



Federal Ministry for  
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,  
Women and Youth

*Think, learn and act across  
generations – our future society.*

# Older People and Digitisation

Findings and recommendations from the Eighth  
Government Report on Older People



# Foreword

Dear readers,

“Think, learn and act across generations – our future society.” All our work at the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth is geared towards achieving this overarching goal. It is in this spirit that a number of experts are now looking at a range of policy areas and making recommendations for action in the form of five reports on topics now shaping our society.

The Government Report on Older People is the second report in this series, following on from the Government Report on Civic Engagement. Both documents grapple with the issues of digitisation – one of the most far-reaching transformational processes of our time. When work on the Eighth Government Report on Older People began, we were already more than convinced of the relevance of its focus topic “Older people and digitisation”. The coronavirus pandemic has made the subject more topical than ever.

During this period of social distancing and restrictions on going out, many older people have learnt to recognise the opportunities offered by digital communication and information technologies, and have been making greater use of them than ever before. One only has to think, for example, of all the video calls made with family members, all the digital neighbourhood platforms created to organise mutual help and support, and all the doctor’s appointments now increasingly taking place via video link.

The pandemic has however also made it clear that not all older people have the infrastructure required to participate digitally in society. All too often they lack not only the necessary knowledge, but also the financial means to purchase digital equipment. Suitable advisory services are also hard to come by. What’s more, not all live-in care facilities offer their residents WLAN.



The effects of the digitisation process on life in old age can be seen in the fields of housing, care, mobility and health, as well as in the creation of social spaces. The Expert Commission has identified the digital technologies relevant to all these areas of life, singled out emerging new developments and assessed how such developments are having an impact on life in old age. The illuminating results of their deliberations can now be seen in this report. I would like to thank the members of the Commission most sincerely for their commitment to their task and for their stimulating ideas.

I am looking forward to following the public discussion of the report. And I very much hope that this conversation will give rise to a great many more new ideas to help shape our society of the future!

With my very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dr. Franziska Giffey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr Franziska Giffey  
Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

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Why a report focusing on older people and digitisation?

## Why a report focusing on older people and digitisation?

Digitisation is one of the central developments unfolding in our time. The changes brought on by digitisation affect more than just a sub-group of the population; they impact on every member of our society. The majority of people, including many older people, have become very used to encountering new digital technologies, devices and applications, and to using them across many areas of their everyday lives. Indeed, escaping digitisation and its consequences has become almost impossible: even people who do not possess a smartphone, tablet or computer watch digital television and interact with voicebots on the telephone. A great deal of information is now inaccessible without access to the internet and an ever-increasing number of services are now provided exclusively via the internet.

Many of these developments are still in their infancy; their consequences for the lives of older people are therefore as yet unclear. For this reason, the Eighth Government Report on Older People will discuss the opportunities and challenges that digitisation presents to older people: What new possibilities do new digital technologies offer older people? In what areas are such technologies already playing a major role in the lives of older people? How is life in old age changing as a result of the spread of digital technologies?

In order to find the answers to these questions, the Commission of the Eighth Government Report on Older People examined the development and use of digital technologies in areas of life of particular importance to older people, that is, in housing, mobility, social integration, health care and social spaces. On this basis, the Commission then went on to identify areas in which policy makers can help ensure that digitisation has a positive influence on the lives of older people.

# What is digitisation?

Digitisation has both a technical and a social side to it. From a technical point of view, digitisation is a phenomenon that enables data to be displayed and stored in a binary, machine-readable form. Digital data can therefore be created, stored, processed and reproduced far more efficiently than analogue data representations. The creation, storage, processing and reproduction of such data is carried out using digital communication technology. One important feature of digital technologies is that many digital devices are capable of networking with one another.

All the above-outlined technical changes have consequences on people's lives. Digitisation is changing the way in which people communicate, become informed, consume, keep in touch, work and stay mobile. One therefore often hears talk of a digital transformation of society. With the introduction of digital technology and the internet has emerged a range of new opportunities for people – including older people – to

re-shape their everyday lives and participate in the societies they live in. For example, if your mobility is restricted due to a medical condition but you own a PC, tablet or smartphone and have access to the internet, you can use such devices to keep in touch with family and friends, access information and use digital services.

# Guiding principles of the Commission

The Expert Commission of the Eighth Government Report on Older People based its findings and recommendations on the following guiding principles.

## Diversity in the lives of older people

Key to the Eighth Government Report on Older People is the observation that older people do not form a homogeneous group. On the contrary, differences in people's life situations become even more pronounced as they grow older. In terms of determining people's life situations, the factors of gender, level of education, income, economic activity, cultural influences and social background are all at least as important as that of age. For this reason, when discussing the topics of digitisation and the use of digital technologies, one should take care when speaking of older people as a single social group. On the topic of digitisation in particular, it is important to keep in mind and to explicitly address the social differences that exist among older people when considered as a group if one wishes to avoid making sweeping statements about the benefits and risks posed by digital technologies. The social differences that exist among older

people considered as a group and the diversity and heterogeneity in their lifestyles have already been underscored in the Sixth and Seventh Government Report on Older People, which also emphasised the need to paint a differentiated picture of that group. The Eighth Government Report on Older People will link these perspectives up as they relate to digital transformation.

## The potential benefits and risks of digital technologies

The Commission of the Eighth Government Report on Older People works on the assumption that digital technologies have the potential to improve the lives of older people significantly. Digital transformation opens up new possibilities for shaping life in old age and enabling people to participate society. In its Report, therefore, the Commission focuses primarily on the opportunities that digital technologies present to older people. It does however also examine the risks that digitisation poses not only for older people, but also for their family members and their professional carers.



There are numerous contexts in which the ambivalent nature of the digitisation process becomes apparent. For example, systems for monitoring mobility (using tracking technology) and access control systems installed in the doors of residential care facilities can improve safety for older people. At the same time, however, they may constitute an invasion of privacy and a restriction on their freedom.

So, while the digital transformation process can be of great benefit to people's lives, it is critically important that policymakers respond effectively to the challenges it brings, for example those relating to data protection. They are therefore called upon to ensure that these benefits can be exploited in full and the risks kept to a minimum.

The ambivalence of the digital transformation process is also apparent in the widely varying degrees to which it has been implemented in different fields. For example, prototypes and design concepts based on such complex technologies as robotics and artificial intelligence are today quite commonplace in nursing care. Yet, on the other hand, in the nursing home sector, only

a relatively small percentage of providers offer their residents internet access and WLAN.

## Inequality through digitisation

The lifestyle diversity that exists among older generations is reflected particularly well in the way these generations use digital technologies. Thus proving the importance of maintaining a differentiated view of the topic. Many older people enjoy grappling with the challenges of the internet and digital technologies, trying out new devices and applications and using internet-based forms of communication. There are, however, others who have no desire to use digital technologies or the internet. And then there are those who do not have the opportunity to use such technologies. This may be because they cannot afford the equipment or internet access, because the information and support they need are not available, because they have no internet access in their homes, or because they live in an area where high-performance internet is not yet available.

The differences that exist between various sections of the population in terms of access to the

internet and use of digital technologies are often collectively referred to as the “digital divide”. As compared with other age groups, older people are much more likely to lack the ability and the opportunities to use digital technologies. It is the opinion of the Commission on the Eighth Government Report on Older People that this relatively large proportion of older people without access to the internet is a phenomenon that should not be tolerated.

