All members of OLD'UP are elderly and very elderly. We are the authors of all our work, our thoughts, our productions (written, as well as videos). All of them come from us. When we speak in public, it is with our differences (due to our ages) that we embody and display - and in the name of as many elderly people as possible like us. Our survey during COVID obtained 5,000 responses from people over 62, the one on "What living environment for our old age?" obtained 1,000 responses.

We intervene as witnesses directly concerned with old age. And almost always we are confronted with experts, with knowledgeable specialists in "Aging Well" who are younger, who claim to know for us who we are (often with a lot (too much) benevolence!). Making ourselves heard - in all areas - is a struggle. While we are 30% of the population and for a large number of us very useful, indispensable for the proper functioning of our society. Elected officials, grandparents, volunteers at all levels in multiple associations... our commitments and mobilizations contribute greatly to the well-being of all. It is an opportunity for all.

Based on your experience, what recommendations would you make to the European Commission to defend the digital rights of older people?

Since its creation in 2008, OLD'UP has been concerned with digital learning for our generations who did not know or use these tools before our retirement. A grant allowed us to work with students. They first taught us how to use the SNCF terminals and then, at our request and with our supervision, they trained 60 nonagenarians volunteers to use the tablets. An educational booklet explaining how to learn at our age and 40 fact sheets facilitating access to digital technology were published and widely distributed throughout France...

We therefore recommend that the European Commission and those involved in this project, if they want to be effective, listen to, involve and take into account the elderly throughout their work AND maintain accessible human relations at all levels to exchange, help and understand.

[For example: I just spent 2 hours trying to resolve a problem with URSSAF via the internet - on their advice I asked 100 questions to the chatbot -number indicated-), in vain; Then I found a telephone number: a robot answered me -in vain- And when I was finally offered to get in touch with a "real human", I was told that I would be called...after 1h30 of waiting, I received a call from a URSSAF professional attentive to my questions. My problem was resolved in a few minutes!]

5.2. Belgium

5.2.1. Interview with Mr. Arne Kenis, director of the Ursuline Nursing Home in Brussels

Interview date (in person): 6 May 6 2025

Could you briefly describe what the Ursuline Nursing Home is? “Like at home”: what does it offer to elderly or dependent beneficiaries?

First, our vision of the nursing home is a home located in the heart of the neighborhood whose primary goal is to create human contact. We achieve this through various means: culture, animals, nature, activities... everything you can imagine.

The goal is to build connections between people, as the majority of our residents live in the city center, where anonymity is a major issue. About 30% of our residents receive visits perhaps once a week, sometimes once a month, and others hardly ever receive visits.

The connection between residents and the neighborhood is therefore essential for us in order to recreate a form of community within our establishment. We design this space as a small, lively village, with numerous activities. Our priority is to foster human connection. We aim to be an open, welcoming place for all, both residents and staff.

Our approach isn't limited to visits from loved ones. We also organize events open to everyone, such as monthly concerts and classes given by the Royal Conservatory. We also have a large 1,600 m^2 vegetable garden, maintained by a local association, which encourages interaction. The idea is for the nursing home to be a dynamic place, where even those who have no connection with the residents can come for activities.

We also allow local partners to use our premises for meetings or events. For example, students can come and study in our spaces, and associations can organize activities in our garden. This openness is reflected in the architecture, with common areas that extend Rue des Ursulines into the building. The residents' room is their home. Even if it's just a room with a bathroom, it's their private living space, which we respect. Our role is to help them integrate into the neighborhood and continue to discover new things, even if this remains an elusive ideal.

The concept of "Home Like" means recreating a familiar environment, even if it will never completely replace their old home and its memories. We know that there is a form of mourning when arriving in a nursing home, but we do everything to ensure this new space is warm and welcoming.

Do you support the development of digital skills in the older people you care for? If so, in what ways? What activities do you undertake?

Yes and no. For me, there is no single profile of an elderly person, because the profiles of residents are very varied. We have to adapt to the people we welcome. For example, we have residents suffering from dementia, others with psychological disorders, some have never had access to education, while others are well supported by their family or have varying financial means. There are also residents with professional experience with digital tools. In short, there is no single category of elderly people, and it is not age that is decisive, but rather the abilities and background of each person.

