



# “**Digitalisation** must be **human-centred**, based on trust, communication and shared goals”

For many older people, digital transitions raise concerns that go beyond usability - such as trust, privacy and loss of human connection - as well as dealing with scams, misinformation and online manipulation. **AGE Platform Europe**, Europe’s largest network of non-profit organisations of and for older people, has long defended the right to choose between digital and non-digital options. Through a human rights lens, the organisation has been raising awareness among EU policymakers about how ageism still influences the way digital services are developed and/or delivered. We spoke to **Julia Wadoux, Policy Manager on Healthy Ageing & Accessibility** (pictured above), and **Project Officer, Vera Hörmann** (pictured below), on how to raise the voices of older people in the fight for equality at all ages.



## **As digital technologies transform everyday life, what are the most pressing digital rights challenges facing older European citizens today?**

**Julia Wadoux:** I will quote our President at a recent event we co-organised on Ageism in AI: “Older people are not against digitalisation.” This is important to highlight, as our work in this topic is not about resisting digital progress but about advocating for fairness, inclusion for those lacking digital skills, and the protection of consumer rights. We are calling on the EU to provide an offline option as a complementary tool to ensure that essential services such as banking, healthcare, and public administration remain accessible to people of all ages.

At present, digitalisation without an offline option poses many challenges and excludes people across various age groups, not only older persons. For example: extra charges for in-person services such as bank transfers, deposits, withdrawals, Internet availability and digital-only invoices. The lack of offline options affects those who do not wish to use a smartphone or tablet, or cannot for different reasons such as location, disability, income, or social circumstances. Tackling ageism and breaking down stereotypes are essential for a digital transition that is inclusive and barrier-free for all ages. Human rights must guide digitalisation, putting people before technology and involving older people as true partners in the design of digital products and policies.

## **After the digital acceleration resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, why is flexibility between digital and non-digital still essential? How do you respond to the view that paper-based services slow down innovation?**

**JW:** Digitalisation excludes people of all ages, more than many people realise. Even if someone owns digital devices and feels comfortable using them, they may still avoid them due to privacy issues or not be able to use them due to a poor internet connection in certain areas. When essential services are 100% digitalised without an offline alternative, older people and others risk being left behind. This can be especially dangerous in areas such as healthcare and banking, where people can become dependent on other people.

Offering an offline option does not slow down innovation, quite the opposite. A truly innovative product must take everyone’s needs into account from the outset. Even for commercial services, if you are a company that does not consider older people in the design process, that means losing potential customers. A truly inclusive product must involve older people as real partners. Digital transformation must be safe, inclusive, sustainable; and a human-centric approach that upholds democracy and human rights is key!

**As many organisations face leadership transitions, your DIGITOL project highlights the power of intergenerational learning. What lessons can be learnt about bridging digital and social gaps through intergenerational collaboration and engagement?**

**Vera Hörmann:** AGE Platform Europe was one of the EU partners in the DIGITOL project, and the lessons learned were valuable for the impact of digitalisation and disinformation. The initial training by young volunteers was followed by joint intergenerational co-design community actions to promote critical thinking and digital literacy, towards inclusive environments and shared knowledge. This not only improved digital and media literacy among the older people, but also generated empathy, mutual understanding and cooperation between the age groups.

A major takeaway for organisations is that intergenerational collaboration should be seen as a strength, especially during leadership transitions. By combining different experiences, digital knowledge and social perspectives, organisations can build more resilient and inclusive teams. Structured activities such as co-creation workshops and community engagement, like those used at DIGITOL, can help foster long-term intergenerational solidarity. Through mentoring, older workers can share their experiences – for example in prioritising tasks and coping mechanisms with high workloads – benefiting mental health, while younger employees can help older colleagues develop digital skills.

**How can health, finance and public administration services address issues such as trust, privacy and human connection from a user perspective?**

**JW:** It is certainly important for society as a whole to reflect on issues like trust, privacy and the loss of human contact. This other dimension of technology was also emphasised

by our President, saying that “older people can be sensors of what is going on, reflecting and pointing out concerns.”

We live in a fast-paced, digital-driven society where changes happen quickly, often without time to fully consider their impact. Digital tools can make things faster, but what is the cost to our privacy and our information? Bots may answer simple questions, but many of us, regardless of age, have experienced the frustration of being left with no real help. Older people, with their life experiences, may be more inclined to question and raise these issues, but this is important for everyone. Essential services should be designed collectively, offering clear information, responding to concerns and providing an offline option when needed.

**Rural and remote areas often lack reliable digital infrastructure, adding another layer of exclusion for older populations. What local policies or initiatives are still needed to fill this void?**

**VH:** The growing digitalisation of services could be an opportunity to age in place, but it often presents significant additional challenges for rural older adults. Initiatives like digital assistance at village points are vital, and broader policy efforts are required to improve digital literacy and ensure equitable access to technology and internet infrastructure. The **Mobile Age** project worked to make digital public services more accessible by co-creating mobile applications with older people. By involving older adults in the design process, the project ensured that the digital tools developed were user-friendly and addressed the specific needs of rural populations.

When studying integrated long-term care initiatives in the **Laurel** project, people living in rural areas often mentioned that technology might not be ‘the’ solution policymakers and companies want. Shared community spaces, mobility solutions and co-designing initiatives to ensure participation and up-take were given higher importance.

**What insights have projects like DIGITOL or your pandemic-era fraud alerts revealed about the most effective ways to develop digital and media literacy?**

**VH:** During the pandemic, many older people faced a wave of misinformation, scams and fraud attempts. DIGITOL tackled this by first discussing sensitive topics (migration, integration and social cohesion, gender issues, minority rights, sustainability, etc.) among older and younger people, with the aim of stimulating open dialogue and understanding, before dealing with online disinformation. This intergenerational exchange made a real difference and empowered older people to feel more confident online and for everyone to question the reliability of what they see and read.



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