### Digital competences

The Eighth Government Report on Older People bases its conclusions on the assumption that older people, just like people in other age groups, are quite capable of shaping their lives competently and responsibly within the framework of the possibilities and social networks available to them as individuals. Precisely in the context of digital technologies, this competence-oriented view of human beings is not self-evident: older people are all too frequently portrayed as being unable to keep up with technical changes, as having a negative attitude to innovations and as reacting merely passively and well after the fact to all such developments. Against this, the Expert Commission has chosen a perspective according to which

older people are generally capable of acting with competence and self-determination in the digital world. Those who cannot acquire for themselves the digital skills that they need should be provided with the necessary support and advice.

### Further research into the use and impact of digital technologies

A great many resources are being invested in the development and dissemination of digital technologies with older people in mind as the target group. This effort is usually justified by the fact that digital technologies have the potential to promote independent living, create a greater sense of participation in society, bolster nursing care and, in general, improve quality of life for older people. However, the Eighth Government Report on Older People calls attention to the severe lack of scientific studies providing a solid empirical basis upon which to assess the effects of digital technologies on the quality of life of older people. As yet, there is no empirical evidence to show that use of digital technologies improves quality of life for older people in the areas examined by the Eighth Government Report on Older People.

## Shaping the digital transformation

The Eighth Government Report on Older People aims to trigger social discourse on how people in Germany would like to live in old age during the digital age. Its approach is based on the assumption that older people are anything but helpless in the face of the digital transformation. In making its appeal for actors to become actively involved in shaping digital change, the Expert Commission for the Government Report on Older People simultaneously addresses actors on three levels: that of the individual, that of institutions and organisations, and that of society as a whole.

On the individual level, questions surrounding skills in handling and acceptance of digital technologies are of enormous importance. Where older people, their family members and their other caregivers (family doctors and in-home caregivers, for example) either do not possess the necessary skills to use the available technologies or are unwilling to accept them, even very mature technological offerings will be unable to make any impact.

On the level of institutions and organisations, the Commission addresses actors working in structures involved in service and care provision who are responsible for deploying digital technologies and who share responsibility for imparting the skills that individuals need to effectively use such technologies.

On the level of society as a whole, it is crucial that binding rules be established within which the digital transformation can be framed and shaped. The issues to be dealt with here include the legal underpinnings in relation to data protection, responsibilities, finances and social security.



# Digital participation

Across many areas of life, participation in society is dependent on having access to the internet and the associated digital technologies, as well as the skills to effectively use such technologies.

Digital technologies and the internet can only benefit people if they have access to such technology, a willingness to accept it, and the ability to use it appropriately. Having access requires a person to have not only the necessary technical infrastructure at his/her disposal (he/she must live somewhere where the internet is available and have connection to the internet), but also the financial means to afford them. Knowledge about the digital products and systems available, and the ability to use them to meet one's needs are also important factors in digital ownership. These prerequisites do not apply to the same degree to everyone. The differences between different sections of the population in this regard are often collectively referred to as the "digital gap" or "digital divide".

Many studies have shown that, while ever more older people have been using the internet over the last few years, the digital gap between younger and older people remains a large one. While the proportion of retirement-age people with access to the internet is now quite high (over 80 percent), people in their mid-70s are much less likely to have internet access. At the same time, however, there are clear and significant differences to be seen within the collective of older people. Older people with lower and medium levels of education either use digital technology significantly less often or are significantly less skilled at using it than those with higher levels of education. These differences increase with age: while differences in levels of digital skill are now relatively small between people of varying educational attainment before retirement age, they remain very large for older people from around 67 years of age upwards (see graphic).

## Digital participation

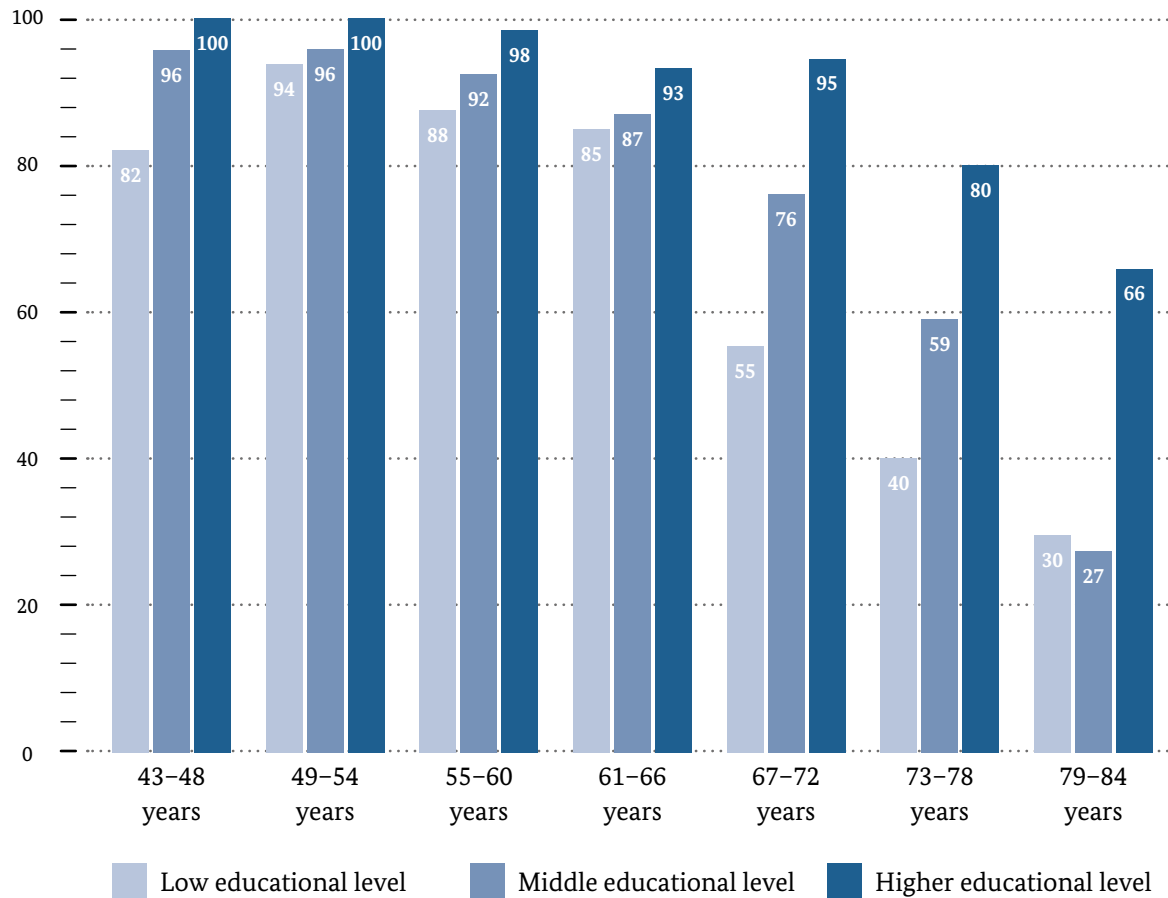


Illustration: Proportion of people with access to the internet by age group and education (2017, in percent)

Source: Huxhold, O. and Otte K. (2019): Zugang zum Internet und Nutzung des Internets in der zweiten Lebenshälfte [Access to the internet and use of the internet in the second half of life]. DZA Aktuell. Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen [German Centre of Gerontology]. Based on data from: DEAS 2017, weighted, (n = 5246).