For residents who already had little computer knowledge before their arrival, it's rare for this to improve with age. Some have great difficulty using a smartphone, especially those with memory problems. Sometimes they forget their access code every ten minutes, and even when we disable the code, they find themselves lost in the interface or press buttons by mistake. This leads to frustration and can become unmanageable for our staff.

Conversely, there are residents who, thanks to their professional background, still possess digital skills. These people sometimes have a computer in their room and continue to use the internet to communicate, for example, by sending an email to report a complaint or requesting information about meals. However, this remains a minority: out of approximately 140 residents, only about ten are still able to use these tools independently. For the majority of the other residents, who suffer from dementia or mental health issues, digital tools can be a source of anxiety.
For example, one woman is convinced that WhatsApp is being accessed through the ventilation and refuses to have a device nearby. Others don't want a phone at all. We must respect these sensitivities.

Some people think it's necessary to install Wi-Fi in all nursing home rooms, but this ultimately only concerns a small portion of residents. For those without family or who no longer have outside contacts, this connectivity is not useful. However, for the small group who are interested, we invest to support them. In particular, we help them find an affordable subscription, as many end up with offers that are too expensive. We also support them in choosing a smartphone, as they no longer go out to do the shopping themselves. We sometimes seek financial aid or subsidies to reduce costs.

We also organise workshops three or four times a year to teach simple things like sending an email, using WhatsApp, or Spotify. We avoid training related to banking transactions for security reasons, especially since many people don't even have bank cards anymore. For online purchases, we provide direct support to avoid mistakes or scams.

We have two social workers involved in digital support, and a person from the fund who is also interested in these issues.

However, even among staff, digital skills vary: some are only proficient with their smartphone or Facebook, but not with sending emails. We must be aware of these limitations to avoid adding mental strain to residents and staff. Technology must remain a tool and not become a stressor. For some profiles, it is preferable to opt for simpler devices without touchscreens, as gestures like swiping or tapping are not always understood. We must find a balance between the real needs and the user capacity of each resident.

In your opinion, what could be some avenues for developing activities to combat the digital divide for the elderly?

For me, the first avenue would be for the government to centralize its digital tools into a single, simple, and understandable tool. Today, we are faced with a multitude of applications and platforms for administrative or medical procedures. For example, when a resident goes to the hospital, the information is often put on their ID card or transmitted virtually, and we are not always aware of it. Sometimes, residents don't understand what has been done either. The challenge is to make these tools more accessible and adapted to the real needs of older people.
I think it would be helpful to inform people about how to use these tools in a simpler way, using standardized materials like explanatory videos. For example, learning how to watch Netflix, listen to music, read a newspaper, or manage an account without the risk of being scammed. This also requires combating spam, which can be a real obstacle for our residents. We also need to think about how to train our staff so they can support residents. We can't expect every caregiver to master all the available applications. We need to make clear choices and focus on the tools that are most useful for the majority.

Furthermore, I've noticed that some digital tools, although created with good intentions, are not always adapted to the residents' profiles. It's crucial to take into account their abilities and context to avoid situations of misunderstanding or stress. In the care sector, there's also a movement towards using AI or robots to support the elderly. We're talking about machines that dispense drinks, smart lamps that remind people to take their medication, or even robots for exercising. At our company, we prefer to avoid this path, because our priority remains human contact. Elderly people need social interaction, and investing in staff is a priority for us.

That said, there are times when digital tools are useful, such as enabling video conferencing with relatives living abroad. We've introduced tablets to facilitate these exchanges, but that doesn't mean every resident needs to own a smartphone. Sometimes, all it takes is creating a common space where video calls can be held securely.

Finally, it is essential to find a balance between digital modernisation and maintaining human relationships. Investing in staff to ensure this human presence is an essential choice for us, because technology should never replace the social interactions that are central to residents' well-being.

5.3 Portugal

5.3.1. Interview with Carina Oliveira from the Reformers association in Porto

Interview date: 28 May 2025

Can you briefly describe what your organisation is, and what it provides to beneficiaries and dependents?

