

Ageing in digital societies: enablers and barriers to older persons exercising their social rights

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1 Legal and policy framework

1.1 National legislation on digital public administration

In current legislation, there is no right, as such, to equal access to public services undergoing digitalisation.

On 7 October 2016, a digital law was enacted.¹ One of the government's stated objectives at the outset of the bill was to ensure digital access for all, in particular by promoting accessibility to digital public services throughout the country and by facilitating digital access for persons with disabilities.

The issue of equal access to online services is therefore mainly focused on people with disabilities.

In order to make digital technology more accessible to people with disabilities, this law reasserts the obligation for administrations to make their websites accessible. It imposes two new obligations on them: draw up a multi-year accessibility plan and display whether or not they comply with the accessibility rules on the home page of their websites, with financial sanctions if they do not.²

These rules also apply to the websites of public service delegates.

Since then, Article 80 of the law of 5 September 2018 for the freedom to choose one's professional future has amended them, in particular by introducing a limit, namely the "*disproportionate burden for the organisation concerned*".³

In addition, as regards access to public services via an alternative to online channels, most administrative procedures are still possible by sending a paper form.⁴

Furthermore, according to the national strategy for the guidance of public policy, approved by the 2018 law for a state serving a trusted society,⁵ the administration

¹ France, Law No. 2016-1321 for a Digital Republic (*Loi n° 2016-1321 pour une République numérique*), 7 October 2016, available at: www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000033202746/

² France, Law No. 2016-1321 for a Digital Republic (*Loi n° 2016-1321 pour une République numérique*), 7 October 2016, Article 106, available at: www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000033202746/

³ France, Law No. 2018-771 for the freedom to choose one's professional future (*Loi n° 2018-771 pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*), 5 September 2018, available at: www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037367660/.

⁴ France, Senate (*Sénat*), [Reply from the State Secretariat to the Minister for the Economy and Finance and the Minister for Action and Public Accounts, responsible for Digital Affairs](#) to Question No. 13049, 12 December 2019, available at: www.senat.fr/questions/base/2019/qSEQ191113049.html

⁵ France, Law No. 2018-727 for a State at the service of a trustworthy society (*Loi n° 2018-727 pour un Etat au service d'une société de confiance*), available at: www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000037307624/

is required to implement the means required to organise an efficient telephone reception service for users, by 2022.

1.2 National policy, strategy or action plan on the digitalisation of public services or digital inclusion

In 2018, the French government launched a National digital inclusion strategy.⁶

This strategy aims to:

- support people in their efforts to become digitally independent and to take ownership of their lives;
- guarantee human support by giving caregivers the means to bridge the gap between digitised administrative procedures and users;
- offer people support paths;
- support the initiatives of local authorities and local actors.

Older persons or vulnerable groups are not specifically mentioned.

In 2020, the government announced the main measures of the National recovery and resilience plan⁷ to strengthen the actions put in place by the State since 2018, in the framework of this strategy, organised along three lines:

- equip digital helpers who support French people who will never be digitally savvy;
- offer training for citizens;
- support local government initiatives.

A total of 250 million euros will be made available as part of this strategy.

Firstly, the State will finance, to an amount of 200 million euros, the training and activity of 4,000 digital advisors. They will be deployed throughout the country with the aim of developing workshops and hands-on digital training. On the one hand, digital helpers are public services officers, in the front line with users having difficulties with digital technology whereas supporting the public in their digital uses is not one of their core duties. On the other, digital mediators are

⁶ France, National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (*Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires*), "Writing tomorrow's digital society together" ("*Ecrire ensemble la société numérique de demain*"), available at: <https://societenumerique.gouv.fr/fr/>

⁷ France, National recovery and resilience plan ("*Plan national de relance et de résilience*"), 2021, available at : www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-national-de-relance-et-de-resilience-pnrr

professionals whose core duty is to support the public in becoming independent in the use of digital technology.

The State is also to fund the design and deployment of accessible, attractive digital inclusion kits for all local structures (town halls, libraries, social centres, third-party websites and charities), to the tune of 40 million euros.

Also as part of this strategy, the government has set up the digital pass system, which takes the form of booklets of several passes, based on the luncheon voucher model. It entitles beneficiaries to access - in previously eligible locations - digital support services. In practice, people receive a booklet of digital passes from a local structure (public service counter, associations, social workers, etc.) and can then participate in an introductory or advanced digital workshop.

The public targeted by this pass includes the long-term unemployed and "digitally deprived" people. Older persons are not specifically mentioned.