Older people's (past) professional and technical biographies also play a role in their degree of competence in the use of digital technologies. Mainly older people with a high level of education have had the benefit of coming into contact with digital technologies during their working lives.

One can also see clear gender differences. For example, although increasing numbers of older women are using the internet, women made up just under 40 percent of over-80s actively using the internet in 2018, despite the fact that they account for two thirds of the older population in this age group overall. This difference between men and women is due not only to their traditional roles, but also to the professional biographies of women. Older women have more often had less intensive, less technical professional careers than men, and may sometimes have no employment history at all. They also tend to have earned less in their jobs and, in their old age, have less money at their disposal than men of the same age.

The relative share of the population without access to the internet and digital technologies is particularly high among migrants – a phenomenon attributable to the above-average number of migrants of low socio-economic status. For many older migrants, insufficient command of the German language and experiences of exclusion and discrimination are further barriers to using the internet. Infrastructural differences between urban and rural regions and between the various Länder also have an impact on the dissemination and use of digital technologies. All in all, it is clear that there is often interaction and reinforcement between the various dimensions of inequality; that is to say, for many older people, access to and use of digital technologies is hampered by a multiplicity of intersecting features of social inequality.

Barriers to accessing and using the internet must be removed if we are to reduce the digital divide and avoid digitally excluding certain groups of older people. There is a need to support socially disadvantaged older people through, in particular, financial assistance and low-threshold information and education services created specifically for that target group.





# The digitisation of older people's living environments

The Eighth Government Report on Older People looks into the effects of digitisation on the lives of older people in six different facets of life and fields of action that are of particular importance to older people. To this end, the Expert Commission has evaluated relevant scientific studies and gathered together a number of findings on the dissemination, use and impact of digital technologies.

## Housing: Living in security and independence

Housing is one of the most important basic needs of older people. Many older people, and especially very old people, spend a large proportion of their time in their own homes. They have often been living in their home for many years and have developed an emotional bond with it. Their home gives them a sense of security and self-reliance. Even where they begin to need outside help and support, most older people want to avoid moving and therefore tend to be averse to the idea of live-in care facilities.

Digital technologies can serve to support independent living under one's own roof, thus enabling people to remain in their own homes even after they begin to need care. Technical assistance systems and what are often referred to as smart home technologies, which can be connected to the internet as well as networked into one another, are often deployed to facilitate continued independent living. The fields of application of such technologies are many and various. They include, for example, systems designed to improve safety in the home (systems to detect falls and to protect against fire, as well as intelligent door-opening and lighting systems, to give a few examples). Other systems can help with household chores (robots for vacuum-cleaning and lawn-mowing, for example) and provide support for health or nursing care (non-contact sensor devices to measure vital signs, as well as telemedicine and telecare systems). It is also possible to book and/or carry out administration and services from home with the help of digital technologies (to call out tradespeople or order deliveries, for example).

## The digitisation of older people's living environments

Some of these systems send messages and data over the internet to family members, carers, health services and service providers. Obviously, such systems can only work in homes equipped with internet access. This fact makes it all the more problematic that large numbers of very old people have no internet access in their homes.

Many older people and their family members would be happy to acquire and use digital technologies to support a more independent lifestyle in the home. All too frequently, however, their enthusiasm in this regard is stymied by a lack of information and advice, and often by the high acquisition and operating costs involved. The housing industry (especially construction companies and housing cooperatives) plays a central role in fitting out homes with smart home technologies and assistance systems. Indeed, such organisations are perhaps the most important players in terms of providing digitally equipped living space. The housing industry is in a far better position than individuals to demand high standards in terms of safety, quality and service from technology providers and to thus create a consumer protection shield in the interests of tenants. Enforcing such standards relieves older people of the responsibility of having to select, maintain and ensure the correct functioning of such equipment.

However, the housing industry needs support in this area. Here, federal or local government support programmes could create incentives, for example, by encouraging companies to combine the tasks of eliminating structural barriers in living spaces with that of installing suitable technical assistance systems for everyday life.

Yet it will only be possible to fully exploit the potential of digital assistance technologies if the people living in these homes are in a position to operate such devices. System designs therefore need to be user-friendly and as self-explanatory as possible. At the same time, residents will need to have at least basic digital skills (in using smartphones or tablets as interfaces to assistance systems, for example) or develop these through corresponding lessons. Nevertheless, it will always be essential to ensure that easily accessible and speedy technical support is in place. Assistance systems requiring an internet connection will need to meet high standards in terms of data privacy and security.

There is a growing awareness that residents of live-in care facilities have just as much a right as others to access the internet and digital services. Such facilities should be equipped with basic WLAN installations to allow residents to use their digital devices to access information, to upload and download music and films, to use a virtual assistant and to communicate via video connection with friends and relatives.

Although smart-home systems and technical assistance systems are often said to have the potential to help older people live in their own homes for longer and thus postpone moves to live-in care facilities, there remains a lack of conclusive scientific evidence for this claim.



## Mobility: Maintaining independence

Quality of life in old age depends to a large extent on whether older people possess the capacity to move about independently within and outside the home, to maintain their social contacts and to receive medical treatment. At the same time, the risk that individual mobility becomes restricted increases as people get older. Digital technologies can be used to help restore lost mobility and to monitor the mobility of older people and, in this context, can be used to prevent falls, for example.

Through the work done in various research projects, a considerable variety of assistance systems have now been developed to support the mobility of older people. Some of these systems are available on the market and have been deployed for use in everyday life or as part of an individual's healthcare regime. The broad spectrum of offerings includes support systems that assist older people in terms of general mobility (e-bikes, assistance systems in vehicles and mobility apps, for example), systems specially designed to assist people with reduced mobility (including such products as smart wheelchairs and exoskeletons), and systems for restoring or maintaining walking ability and balance (exergame systems and wearables, for example). In addition to such offerings, there are also systems

designed to monitor and ensure safety for mobility (tracking systems or smart locking systems, for example), as well as arrangements to prevent loss of mobility (sensor mats for fall detection and wearable activity systems, for example).

Increasing numbers of people of all ages are using activity and sports monitoring systems both to boost their own mobility and as aids to preventive healthcare. Such systems collect data on physical activity (including number of steps taken, gradients and distances covered) and measure vital signs (such as heart rate, oxygen saturation, etc.) to check and evaluate the wearer's activity and health data. However, the complexity and variety of the mobile sensors and smartphone apps used for this purpose, combined with their sometimes poor user-friendliness, often present an almost insuperable barrier to people with little technical experience. As these technologies become ever more widespread, the risk that older people may feel an obligation to become or remain active and mobile increases.

Systems for monitoring mobility and physical activity are becoming increasingly common in the care sector. Such arrangements, often referred to as "tracking systems", are deployed both in private homes and in live-in care facilities, where they are

particularly useful in locating older people suffering from dementia. Here, they automatically monitor residents' entries and exits, and call for help quickly in an emergency. However, such access and monitoring systems can be problematic if the subjects of such systems begin to feel that they are restricting their autonomy or exposing them to inappropriate monitoring. Such technologies should therefore only be deployed with the consent of the people being put under surveillance. Such consent is not always obtainable, however, especially in the case of people with dementia. This in turn gives rise to ethical issues.