The Reformers association works with older people in various institutions, such as day centers and community centers, as well as with independent seniors who live at home but participate in activities organised by the town hall or local councils. We have volunteer mentors who share their talents with groups of seniors. And these talents are very varied, so to speak. They range from more traditional things, such as sewing, cooking, or macramé, to things

more daring, such as surfing or roller skating. We also receive many requests to work in the field of digital literacy. Our main objective here is to build a bridge between generations, to value the talents of volunteers while stimulating the abilities of older people. The idea is that each activity is an exchange, a moment of mutual learning. At the same time, it helps combat social isolation, which is very present in this age group.

We've also noticed that many seniors want to continue learning and discovering new things. That's why we're constantly adapting our activity offerings, listening to their desires and needs.

It’s about fighting ageism, or age-related prejudice—the idea that some people are “too old” to do certain things, or that age is a limitation in many aspects of senior life. But it’s also about fighting social isolation and loneliness.
The courses for these seniors have grown steadily, and this has helped us a lot in both areas: combating ageism and loneliness. Our goal with these courses is to promote digital literacy, to bring these people closer to an increasingly digital world. And the truth is that these people aren't necessarily lagging behind, but it's also true that there aren't really accessible places or resources for them to learn. There aren't easily accessible spaces or information for them to connect and better integrate into this digital world, which is advancing more and more every day. Many services have migrated to digital—from booking medical appointments to banking, including bank statements, which are now online, whereas before they arrived by mail. So the goal is to bring this support directly to seniors.

What does your institution provide to elderly and independent beneficiaries?

It's about fighting ageism, but also about making seniors agents of change. In other words, they need to stop seeing themselves as passive members of the community, but understand that they are fully part of it, that they can still actively engage and initiate action.
We also implement a "payback" system, meaning that these seniors choose an action of "thank you" to society. They identify a social problem in their community and try to address it in a concrete way by creating an action plan.

In short, the main idea is to make this population aware that it remains active in society and that it has all the legitimacy to make changes. It is also about strengthening their skills, particularly in digital matters.

So, do you support the development of digital skills among older people? If so, how? And what activities are offered?

We organize regular courses, i.e., weekly classes on the theme of digital literacy, with groups of seniors. The goal is to assess the level and involvement of seniors in the digital world, in order to adapt the content. We offer courses ranging from the most basic level—such as sending photos, saving contacts, or sending a simple message—to more advanced levels, which evolve over time. For example, reading QR codes, sending emails, etc. There is also the whole issue of accessing medical services via digital means. We often explain how automated phone calls work, where you have to press the number 1 for a certain service, 2 for another, etc.

We're trying to demystify these processes because they're becoming increasingly present in everyday life. For example, in some cases, a call puts you directly in touch with someone who will direct you to the right service. We're currently doing this sorting work for them because the senior population is often unfamiliar with these mechanisms. Our goal is really to clarify things, to encourage the digital involvement of these people, so that their daily lives are made easier and they stay connected to the world, without being left behind.

What digital exclusions have you identified among the older people you work with?

I think there are many areas in which older people are digitally excluded. For example, doctor's appointments are now often sent by automated message. Medical prescriptions are also sent by text message, and many older people don't know how to use them on their own to present them at the pharmacy. They often have to ask the person accompanying them for help. There's also the issue of family contact. Many older people live alone, with their family at a distance. Many of them don't yet know how to use video calls to stay connected with their loved ones, or don't even know it's possible and continue to limit themselves to traditional phone calls.

But beyond that, there are a multitude of services that are now digital, and older people are being left behind. A very concrete example: today, in many restaurants, the menu is available only via a QR code—there are no more paper menus. Seniors don't know how to access it, and they feel excluded. There's also the issue of online payments.

What are the main digital needs?

For example, digital payments—learning how to make them securely. And also, being vigilant against fraud: they receive automated messages, and they don't know whether to believe them or not. So it's important to teach them how to identify scams, block suspicious numbers, and protect their data. There's a very wide range of needs here.

And what about digital accessibility?

Regarding access to digital tools, most of the group we work with has access to them—especially smartphones. They don't always have a computer, and many aren't attracted to the idea of learning how to use one. But today, the smartphone is like a small computer that almost everyone has at their fingertips. And yes, many do have one. However, they don't know how to exploit its full potential. They don't know how to use the tools they have in their hands. So, in terms of accessibility, access exists, but the skills needed to take advantage of it are lacking.

In your opinion, what could be some avenues for developing activities to combat the digital exclusion of older people?

