



HANKEN

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Alone but connected? Digital (in)equalities in care work and generational relationships among older people living alone (EQualCare)

A policy brief for decision-makers: The perspectives and needs of older people have to be taken more into account when digitalising services

“But I am pretty tired of the whole digitalisation. For all of us who are old, it is so unfair, because there are so many that do not really manage”

Finnish citizens are expected to use digital services more and more in their everyday lives. Services relating to health, economy and free time are increasingly managed through the internet. It is expected that everyone wants to and is able to take care of their everyday life online – as it is framed as more efficient than doing things offline. The reality is different. How does one make sure that everyone can manage with the important tasks and business of everyday living in this digitalised landscape? Who is responsible for making sure that everyone has the necessary technical equipment and know-how, that the technology works, and that help is available when needed and when it doesn't work?

In this policy brief we present some suggestions for the development of policy concerning the digitalisation of services. The brief is based on research results from the project *Alone but Connected? (EQualCare)*. We hope that with the help of the brief, older people's collective and individual needs can be taken into account more fully in developing digital services. First, the current situation is presented along with why it can be problematic. Then, the recommendations developed from interviews and discussions with older people are presented.

The perspectives and needs of older people have not been considered in a sufficient way when digitalising services

According to our research, the perspectives and needs of the ageing population are not considered sufficiently when planning and making decisions on digital services. Older people have not been heard in good time before reforms and decisions have been made and without sufficient impact assessment. This is problematic, as older people are affected by different living situations, with varying conditions and opportunities for using digital tools. In addition, many are dependent on different levels of technical help and support. How these needs are met, or not, is affected by people's networks of family, friends and acquaintances. Moreover, individuals' socio-economic circumstances are relevant to consider, as the technologies needed for using digital services are often costly. In a welfare society, it is important to ensure that services are available and accessible for all, especially when it comes to social, care and health services.

Many older people are concerned with the trend that points towards a decrease in physically accessible, face-to-face services, as well as a decline in services offered by telephone. There can also be issues in booking appointments, as well as in getting to them and moving about more generally.

Older people are put in an unequal situation if they cannot take care of their business online, and if the offline service offered is poor or non-existent. Everyone should have the same rights and possibilities in taking care of their issues.

Here are examples of what older people interviewed themselves say:

“Everything is moved online. Some things are very difficult to manage. (...) then no one answered, when I called the given phone number”

“(...) But then there are no other offices in the town where the person has their [bank] account, apart from one. In those situations, I notice it, when everything is handled online (...), bills are paid online or in the mobile bank”

These are the changes older persons would like to see

Based on interviews and group discussions with older people, we have the following recommendations. Moreover, it is not only older people who are raising these issues or are concerned about them. Problems with accessing face-to-face services offline and digital problems affect individuals of all ages from time to time.

- **Older persons should be heard already early in the planning stages when it comes to important decisions that concern them**

It is important to assess the practical consequences of decisions concerning digital services.

- **How to reach those in need of digital support needs to be planned and developed**

Different ways to reach those in need of support need to be developed, and more information on existing digital support services on tools and services is needed.

- **Services providing support for digital services need to be developed**

There is a need for more and increasingly developed services that are high quality, free and user-friendly. Information security and prevention of fraud are paramount.

- **More resources need to be allocated to agencies that advocate for older people, their interests, and their rights**

More collective resources need to be allocated to agencies that advocate for older people, their interests, and their rights, as many services providing such support are run by volunteers.

- **There is a need for a coordinating authority that is responsible for digital matters**

Matters concerning digitalisation need to be coordinated – from a grassroots level all the way up to the responsible authorities.

- **Continuous access to physical, face-to-face services offline needs to be guaranteed**

It should be ensured that citizens can manage their daily life physically offline, if they wish to do so, and that they are able to reach the services they need.

About the project:

For the past three years, research teams in Finland, Germany, Latvia and Sweden have been studying topics related to ageing, informal care and support networks, living alone, and digitalisation. Within the project, we have analysed national and international statistics and policy documents, and also conducted participatory action research (PAR) with older people over 60.

More information can be found here:

<https://jp-demographic.eu/projects/equalcare/>