Technical solutions such as robotic exoskeletons are now being used in some clinics as part of geriatric rehabilitation treatment. Such mobility assistance systems, which provide support for particular parts of the body such as back muscles, giving them additional strength in movement, are now widely regarded to be safe and helpful and can be used not just to remedy mobility impairments in older people, but also by caregivers themselves to protect against back problems. Games often referred to as "serious games" or "exergames", designed to help improve a user's balance and walking ability, are also increasingly being used in rehabilitation clinics and live-in care facilities.

## The digitisation of older people's living environments

Work is also underway on technology-supported public transport services that enable older and mobility-impaired people to enjoy individualised, barrier-free mobility by means of digital technologies. For example, mobility platforms can be used to provide information on accessibility and public transport schedules, carpooling opportunities and possible obstacles to mobility. Intensive research is also being conducted into the use of navigation systems that help older people find their way around outside the home.

Among the most successful innovations in mobility in recent years is the e-bike, which, on top of its role in transforming the way many older people maintain their mobility, has also debunked the widespread image of older people as being hesitant to adopt new technologies and innovations. Moreover, older people now commonly use assistance systems in motor vehicles. Digital parking assistance systems serve to help drivers with restricted mobility in the shoulder and neck areas, and devices like proximity control thermostats, automatic emergency braking and cornering assistants can make driving safer and more relaxed for people with age-related conditions.

Aside from the already established technologies mentioned above, the future has yet to reveal what role virtual mobility can play in improving quality of life for older people – when, for example, virtual hiking on the mountainside will replace real-life mountain trekking as the latter becomes impossible due to health impairments. And in a few years' time, the role to be played by autonomous vehicles in maintaining motorised mobility for older people is likely to become clear.



## Social integration: Still together – but differently

Social relationships play a hugely important part in quality of life throughout any person's life. Older people's relationships with family members, friends and neighbours provide them with emotional support, practical help and financial assistance. Social relations also provide the essential basis for social activities and for sharing ideas and information.

As people grow older, their social networks tend to become smaller. The likelihood of becoming socially isolated therefore also increases significantly with age. A person is defined as socially isolated if he or she experiences few contacts with other people over an extended period of time and spends most of the day alone. It should be remembered that social isolation and loneliness are two separate phenomena: social isolation is something that can be objectively determined, whereas loneliness is a subjective experience upon which only the person concerned is in a position to judge. Social isolation in old age can have negative effects on health even in cases where the person affected does not feel lonely or depressed.





The internet and digital communication technologies have created new opportunities for older people to establish and cultivate contact with other people. The Eighth Government Report on Older People examines the significance of digital communication technologies on social integration and feelings of loneliness among older people. The results of the empirical studies available on the topic indicate that the overall effect of digital communication technologies is a positive one. When older people begin to use digital communication media and the internet they become better integrated socially and have less intense feelings of loneliness than previously. This is especially the case if they also maintain their existing social relationships with the help of digital technologies. However, there are some indications that not all

older people benefit to the same extent from the opportunities offered by digital communication technologies. Highly educated people on good incomes are more likely to have access to and be skilled at using digital communication technologies. They therefore benefit more in terms of social inclusion than people with lower levels of education and income.

Despite these indications that there is a positive correlation between the use of digital communication technologies and social inclusion, it remains the case that relationships based on digital social networks tend not to be as important for older people as they are for their younger peers. For example, the number of social media contacts people have decreases with age. Older



people clearly prefer analogue communication with their family and circle of friends over digital connections. Whether and how this preference is likely to change in the future is not yet clear.

Digital communication technologies can help people intensify relationships and maintain contact with trusted caregivers. This is especially important for people whose children and grandchildren live far away, and for people in need of assistance and care. Moreover, because they make it easier to make new social contacts, these technologies can also help people build new relationships and expand their social networks. This may be particularly relevant to people living alone and with few personal contacts, that is, to people at increased risk of social isolation. In using digital communication technologies it is important not to allow virtual online relationships to displace or replace real-world offline relationships – otherwise they may end up exacerbating feelings of loneliness.

## Health: New paths to providing healthcare

In the field of healthcare for older people, digitisation opens up a wide range of possibilities. These include e-health offerings (the 'e' stands for 'electronic') such as electronic health records, digital information systems for patients and virtual doctor's appointments, which can make it easier to access medical care. Digital technologies can also facilitate better communication within medical professionals. M-health applications (the 'm' stands for 'mobile'), such as fitness wristbands or serious games (i.e. digital learning games), can serve to maintain and improve autonomy and quality of life. The use of monitoring apps can help chronically ill persons to self-manage and to reduce the frequency of stays in hospital. Overall, digital applications in the healthcare system can meaningfully supplement and enhance conventional patient care, compensating for gaps in care and helping to reduce healthcare costs.

## The digitisation of older people's living environments

Digital health technologies are also changing relationships between doctors and their patients. The use of digital health technologies means that health-related information becomes more easily available to patients and easier to pass on to others. This creates greater transparency. It also simplifies communication with healthcare professionals. In addition, digital health technologies are enabling patients to become involved in their own diagnosis, treatment and symptom control. A more patient-centred approach in healthcare will mean some medical competencies being transferred to patients.

The usefulness of digital health technologies and the degree to which they are accepted among older people depend heavily on whether older users have the skills to use them effectively and the extent to which they possess basic knowledge about health matters. Empirical studies show that older people are likely to use digital health services less frequently if they consider their skills in using digital technologies to be low. The expected benefits of digital applications and expected costs of using also impact significantly on acceptance of digital health technologies and services in the healthcare sector.

Accordingly, it is important that the design and implementation of digital health technologies should measure up to the many and various needs and demands of older people. E-health applications need to be easy to access and use, and their means of data transmission need to be secure, trusted and reliable.

Such digital health technologies benefit not only older patients, but also their care-giving family members. This can be seen in the use of digitally delivered psycho-social support services, for example. Various studies suggest that digital information and communication technologies can lighten the burden of care giving and boost

social support. Digital technologies can remove obstacles to accessing respite services for family caregivers, including the obstacles posed by high costs and logistical needs.

In general, however, the scientific evidence, both on acceptance of digital health technologies and on their benefits and risks, has so far been patchy and disparate. For example, existing research on e-health services usually focuses either on specific ailments (such as diabetes or heart insufficiency) or specific intervention strategies (e.g. monitoring or short messaging apps). Only rarely do the current studies differentiate according to the age of the patients. However, it is only a year ago that the German medical professional code of conduct first allowed treatment to be delivered exclusively by telemedical means without compelling necessity. It is therefore not particularly surprising that the stock of scientific knowledge on the acceptance, benefits and impacts of the use of digital technologies in healthcare remains scanty. Research activities in this area need to be urgently expanded in the future.

## Nursing care: Digital technologies are there to provide support, not to replace nursing care

Care provision is faced with major challenges as a result of current demographic and social trends. There is an increasing shortage of trained professionals, and informal support and care by family members is becoming increasingly difficult to organise. There is therefore an increasingly urgent need to develop and test new ideas on how to provide nursing care. The use of digital technologies is becoming an increasingly important instrument in this effort. Expectations are high with regard to the ability of digital technologies to significantly improve care provision. It is generally assumed that digital technologies have the capacity to provide relief and support for care providers as well as to improve networking and information flows within care networks. It is hoped that digital technologies will positively impact on all care contexts, including (1) self-care, informal care and support provided by family members, (2) professional care provided in the home environment, and (3) professional care provided in live-in facilities.