I think it comes down to information. We need spaces where people can learn, and often in-person spaces, because if people don't have the skills to access digital technology, offering content online won't solve the problem.
We therefore need places for face-to-face exchange, where people can ask questions, bring up their specific problems, in order to obtain answers, and gradually gain autonomy. This is how they will be able, over time, to access digital content on their own.

For this type of digital content, is it still necessary to have someone explain what they are reading or handling?

Yes, absolutely. Because very often, literacy, or even basic literacy, is not acquired independently by many seniors.

So, there is already a difficulty at this level?

Yes, autonomy is difficult in this initial phase. In our opinion, it is essential to have someone to explain, to repeat as many times as necessary, and to create adapted content that gradually allows people to become autonomous. For example, on a phone or computer, each device works differently, each operating system or model has its own specificities. So yes, in this initial phase, human presence is essential to explain the content.

Can we say that working with an elderly population, and the fact that they lack digital literacy, is also linked to low basic education?

Yes, it complicates the process a lot. Many of these people left school very early to go to work and never returned to school. They were neglected in this area throughout their lives, and then the digital transition naturally overtook them.

Do you notice that some people give up easily when they learn something more complex, like emails?

It depends on the case. The important thing is to build autonomy little by little. Don't try to understand everything at once, but succeed at a simple task, become independent in it, and then move on to another the following week. It's also important to go back over what was learned the previous week, see if they still remember it, before continuing with new content.

5.4. European Union

5.4.1. Interview with the European Commission

Online interview with DG Communications, Networks, Content and Technologies (DG CNECT), CNECT Unit B2 “Coordination of the Digital Decade”
Interview date: 13 May 2025

What are the European Commission's priorities in the fight against the digital divide for the 2024-2029 mandate?

With the adoption of **Europe’s Digital Decade** [29] in 2022, the EU has highlighted digital inclusion as an integral part of its digital agenda and competitiveness strategy. The **Competitiveness Compass** [30], launched in January 2025, echoes this development by considering inclusion, skills and access to innovation as prerequisites for productivity and sustainable growth.

As the compass indicates, Europe must ensure that everyone can reap the benefits of the digital transition, regardless of where they live, their income, or their age. This is why initiatives such as SKILLS TO CONNECT are so important. Although it already follows on from the European Commission's (EC) previous priorities, namely the E**uropean Pillar of Social Rights** [31], this priority now acquires a new dimension in the context of growth and competitiveness.

The Digital Decade focuses on four cardinal points for 2030: digital skills, infrastructure security, business digitization, and digital public services. Inclusion is a central objective of the Digital Decade, integrated throughout the program and monitored annually through national roadmaps and the Digital Decade Progress Report. In terms of skills, we aim to have 20 million ICT specialists by 2030 and to ensure that 80% of the population has at least basic digital skills.

[29] Digital Decade of Europe, European Commission (EC), https://digitalstrategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade

[30] Competitiveness Compass, EC. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/competitiveness-compass_en

[31] European Pillar of Social Rights - Building a fairer and more inclusive European Union. (April 2025). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en

The Digital Decade Report [32] has monitoring tools to measure progress towards all the goals. It is based on a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and each year the EC makes recommendations based on the monitoring of results. This makes it possible to assess how close or far Member States are to their targets and what measures need to be taken to achieve them.

For example [33], the average level of basic digital skills in the EU currently stands at 55.6%, far from the 80% target set for 2030. Among people aged 65 to 75, this figure falls to 28.2%, which is significantly low. This may not be very surprising, given the low use of technology among older people, but if we compare Member States, for example, the Nordic countries and those in southern Europe, the difference is very significant: a gap of around 60% between the best and worst performing countries.

We also see a gap related to education: people with a university education have significantly higher digital skills than those with a secondary education. There are also marked disparities between urban and rural areas. In rural areas (where older people often live), access to broadband internet remains limited, with a 20% gap in ultra-fast broadband coverage. Similarly, the gap in digital skills between urban and rural areas reaches 15%. These gaps are particularly significant among older people.

For example, as mentioned above, only 28.2% of people aged 65 to 74 have basic digital skills. This impacts their ability to perform basic tasks online, such as using e-health services, accessing public administrations, or communicating securely. Although the provision of digital public services in the EU is advanced, with a score of 82.3 out of 100 in 2024 according to the e-Government benchmark, their actual use remains uneven. This gap is often associated with disparities in digital skills and user confidence, particularly among certain population groups such as older people and those with limited digital experience, who often experience difficulties navigating digital tools and platforms.

