

Older people and digitalisation

Executive summary of the statement by BAGSO, the German National Association of Senior Citizens' Organisations, regarding the Eighth Government Report on Older People

Preliminary remarks and overview

The Eighth Government Report on Older People in the Federal Republic of Germany on the topic "Older People and Digitisation" was published on 12 August 2020.¹ The Federal Government's reporting on older

persons is based on a decision of the German Bundestag in 1994. It instructs the Federal Government to draw up a report on the situation of the older population in Germany once every legislative period. The reports are drawn up by independent expert commissions with experts from various disciplines.

As the Expert Commission presented the report already on 23 January 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, in particular the question of offsetting social isolation through digital means, were not taken into account. However, these experiences once again illustrated the urgent need for action. Over the last few years, BAGSO has dealt intensively with these topics and questions in parallel to the drafting of the Eighth Government Report on Older People.²

1 Further information, including an English summary of the report are available at: <https://www.achter-altersbericht.de>, https://www.achter-altersbericht.de/fileadmin/altersbericht/pdf/BMFSFJ-2020-01199_21x21_Senioren_eng_v7_BF_.pdf

2 BAGSO Position Paper "Older people in a digital world" (<https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/positionspapier/older-persons-in-a-digital-world/>)

BAGSO welcomes that the Commission of the Report on Older People

- focuses on the topic of digitisation, which is increasingly important to the lives of older people,
- defines digital participation as a responsibility of public service,
- emphasises the role of municipalities in the development of digital support structures in order to facilitate access and participation,
- raises awareness of a digital gap in particular within the older population which increases already existing social, health and regional inequalities,
- would like to see ethical issues in the use of digital technologies to be discussed at an early stage and with the involvement of those who will use the technologies,
- views the use of digital technologies in nursing care only as an additional support measure and never as a replacement of care provided by human beings,
- agrees that the right to participation must be guaranteed for people who do not use digital technologies.

Both the Commission report and the statement of the Federal Government address many of BAGSO's concerns. However, in the view of BAGSO, the Federal Government's statement in particular does not go far enough. There are hardly any measures announced providing impetus to the implementation of the Commission's recommendations. The Federal Government needs to create a mandatory framework for developing digital support structures.

Specifically, BAGSO supports the Commission's recommendations to

- institutionalise permanent monitoring on digitalisation and life in old age to oversee the process of digital transformation with regard to older people,
- combine barrier-free housing development with the implementation of technologies in the apartments,
- promote the use of the Internet and the acquisition of digital technology for people on low incomes,
- involve older people in the entire research and development process of digital technologies and applications,
- incorporate digital literacy skills into the training, study and further education curricula for professions relevant to older people.

In addition, BAGSO recommends

- setting up a comprehensively funded "Digital Pact for Old Age" (*Digitalpakt Alter*) along the lines of the "Digital Pact for Schools" (*Digitalpakt Schule*) at federal level to enable everyone in the post-professional phase of life to acquire digital literacy skills,
- achieving binding targets in promoting digital literacy through a comprehensive "education in old age" (*Bildung im Alter*) strategy,
- incorporating insights such as those from the "Age-friendly Cities" initiative of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the "Smart Cities" initiative as well as proven model projects more systematically than before into planning and implementing age-friendly neighbourhoods,

- ensuring increased standardisation and usability of digital technology through targeted funding guidelines and improved data and consumer protection,
- appointing a "digitalisation counsellor" at every nursing care facility, whose task is to support caregivers and residents in applying digital technologies,
- appointing neutral ombudspersons, who assist in resolving conflicts over the use of technologies and ethical issues, e.g. between persons in need of care, relatives and professional carers.

BAGSO combines the interests of a variety of older people through its 120 member associations and offers the continued support of community discourse. It issues the following statement, divided into six areas, on the Commission's report and on the Federal Government's statement. Please note that these six areas should not be regarded as separate but as interconnected areas.

I. Basic digital services

The Commission rightly refers to the Internet as the base infrastructure. As long as there is no possibility for older people to connect online, they will also not benefit from digital technologies. According to BAGSO, basic digital services include internet access, free Wi-Fi in public spaces, web-enabled, intuitive devices and, if required, permanent and qualified support in and through the digital world.

BAGSO views access to the Internet and web-based services as essential public service elements of today's society. The

Federal Government, the *Länder* and the municipalities have to create appropriate framework conditions.