A wide range of digital technologies is now available for use in all of the above-listed care contexts. The innovations designed to aid self-care and informal support provided in the immediate home setting can be mainly categorised in what is often referred to as assistive technologies. Such applications include electronic reminders, remote control systems for electronic devices, household robots designed for everyday use (such as robotic vacuum cleaners and lawn mowers) and electronic standing aids. Security systems such as home emergency alert systems, door and window alarms, smoke, water and motion sensors and lighting systems are also important in this context. In the private homes of people who require support and care, it should be ensured that such technologies make it easier for them to lead independent lives, improve their safety, help them find their way around, and help stimulate them to engage in social interaction and leisure activities.



In all fields of professional care, the potential of systems designed to help on the administrative and organisational side of care work is currently of particular interest. Mobile devices and specialised software are deployed by many care services and in many live-in facilities in such tasks as rostering, documentation of care tasks and billing. In the case of non-residential care services, the benefits offered by digital route planning apps are well worth mentioning. Digital technologies designed to support direct care work (including telecare systems, social robots and service robotics) are not yet widely used in non-residential care services provided in the home environment.

In long-term live-in care, a number of technologies are employed to prevent falls and bedsores, to help with incontinence, and to monitor the whereabouts and mobility of people in need of care. Also available on the market are electronically adjustable beds, electronic standing and load-carrying aids, alarmed sensor mats and devices for measuring vital signs digitally. In an increasing number of live-in facilities, a variety of consumer electronic devices and applications are now being made available to help provide leisure time activities.

Systems for ensuring safety in the home (especially home emergency messaging systems), together with applications to help in the administration, documentation and organisation of professional care work, have become widely established in Germany. However, given the new opportunities offered by digital technologies in the care sector and the high expectations placed on them, the overall level of dissemination of digital technologies in care must be regarded as modest. Digital technologies designed to support direct care are rarely seen in use, whether in in-home or residential care. Many of the technologies developed up until now still exist only as prototypes and are as yet entirely unavailable on the market. There may be several explanations for the modest spread of digital products in the care sector. Among the most important explanations are the lack of information that exists among people involved in nursing care on the range and potential of digital technologies, along with their acquisition and maintenance costs, which are only covered to a very limited extent by health and nursing care insurance providers at present. In addition, there are not many studies in existence that confirm the assertion that the effectiveness and quality of nursing care can be improved on the ground through the use of digital technologies. Although some isolated studies provide indications that

they may have such a positive impact, reliable and methodologically sound findings are not yet available.

The level of acceptance met with by digital technologies in nursing care is generally high in the general population, even if concerns do exist in relation to data protection, data security and ethical issues. Increasing numbers of people in need of care, their families and the younger generations working in the professional care sector consider the use of digital technologies to be a feasible prospect in the care sector too. There are then a number of prerequisites that need to be satisfied in order to anchor the use of digital technologies in care activities more firmly by means of an overall strategy to improve the quality of life and care, both in older people's private homes and in long-term live-in care facilities. However, all efforts to further exploit the likely potential of digital technologies in care should be directed towards ensuring that the use of digital technology is not motivated primarily by economic concerns and that such technology does not end up simply replacing face-to-face care work, but rather supports and complements such work.





## The social space: Connecting and networking

The immediate living environment enjoyed by older people is of enormous importance to the quality of their everyday life. Parishes, neighbourhoods, districts and villages are all places of living, social exchange and participation for older people.

As it has already been pointed out in the Seventh Government Report on Older People, the rate and nature of demographic and structural changes in Germany varies greatly from region to region – with growing centres of population and well-anchored cities contrasting against structurally weaker regions and districts facing major economic and social challenges. In many regions, municipalities are merging, public transport is being cut, kindergartens, schools and clubs are closing and private-sector services (such as retail and financial services) are not (or no longer) being provided as a result of their unprofitability. Such changes have a particularly serious impact for older people – especially where health and nursing care are among the services being cut back.

## The digitisation of older people's living environments

Against this background, those in leadership positions in many municipalities are beginning to ask themselves how digital technologies can contribute to networking in the social space, and thus help older people to participate in social life and compensate for the removal of previously available infrastructures. Public administrations are also increasingly making their services available online. On top of that, many actors are setting up online platforms on which services can be offered and taken up, where voluntary sector activities can be organised and information exchanged. However, whenever one is preparing to provide digital offerings as a public service, one should always bear in mind that many older people are unfamiliar with digital technologies and the internet. Combined with local offerings for the development of digital skills, such digital services can also be used as an occasion to learn how to use digital end devices and how to browse the internet under guidance and in a manner relevant to users' everyday needs.

Digitisation of services should never become an end in itself. The more new digital offerings build on and connect up with existing analogue structures and networks, the better they can provide support for regional and neighbourhood networking and encourage participation. A great many pilot projects have shown that appropriately designed offerings can advance economic development and help improve municipal services of general interest in relation to local availability, mobility, and health and nursing care. The aim of digital services of general interest should always be to reinforce participation and buy-in from outside the digital space. Citizens of all ages, but paying particular attention to vulnerable groups, should therefore be involved as participants in developing new ideas on digitally supported services of general interest.

To ensure that digitally supported, local government public services can go beyond the status of mere pilot projects involving small target groups – and to help them become economically viable – they need to be designed for wider usage than by individual municipalities. It is essential for them to become applicable across multiple local government areas, especially in rural regions. A satisfactory digital infrastructure, and, in particular, the availability of sufficiently powerful



internet connections, is one of the prerequisites for the success of digitally supported public service provision. Achieving this will require pushing on with a comprehensive countrywide build-out of broadband capacity and mobile network coverage. In addition, the specific conditions and prerequisites required in each individual region or neighbourhood (in terms of technical and social infrastructure, the involvement of regional players, etc.) also need to be taken into account when developing and implementing digital offerings and preparing the associated financing models.

Thus far, little empirical evidence is available on the effects that the digital provision of information and services may have on the quality of life of older users. Evaluations of the initial pilot projects in rural areas indicate a positive impact, provided that digital services maintain a link to analogue solutions that address individual problems close to users' everyday life issues.



# Digital sovereignty

Older people are all too often portrayed as having a sceptical attitude to digital technologies and the internet, and as finding it difficult to use the devices and applications associated with it. Against this, the Commission of the Eighth Government Report on Older People would like to emphasise that older people – like people in any other age group – are well able to develop the skills they need to act with confidence in the digital world. In fact, many older people deal perfectly competently and naturally with digital technologies and the internet. The Commission appeals to all older people not to close their minds to participation in the digital transformation. However, people who consider it an imposition to be expected to become involved in such changes should not be obliged to learn any new skills if not inclined to do so. It does not make sense to expect absolutely everyone to be skilled in using digital technologies and the internet. However, there can be no guarantee that there will always be analogue options available as an alternative to digital offerings. It is crucial that digital sovereignty be facilitated through local learning and support services and the creation of the right background conditions wherever people are willing and able to develop their own skills in the use of digital technology.

A crucial element in ensuring that people are equipped to act under their own sovereignty in using digital technologies is that technical developments and services complement each other effectively on three levels.