The good news is that the gender gap has narrowed, with only a 2% difference between men and women in basic digital skills.

[32] State of the Digital Decade 2024 Report (July 2024). Shaping Europe's digital future https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/report-state-digital-decade-2024

[33] Digital Decade Report 2024, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/factpages/statedigital-decade-2024-report

In some tests, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) [34] or ETLS (European Education and Learning Survey) [35], girls have even sometimes outperformed boys, which is a promising trend.

Now let's talk about the relevant EC priorities: the Skills Union [36] was launched in April 2025. This Skills Union includes an Action Plan for Basic Skills and a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Education Strategy, including initiatives such as the Digital Skills Academies focusing on AI, cybersecurity, quantum physics, etc. These initiatives are funded by a range of funding mechanisms such as Erasmus+ [37], the European Social Fund (ESF+) [38] and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) [39].

On the other hand, the Gigabit Infrastructure Act [40], funding put in place under the Connecting Europe Facility, the Digital Agenda and a special focus on deployment in rural areas aims to support affordable connectivity, especially in rural areas.

An important technology to consider is artificial intelligence (AI), which has become a top priority in recent years. It is transforming our economies and daily lives at a rapid pace, offering new opportunities but also posing new risks that must be managed.

In this context, the EU supports initiatives to promote inclusion and mitigate digital exclusion. For example, the EDIC Language Technology Alliance focuses on linguistic and cultural access, using AI to overcome barriers and expand access to citizens who would otherwise be excluded. Accessibility by design has also been a long-standing priority. The flagship initiative AccessibleEU, launched in 2023, goes beyond the basic requirements of the Web Accessibility Directive [41] to promote inclusive public services and implement good practices across all Member States.

[34] PISA, https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html

[35] European Survey on Training and Apprenticeships: Development and Data Collection. (2022), CEDEFOP. https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fr/a-propos-du-cedefop/marches-publics/enquete-europeenne-sur-la-formation-et-l-apprentissage-elaboration-et-collecte-de-donnees

[36] Union of Skills, EC. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/union-skills_en

[37] https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/en

[38] https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en

[39] https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en

[40] Gigabit Infrastructure Act, European Commission. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/gigabit-infrastructure-act

[41] Directive - 2016/2102 (2016).https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2016/2102/oj

Trust and empowerment are also central to inclusion. The European Digital Identity Wallet, adopted in 2024, and various national wallets currently being launched allow citizens, particularly vulnerable groups and the elderly, to access their medical records and public services in a single, secure location. These tools are particularly important for caregivers, who may be authorized to act on another person's behalf.

As these services become increasingly cross-border, it is essential to ensure that they operate seamlessly across the EU. This is the role of the Interoperable Europe Regulation [42], adopted in 2024, which supports the delivery of digital public services through a single European portal, thus reducing fragmentation and improving accessibility for all.

What strategies have been implemented or are planned to combat the digital divide in Europe? What are the current results of these strategies and/or legislation?

At the national level, many Member States have inclusion projects, but these are often fragmented and do not specifically target low-income groups or older people. Exemplary initiatives include:

- In Finland, “Equality in Technology” for women and girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).
- In Slovenia, mobile digital classrooms exist for seniors. Slovenia, a small country with a population spread across hard-to-reach areas, uses a van that travels to villages and remote areas to provide digital skills training to older adults, covering both basic and advanced digital skills. One notable example is that of a senior citizen over 80 who, after participating in the program, launched a startup.
- Belgian social connectivity tariffs: Belgium is one of the few Member States to offer social connectivity tariffs. This program allows vulnerable groups to access the internet at reduced rates.
- In Poland, there are national education networks and public awareness initiatives on digital rights.

Despite these efforts, connectivity gaps remain.