II. Housing, mobility, social participation and neighbourhood

Housing, mobility, social participation and neighbourhood directly affect older people's lives and their ability to move around their living environment and to interact with others. Digital technology has the potential to support self-determined living at home, maintain mobility and enable socio-spatial connectedness. This is why the Commission rightly highlights the major role of the social and physical environment as a factor for a good life in old age.

The Federal Government, the *Länder* and local governments must develop a jointly controlled, integrated and interdisciplinary overall concept in order to allow people to live long, self-determined lives in a home in which they can connect to neighbours, take part in social activities, move around safely and have access to healthcare. In doing so, it is important to link the digital and analogous systems relating to living in old age, mobility and participation in the highly different neighbourhoods in Germany. Up until now, these have existed as separate systems as far as technology and organisation are concerned. The Commission points out these necessities in the section on housing. According to BAGSO, it is the task of politicians to create the necessary framework conditions to resolve the identified interface problems. Related data

protection and data security issues must also be dealt with in regulatory frameworks.

III. Health and long-term care

The Commission sees general potential in the ever-progressing digitalisation to improve healthcare and nursing care as well as self-care. Together with the Commission, BAGSO is calling to unlock the opportunities presented by digitalisation for the care of older persons.

E-health and telemedicine offer a wide range of useful applications. To ensure older people can access digital health services it is essential to promote their digital and health literacy. In parallel, analogue access to health and care services must be ensured.

Digital media should also be promoted because of their aptitude to support social contacts and strengthen social networks (family, friends, clubs) which are vital for social cohesion, individual well-being and health.

IV. Ethics, data and consumer protection

The Commission explains in exemplary fashion the ethical ambivalence in the use of digital technology. However, its reference to risks should not deter people from using these technologies but serves to inspire their efforts to avoid the risks.

The Commission calls for a regular public discourse on digital ethics. Although it generally asks for older persons to be included in decisions to benefit society as a whole, it does not specify concrete ways of implementation. BAGSO combines the interests of a variety of older people through its member associations and will continue to promote community discourse proactively.

V. Digital education and skills development

BAGSO regrets that the subject of digital education and skills development is not given appropriate attention in the Eighth Government Report on Older People, even though promoting technology and media literacy is a key prerequisite to facilitate access for older people to digital opportunities and enable them to make informed choices on how to use them. Only if users have the basic skills needed can the technologies considered in the Report help them live a good life in old age – with respect to all areas. The education landscape needed for older people to acquire technology and media skills is not available nationwide, is unequally distributed across Germany and lacks professionalism.

According to BAGSO, people in the post-professional phase of life must be structurally and financially supported in acquiring digital literacy skills (Digital Pact for Old Age, along the lines of the Digital Pact for Schools³).

³ Under the Digital Pact for Schools, which came into force on 17 May 2019, the Federal Government is investing 5 billion euros in digitisation in general-education schools (skills development and IT equipment).

In its position paper, BAGSO calls for⁴ the nationwide provision of low-threshold learning opportunities and exercises for older people carried out by professionals trained in media education who take into account the diversity of older people and their different levels of knowledge and gear the content to older people's everyday situations and individual purpose.

In addition, BAGSO is calling for the nationwide establishment of independent places where media and digital technologies can be tested. These can also be closely linked to educational opportunities.

VI. Technological research and development

The Expert Commission explains in detail that there is still considerable need for research on the topic of "old age and digitalisation" in Germany. In particular, there is a lack of large-scale, high-quality and independent research to better assess the benefits and impact of digital technologies in the everyday lives of older people. BAGSO therefore considers it necessary to systematically evaluate findings and experiences from national and international model projects. This would provide an opportunity to gain insights for future developments and to derive specific measures and consolidate successful model programmes in the long term.

⁴ BAGSO Position Paper "Older people in a digital world" (<https://www.bagso.de/publikationen/positionspapier/older-persons-in-a-digital-world/>) (in English).

Concluding remark

The purpose of the reports on older people to the Federal Government is to gain new knowledge on the current life situation of older people and to inform the public about it and hence, they are designed to form the basis for political action. BAGSO therefore calls on federal- and state-level parliaments as well as federal and state governments to carefully consider the issues addressed and the recommendations prepared by the Expert Commission for the Eighth Report on Older People and to derive and implement the necessary measures.

This English executive summary is based on a statement given by the Board of BAGSO in August 2020.

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