Firstly, on the individual level, digital sovereignty requires that older users can develop digital skills. Such digital skills include the ability to use digital products and systems in accordance with one's own needs, interests and preferences. This ability will require a knowledge of how to use digital technologies and an awareness of the consequences – intended and unintended – of using the digital devices.

Secondly, the relevant organisations, institutions and networks must provide learning and support services to help develop such digital skills. Wherever older people display a willingness to use digital technologies but cannot acquire the necessary knowledge on their own, they should be given access to such learning and support services.

Thirdly, with regard to background conditions, it should be ensured that it is possible to use digital systems and devices transparently and safely – through the enactment of the appropriate legally binding regulations on data protection, for example.

Over the last two decades, a large number of initiatives and services have been created with the aim of strengthening the digital competencies of older people. At local level in particular, a great many low-threshold offerings have appeared with a close connection to the relevant social space and are often supported through the voluntary efforts of older people. Such offerings are designed to meet the oft-expressed desire among older people for informal, self-determined learning opportunities targeted at their life situation. In addition, institutionalised advisory services on the use of assistance technology both in one's own living environment and in the context of a variety of different care arrangements play an important role in improving digital skills among older people. Such offerings provide information on the fields of application of assistance technology and often offer opportunities for people to try out devices and applications.

Digital learning formats (for example, chat bots, online forums, video tutorials and virtual reality environments) that can be adapted flexibly to suit various learning situations, learner types and learning needs are also becoming increasingly available. Naturally, such internet-supported learning formats presuppose some basic knowledge of how to use the internet – but it seems safe to assume that an increasing number of older people now possess such basic digital skills.

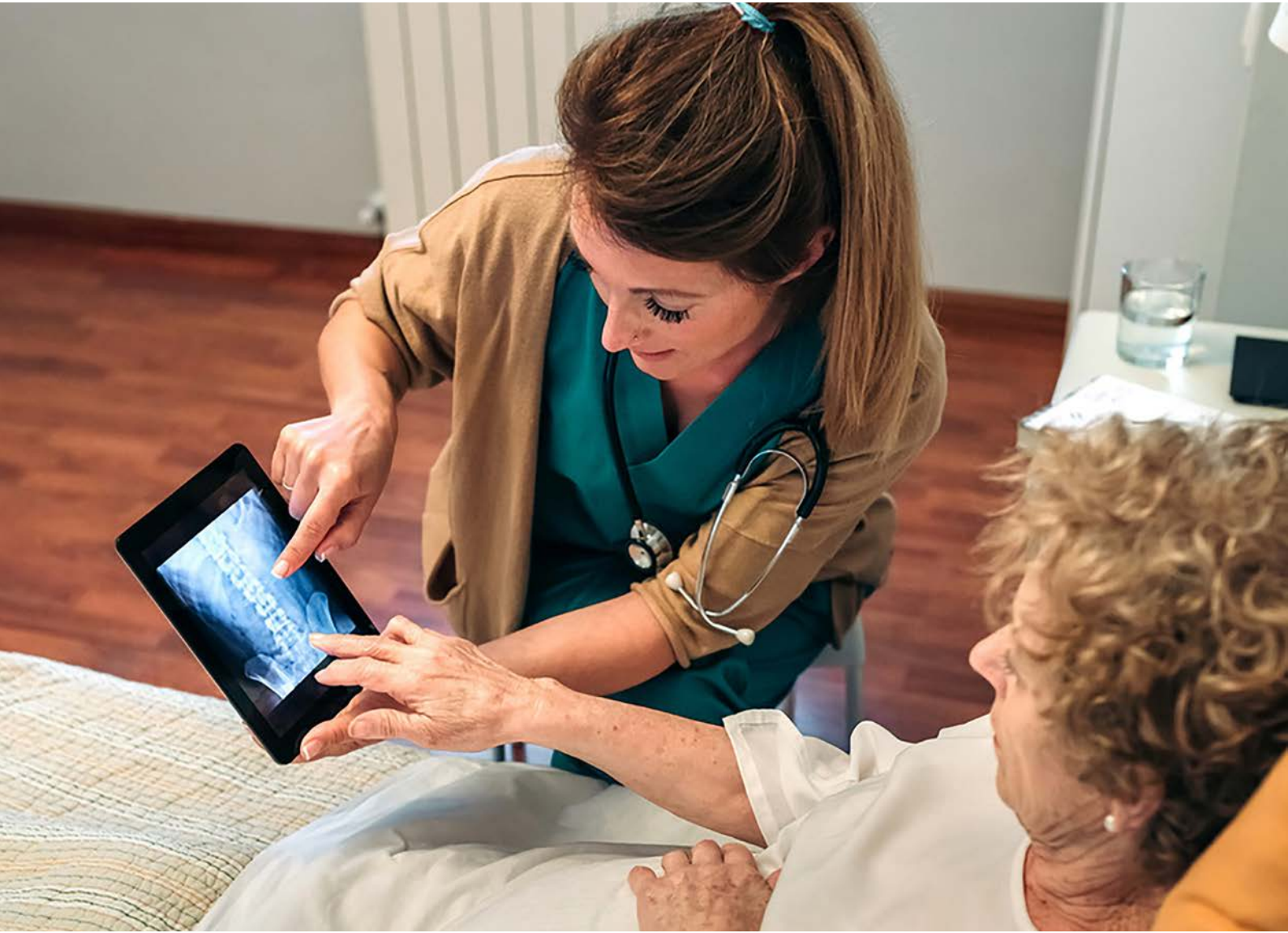
Many of the services now available to support the development of digital literacy were developed in a decentralised manner, on the initiative of individuals or of small groups of people, and are relatively modest in scope. As a consequence, the overall landscape of such services tends to be somewhat disparate, confusing and erratic. In terms of content, many such initiatives are aimed primarily at developing the instrumental and technical skills necessary to allow learners to operate particular devices. Rarely is any effort made to reflect critically on such work, and possible ethical issues are almost completely ignored.

If even more older people than in the past are to have the opportunity to learn how to use digital technologies and the internet and to further develop their digital skills, then services teaching digital skills and providing help by means of assistance systems need to be professionalised, and the quality of their content and their teaching methodology needs to be ensured. In order to provide interested parties with easy and uncluttered access to information on the learning and assistance formats available to them, initiatives already launched by central actors need to be further developed and consolidated in an effort to systemise the information contained in these offerings and keep it up-to-date. The focus should not be centred exclusively on older people, but on (caregiving) family members as well.

Local government in particular has an important role to play in this area – local authorities need to regard it as part of their public service remit to create and set on a firm footing services designed to develop digital skills among older people. To achieve this, however, local authorities will need political support from both the Länder and the Federal Government in the form of financial guarantees, binding guidelines and adjustments to legislation.

Ideally, care should be taken when developing and designing new technologies to ensure that the resulting devices can be operated intuitively and that the applications loaded onto them are self-explanatory. This will significantly increase the level of acceptance of such new technologies. To this end, users should be involved in their development and design. There is currently a growing trend towards the creation of long-term cooperative arrangements between the institutions responsible for developing new technologies and representatives of target groups (including, older people themselves, professional caregivers and service providers, for example). These arrangements are known as “real laboratories”.