[42] Regulation on interoperability in Europe, EU.https://ec.europa.eu/digital-building-blocks/sites/display/EUDIGITALIDENTITYWALLET/EU+Digital+Identity+Wallet+Home

[43] Simbioza Mobiln@ – a mobile classroom on wheels. (24 July 2023). Digital skills and jobs platform. https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/inspiration/good-practices/simbioza-mobiln-mobile-classroom-wheels

At EU level, the **Gigabit Infrastructure Act** [44] (fully applicable from November 2025) aims to ensure affordable connectivity for all. The provisions relating to universal service are governed by the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC). The EECC[45] stipulates that Member States must ensure that consumers in their territory have access, taking into account national conditions (affordability and/or availability), to adequate very high-speed broadband services. In March 2024, BEREC published a report compiling best practices from Member States in defining adequate very high-speed broadband access and ensuring affordability, particularly for users on low incomes or with special needs. The objective is to ensure that all citizens can perform basic online tasks, such as accessing eGovernment, e-learning and communication. [45]

The **European Digital Identity Wallet** [46], adopted in 2025, aims to protect citizens, including the elderly, from data misuse. In addition, the AI Act [47] addresses challenges related to disinformation, deepfakes and potential technological threats.

The **Best Practice Accelerator** is a Member State-led initiative, supported by the EC, aimed at facilitating the exchange of effective digital policies. It is structured around three thematic groups, of which the digital skills group is the most active. Member States share their measures via a common repository and discuss them in dedicated workshops. We are already seeing the first examples of Member States replicating successful practices from other Member States. For example, in April 2025, we organized a workshop dedicated to women in the digital sector. This initiative was particularly interesting: during each session, three or four Member States shared two to three examples of good practices or concrete strategies directly addressing a specific issue. They addressed, for example, the issue of limited access to digital services for older people and proposed tailored solutions.

In addition, we are also collecting challenges as part of this initiative. Collaboration is carried out with public administrations, allowing the exchange of solutions between Member States. The objective of these measures is to ensure that they are measurable, reproducible, effective, and sustainable over time.

[44] Regulation - EU - 2024/1309 (2024).https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1309/oj/eng

[45] European Commission (2024), Digital Decade 2024: Implementation and Perspectives – Part 2/2, Commission Staff Working Document, p. 100. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-2024-implementation-and-perspective

[46] EU Digital Identity Wallet Home - EU Digital Identity Wallet https://ec.europa.eu/digital-building-blocks/sites/display/EUDIGITALIDENTITYWALLET/EU+Digital+Identity+Wallet+Home

[47] Regulation - EU - 2024/1689 - FR - EUR-LEX. (2024).https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj/eng

How can your CEO take action on digital inclusion?

DG CNECT is essentially structured around a legislative framework known as the Digital Decade Policy Programme [48]. This agenda is monitored and maintained through a series of recommendations addressed to each Member State and also at a horizontal level across Europe. These recommendations include digital skills, rural coverage, connectivity infrastructure, digitalisation of businesses, and the uptake and accessibility of digital public services. A Digital Decade Progress Report is published annually. This report assesses progress based on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in the four core areas of the Digital Decade Policy Programme: digital skills, digital infrastructure, digitalisation of businesses, and digital public services.

The funding package includes several key programmes, including **the Digital Europe Programme, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**. These initiatives support, among other things, affordable and secure connectivity, business adoption of advanced digital technologies, and the deployment of high-impact digital public services. One of the main objectives is to provide Wi-Fi access in all municipalities, to ensure free and open internet access for all. In addition, there is a focus on improving digital skills, reskilling, and strengthening essential digital services. The EU also encourages peer-to-peer learning mechanisms, such as the **Good Practice Accelerator**, and supports collaboration through the **European Digital Infrastructure Consortia** [49]. In addition, the **Alliance for language technologies** [50] is one of several initiatives aimed at improving digital skills, including cybersecurity skills.

Moreover, the **European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles** [51] remains a fundamental guideline to promote inclusion and equal access to digital opportunities across the Union.

[48] Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030. (2023). Shaping Europe's Digital Future. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-policy-programme-2030

[49] European Digital Infrastructure Consortium, EC. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/edic

[50] The Alliance for Language Technologies EDIC. https://alt-edic.eu/

[51] European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, EC. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/european-declaration-digital-rights-and-principles

How can the European Union act to support the digital inclusion of older people and their caregivers? Is there any action you would describe as successful?

Despite existing gaps, there are also significant opportunities. For the first time, the Digital Decade provides a clear picture of the current situation, with clearly defined key performance indicators (KPIs). We now have a clear idea of the pace of progress and our objectives by 2030. While current trends show that further efforts are needed, the Digital Decade equips us with the governance tools, shared objectives, and collaborative mechanisms that will enable us to act decisively.

Initiatives such as SKILLS TO CONNECT and structured peer learning through the Best Practice Accelerator (BPA) demonstrate that Member States are not working in isolation. They are learning from each other, adapting solutions, and building momentum together.

Considerable progress has been made, and the next steps are to deepen the qualitative analysis, identify specific challenges, and develop more targeted, transferable, and scalable solutions. The goal is to ensure that inclusion measures reach people where they are, in a way that meets their needs, whether in a big city or a remote village.

The EU strongly promotes inclusion as a fundamental right, regardless of age. It is well known that older people often face a lack of digital confidence, financial constraints, and limited access to digital tools. To address these challenges, the EU has put in place several policy and legislative instruments.

One of the key frameworks is the Declaration of Digital Rights and Principles, reinforced by the Digital Decade governance. In addition, the EU has implemented targeted support measures focused on basic digital skills and lifelong learning. This commitment is supported by concrete measures, including the Skills Union [52], which places a strong emphasis on basic digital skills and lifelong learning.

The EU also supports the development of inclusive digital public services and improved connectivity. Many good practices are collected and highlighted via the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform. In addition, the European Digital Skills Awards [53] celebrate the outstanding contributions of projects and organizations dedicated to empowering individuals to master essential digital skills, for example digital literacy initiatives for older people.

[52] Union of Skills, EC. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/union-skills_en

[53] Digital Skills Awards, https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/european-digital-skills-awards-2025

The Best Practice Accelerator highlights high-impact projects, such as Mobile Heroes in Slovenia, which delivers basic and advanced digital training directly to remote villages. In Slovakia, the Digitálni seniori initiative combines face-to-face and online training with the provision of free tablets and data. In Germany, the **DigitalPakt Alter** [54] runs around 300 local centers to help older people improve their digital skills. Other projects, such as **Emmaüs Connect** in France, offer personalized support and digital skills training for seniors living in rural areas.

The **AccessibleEU Centre** [55], launched in 2023, is a flagship initiative to promote accessible public services and inclusive design. The centre offers more than 300 good practices in accessibility and digital inclusion.

Finally, a relationship of cooperation and mutual understanding between generations, within an increasingly digital society, is a very important issue linked to a topic currently subject to public consultation by the European Commission: intergenerational equity [56]. Everyone is warmly invited to contribute by sharing their ideas. Moreover, the intergenerational equity strategy, planned for the first quarter of 2026, is one of the key results of the Skills Union.

And these are just a few examples.

Of course, challenges remain. Some measures remain fragmented or too limited in scope, and older citizens are increasingly requesting more human assistance in accessing and learning how to use digital public services. Meeting this demand is essential to improving trust, ease of use, and inclusion.

Nevertheless, the direction we need to follow is clear and the tools are in place. Thanks to shared commitment, cross-border collaboration, and targeted support, we are not starting from scratch, but building on solid foundations. The Digital Decade provides us not only with a roadmap, but also the means to make real progress, and the momentum is already in place.

[54] DigitalPakt Alter, https://www.digitalpakt-alter.de/

[55] AccessibleEU Centre - European Disability Forum, https://www.edf-feph.org/projects/accessibleeu-centre/

[56] https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/intergenerational-fairness_en

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The result of the European SKILLS TO CONNECT project, this white paper highlights the problem of digital illiteracy among the project's target audiences - professionals supporting seniors and seniors themselves - and the factors that contribute to their digital exclusion.

This white paper allows us to show that our target audiences can be active digital citizens, to propose recommendations to our decision-makers and to raise awareness of the challenges of combating digital illiteracy and promoting digital sobriety and formulate concrete recommendations.

Who is it for?

For decision-makers who are responsible for digital and elderly policies. But also for anyone involved in the issue of digital illiteracy, particularly among seniors.

Running from October 2023 to November 2025 and supported by the European Erasmus+ programme, the SKILLS TO CONNECT project aims to design resources to train and equip current and future professionals who support seniors in acquiring basic digital skills.

All results of the SKILLS TO CONNECT project are available on the project website or by contacting the project partners: https://skills-to-connect.eu/

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