## Conflicting goals and ethical issues

The use of digital technologies in the lives of older people is usually connected with the expectation of increased autonomy, self-reliance and well-being for older people. Accordingly, digital technologies are expected to enable or make it easier for older people to perform their daily activities independently. It is also expected that digital technologies, by streamlining work flows and relieving nursing staff of some of their workload, will improve the healthcare of older people and the quality of the nursing care they receive.

However, the use of digital technologies often involves a variety of ethical issues and goals that may come into conflict with each other. Thus, the sensitive use of digital technologies, in in-home care, for example, can engender and reinforce experiences of self-efficacy and participation both for the person in need of care and for his or her care-giving family members. Digital technologies can help older people to regain lost independence, thereby promoting a feeling of control and autonomy. However, if the use of digital technologies focuses exclusively on protection and support, and takes too little account of the needs of older

people, it can result in those people feeling humiliated and disrespected.

In designing any such technology, one should be careful not to unnecessarily emphasise existing support needs and not to create a deficit-centred picture of old age either in the face of older people or of their contact persons. Digital technologies should be designed in such a way that older people can use and maintain their existing skills and experience a sense of mastery in dealing with technology. They should not get the impression of being merely an anonymous application for the use of digital technologies. On the contrary, it should be possible for them to adapt the digital technologies to suit their needs and, whenever it suits them, to switch them off. As a general rule, older people must retain their fundamental right to refuse to use digital technologies.

## Conflicting goals and ethical issues

These requirements for the design of digital technologies make it clear that the process of developing technologies should, from the very beginning, include a process of ironing out any conflicting goals. This should take place at the initial development stages, and not be left until the implementation stage. This process will only meet with the required success if potential users are sufficiently involved in the development and optimisation of the technology. Independent of all the above, the training curricula of engineers should place a value on discussion of ethical issues – precisely because such engineers meet users of their products either only very rarely or not at all.

The Commission of the Eighth Government Report on Older People calls on all actors involved to actively identify and weigh up the opportunities and risks involved in the development and use of digital technologies. This reflection needs to happen well before digital technologies are deployed for use in everyday life and care. Such considerations need to focus on more than simply the function of digital technologies for a single specific purpose; they must also take into account the context in which such technologies are used and the personal needs and preferences of each of the individuals concerned. One should always bear in mind that, in cases where a person's judgement is seriously impaired due to illness (in advanced dementia, for example), third parties are sometimes forced to make decisions on behalf of the person affected. The appropriate negotiation processes need to take place in specific societal settings (in live-in care facilities, for example) and need to be given the appropriate status in such settings.



Summing up, it is essential that decisions on the development and use of digital technologies be made – to a far greater extent than at present – on the basis of available scientific knowledge of the impacts that such technologies may have on those affected by them. With this in mind, there is a need to create incentives for researchers to produce high-quality research aimed at producing practical insights and workable solutions.



# The Commission's recommendations

The Expert Commission has derived the following twelve recommendations from its report:

## **1** Significantly increase the priority enjoyed by older people in the Federal Government's implementation strategy Digitalisierung gestalten ("Shaping digitisation")

Both the phase of life referred to as "old age" and the world of technology are constantly changing. On the one hand, older people are becoming increasingly adept at using digital technologies. On the other, new digital devices and systems are constantly being developed, and the need to handle large amounts of data is constantly placing new demands on knowledge and on information processing technology. The Expert Commission therefore calls on the Federal Government to give far more importance to the topic of "age" in its implementation strategy Digitalisierung gestalten than it has done up until now. In that strategy, the topic of Ältere Menschen und Digitalisierung ("Older people and digitisation") should in future be treated as its own separate field of action. In order to capture the topic in all its complexity, it makes sense to assign separate focal points to each

of the various areas of life considered in the Eighth Government Report on Older People – i.e. housing, mobility, social integration, health, nursing care and life in the community. The implementation strategy should be designed to provide a springboard for initiating a broad-ranging societal conversation on how people in Germany want to live in old age in the digital age, and on how digitisation can contribute to ensuring a high quality of life in old age in the future.

## **2** Enable access to and use of digital technologies for all

Access to and use of digital services is unequally distributed among the older population depending on their different levels of education and income. Indeed, this inequality is far more pronounced among older than among younger people. The Expert Commission calls on the Federal Government to ensure that no one is left behind on the road to a digitalised society and that everyone is given the opportunity to participate in the opportunities offered by digitisation. For this reason, the Expert Commission recommends ensuring that internet access is available and ready

for use in all forms of housing used by older people (including private homes, assisted living arrangements and in residents' rooms in live-in care facilities). Furthermore, the Federal Government, Länder and local authorities should create the background conditions to ensure that the internet can be used comprehensively across the country and free of charge in public spaces and public buildings (in town halls, railway stations, districts, neighbourhoods and villages, and on modes of transport). Older people with a low income or in receipt of basic provisions for old age should be given financial help through the social assistance legislation set out in Volume XII of the German Social Code (Sozialgesetzbuch XII) to make the internet available in their homes and to acquire digital technology that can help provide or maintain their autonomy and their sense of participation in society.

### **3 Promote the opportunities posed by digitisation with regard to intergenerational communication**

The Expert Commission recommends that the Federal Government, Länder and local authorities do their utmost to ensure that digitisation is not seen as creating a divide between the generations, but rather as a phenomenon that can substantially boost communication between the generations. In the view of the Commission, it is the task of local authorities in particular to initiate such communication between the generations by providing offerings suitable for this purpose.

### **4 Reinforce digital sovereignty**

The concept of digital sovereignty refers to the independent, informed, safe and responsible acquisition and use by individuals of digital technologies. With the aim of strengthening digital sovereignty, especially for older people who have little or no experience with digital technologies, it should be ensured that services to support the development of digital literacy provide older people both with elementary user skills and the necessary knowledge to use digital technologies

according to their needs. The Expert Commission calls on the Federal Government to develop reference models specifically aimed at identified target groups and to create uniform quality standards for such support services. In addition, it also calls for the creation and promotion of both physical and virtual spaces for learning and experimentation where older people have the opportunity to try out digital technologies for themselves and to grapple up close and personal with the corresponding opportunities and risks.

Under these conditions, the Commission would like to expressly encourage older citizens to participate in shaping their own living environment and social communities through the use of new digital technologies.

## **5 Understand digital technologies as an opportunity both for older people with care-related needs and for their carers**

The Commission calls on the Federal Ministry of Health to take greater account of the concerns of older people with physical, cognitive or other care-related needs and requirements in its strategic considerations on e-health, telemedicine and digitisation in the care sector. The goal of any

overall “nursing and care provision” strategy should be to enable such people to achieve a greater degree of autonomy and participation, and to receive proper care through the use of digital and adaptive technologies, regardless of where they live (e.g. in their own home, a nursing home or an alternative form of housing). Use of such technologies should not routinely replace support for care needs formerly provided by people. In case of doubt, the people affected should be given the choice between technical and personal support options. To ensure sufficient participation, representatives of older people and professional carers should be involved in the projected new e-Health Council and in other relevant bodies.

In addition to that, the Commission also calls upon research bodies and enterprises to develop digital technologies capable of supporting and relieving the burden on informal and professional caregivers, and of promoting their health. At the same time, policymakers and support institutions will need to develop and establish the appropriate legal and ethical framework to guide such product design work in the fields of nursing and care provision.

**6 Ensure the establishment and ongoing development of digital public services at local government level**

District councils and municipalities are important actors in the design of digital offerings and services for older people. The Commission recommends that local authorities promote the development of local, regional and interregional digitisation strategies. In particular, the opportunities offered by digitisation should be exploited in an effort to network neighbourhoods and, in doing so, develop care structures. The Länder should lend flanking support to such activities, providing advice and financial support.

**7 Promote digital skills within occupational groups relevant to older people**

The activities of particular occupational groups exert a special influence on the lives of older people. This applies primarily to occupational groups in the fields of health, nursing, social work, architecture and crafts, but it is also relevant to the retail, banking and insurance sectors. The Commission recommends that the Federal Government and the Länder enact laws and regulations to ensure that all training curricula for such occupational groups cover the acquisition of digital skills and an examination of the effects of the digital transformation both on their own fields of activity and on the lives of older people. The goal of such an effort should be to develop a comprehensive range of competencies in terms of reflection, discussion and implementation among the relevant professionals on the appropriate usage of digital technologies.



**8 Enable discussion on the ethical questions arising out of digitisation**

Digitisation and the changes it is bringing about in the lives of older people give rise to a number of ethical concerns. These ethical questions need to be debated at both societal and political level. The Federal Government and the Länder should continue to raise these issues in public debate and therefore foster societal and political debates on such topics into the future.

As well as this, the Expert Commission calls upon institutions providing nursing and care services to facilitate and encourage discussion on these ethical concerns in the various contexts in which such issues are of practical consequence. To this end, they should create or enhance appropriate structures and time windows for discussion and appoint relevant contact persons. Older people, their family members and their social networks must be involved in such processes.

**9 Ensure that research into and development of digital technologies takes into account the skills, needs and requirements of older people**

In the view of the Expert Commission, the widespread use of digital technologies in the lives of older people can only have the positive impacts hoped for if the skills, needs and preferences of older people are taken into account early in the process of development of such technologies. Such reflections should pay sufficient attention to the diversity in the various life situations of older people. The Commission therefore supports the current focus of research funding programmes on integrating older people and other possible users into the development of digital technologies. This focus should be maintained and further expanded. The Commission also recommends that findings from the fields of gerontology, geriatrics and the age-relevant social and nursing sciences be integrated into technological research and development as well as into the conduct of advisory, support and implementation tasks. In order to do justice to the intersectional complexity that exists between the phenomenon of digitisation and life in old age, the Commission recommends further developing the existing canon of research methods and encouraging the emergence of new interdisciplinary research formats.

## **10** Ensure sufficient funding for innovation and innovation transfer

The Expert Commission calls on the Federal Government to provide improved incentivisation for digital technologies that support autonomous living in old age and to coordinate the incentivisation measures already in existence. In addition, the Hilfsmittelkataloge (the official list of medical aids covered by the German health insurance companies) should be continuously updated to ensure that the potential of digital technologies, in terms of providing preventive care and maintaining or improving the quality of life of older people and their carers, can be fully exploited. Funding should cover the cost of equipping older people with digital technologies and of providing advice, education and support services designed specifically for the target group. The institutions addressed in this connection include the Federal Government, health insurance providers and the KfW Bank, among other bodies.

## **11** Strengthen consumer protection

With the aim of better protecting the consumer, the Expert Commission calls for digital products to undergo appropriate (initial) testing by qualified professionals for quality, security, data transparency, value for money and user-friendly design. The results of this testing should be easily recognisable to consumers – in the form of a seal of quality, for example. Appropriate quality assurance measures need to be instituted to serve as an incentive for manufacturers to design and market products with a high level of user-friendliness and to supplement such offerings with appropriate services.



## **12** Introduce a monitoring system on “Digitisation and older people”

The Commission of Experts recommends that the Federal Government institute a permanent monitoring regime in relation to the effect of digitisation on life in old age. Particular attention should be paid to the areas of life and fields of action dealt with in the Eighth Government Report on Older People. These are housing, mobility, social integration, health, nursing care and living in the community. The goal of this monitoring function should be to observe and evaluate the process of digital transformation as it affects older people and to derive design guidelines from the knowledge thus gained.

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# Government Reports on Older People

The practice of reporting on older people dates back to a 1994 decision of the German Bundestag instructing the Federal Government to, in the course of every legislative period, prepare a report on the living situations of older people in Germany. The reports are prepared by independent expert commissions made up of experts from a variety of relevant disciplines. To date, the following Government Reports on Older People have appeared:

**1993:**

First Government Report on Older People, “Die Lebenssituation älterer Menschen in Deutschland” [The living situation of older people in Germany]

**1998:**

Second Government Report on Older People, “Wohnen im Alter” [Housing and living environment in old age]

**2001:**

Third Government Report on Older People, “Alter und Gesellschaft” [Old age and society]

**2002:**

Fourth Government Report on Older People, “Risiken, Lebensqualität und Versorgung Hochaltriger – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung demenzieller Erkrankungen” [Risks, quality of life and service provision of the very aged – with a special focus on dementia-related illnesses]

**2006:**

Fifth Government Report on Older People, “Potenziale des Alters in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Der Beitrag älterer Menschen zum Zusammenhalt der Generationen” [The potentials of old age in the economy and society. The contribution of older people to intergenerational cohesion]

**2010:**

Sixth Government Report on Older People, “Altersbilder in der Gesellschaft” [Images of ageing in society]

**2016:**

Seventh Government Report on Older People, “Sorge und Mitverantwortung in der Kommune – Aufbau und Sicherung zukunftsfähiger Gemeinschaften” [Care and shared responsibility at local level – building and securing future-ready communities]

The Government Reports on Older People provide an important foundation for public debate on policy issues relating to older people. The Government Reports on Older People published to date have also contributed to greater public awareness about the process of ageing and the living situations of older people.

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By telephone: +49 (0) 800 1234333 (calls from German landlines free of charge)

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The German versions of the Eighth Government Report on Older People and all past Government Reports on Older People can be downloaded from [www.achter-altersbericht.de](http://www.achter-altersbericht.de).

There you will also find detailed information on the Federal Government's reporting on older people, on events relating to the topics discussed in the Eighth Government Report on Older People, and on the membership of the Commission for the Eighth Report.

If you have any questions or require information on the Government Report on Older People, please contact:

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The Office or the Government Reports on Older People is based at the German Centre of Gerontology (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen – DZA) and is funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend – BMFSFJ).

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## **Imprint**

This brochure is part of the public relations work of the Federal Government; it is free of charge and not intended for sale.

### **Publisher:**

Bundesministerium  
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend  
11018 Berlin Germany  
[www.bmfsfj.de](http://www.bmfsfj.de)

### **Available from:**

Publikationsversand der Bundesregierung  
Postfach 48 10 09, 18132 Rostock Germany  
Tel.: +49 (0) 30 18 272 2721  
Fax: +49 (0) 30 18 10 272 2721  
Sign language phone service: [gebaerdentelefon@sip.bundesregierung.de](mailto:gebaerdentelefon@sip.bundesregierung.de)  
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**Article number:** 3BR196

**As of:** May 2020, 1st edition

**Design:** [www.zweiband.de](http://www.zweiband.de)

**Picture credits Dr Franziska Giffey:** Bundesregierung/Jesco Denzel

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**Printing:** MKL Druck GmbH & Co. KG

**Translation:** Jaime Hyland, Berlin

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