1.3 National recovery and resilience plans covering the digitalisation of public services

The National recovery and resilience plan ("*Plan national de relance et de résilience*") provides funding for a number of initiatives included in the National digital inclusion strategy, mentioned before, in particular with regard to the funding and recruitment of digital advisors.⁸

2 Programmes and practices aimed at ensuring equal access to public services in the digital age

France Service Centres (*Maisons France Services*)

⁸ France, National recovery and resilience plan ("*Plan national de relance et de résilience*"), 2021, available at : www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-national-de-relance-et-de-resilience-pnrr

In 2019, in order to bring public services closer to citizens, regardless of where they live, in towns or in the countryside, the government created a new reception structure: "France service centres" (« *Maisons France Services* »). This new system is based on the existing "Public services centres" (« *Maisons de services au public* ») (MSAP) network. The creation of this new label has made it possible to respond to one of the recommendations of the previous report of the Defender of Rights ("*Défenseur des droits*"), which recommended the creation of a local public service bringing together a representative of several public services in order to provide a broad range of support for users. The France Services spaces, most often in the form of "centres", or sometimes travelling buses, are part of an approach aiming to re-establish the presence of counters and physical reception structures for users, contrary to the idea that public services could be provided completely online.

Resulting from a partnership between the State, local authorities and public service operators, and created to meet the needs of citizens who do not have online access, in particular in rural and suburban areas, France Service accredited public service centres receive, guide and support users in their daily activities (social services, access to employment, energy, etc.). Facilitators are trained by partner operators, such as the National retirement pension insurance scheme ("*Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Vieillesse - CNAV*"), the Health assurance scheme ("*Assurance Maladie*"), the Job Centre ("*Pôle Emploi*"), the Post Office ("*La Poste*") and many others, to deliver services on their behalf.

One of the requirements of the France Services accreditation is that the public is received by at least two officers trained to assist citizens in their queries. There are already some 1,700 digital advisors working in France Services reception structures and 2,200 being trained throughout the country.⁹

3 Research and data focused on equal access to public services in the digital age

The French Ombudsman, the Defender of Rights (DDD), mentions the difficulties of access to rights and public services induced by the dematerialisation of the systems put in place, but in a very general way by referring to the received complaints, without providing any figures.¹⁰

⁹ France, National Assembly (*Assemblée nationale*), Reply from the Minister of Digital transition and electronic communications to Question No. 42741, 15 February 2022, available at: <https://questions.assemblee-nationale.fr/q15/15-42741QE.htm>.

¹⁰ France, Defender of Rights ("*Défenseur des droits*"), 2021 Annual Report (*Rapport annuel 2021*)(2022), available at : www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ddd_rapport-annuel-2021_20220627.pdf.

In October 2021, however, it published a study on the difficulty older adults have in accessing their rights, including a section on difficulties in accessing public services online.¹¹

The survey was conducted by phone from 22 September to 31 October 2020 among a representative sample of 2,506 older people living at home.

23% of the respondents aged 65 and over said they had encountered difficulties in completing their administrative procedures.

According to this survey, people aged 65 or more using the Internet less than once a week reported having more difficulties in completing administrative procedures online than people using the Internet more frequently. In its study, the DDD states that 30% of the sample reported not having Internet access at home; this proportion increased sharply with age (21% of 65-74 year olds, 38% of 75-84 year olds and 53% of 85 year olds or more).

In addition to older persons, among the most affected groups, the report identifies people with disabilities (only 40% of public sites are accessible), young people, with a quarter of 18-24 year olds indicating that they have encountered difficulties in carrying out online procedures on their own (i.e. 14 points more than the average), but also protected adults, detainees, foreign nationals, and socially vulnerable people.

¹¹ France, Defender of Rights ("*Défenseur des droits*"), "Difficulties in accessing rights and advanced-age-related discrimination" (« *Difficultés d'accès aux droits et discriminations liées à l'âge avancé* »), October 2021, available at: www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/et_res-discri-age-num-24.09.21-2_1.pdf

4 State of digitalisation of selected public services

		Selected public services relevant for older persons			
		Access to health records	Public statutory pensions	Social benefits	Other (as relevant in your context)
Stage of digitalisation	Not digitalised (Y/N)	N	N	N	
	Information is available online (Y/N)	Y ¹²	Y ¹³	Y ¹⁴	
	Transactions are possible online (Y/N)	Y	Y	Y	
Recognition of groups at risk of digital exclusion	Service specific regulation recognises barriers to digital inclusion / vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Y/N).	Y	Y	Y	

¹² www.monespacesante.fr/

¹³ www.info-retraite.fr/portail-services/login

¹⁴ www.mesdroitssociaux.gouv.fr/accueil/

	<p>If yes, please list the barriers and groups that are mentioned.</p>	<p>Online public communication services for public services must be accessible to people with disabilities.</p> <p>However, the public health part of the website is currently reported as "not complying" with the standard laid down for this purpose by the government (the RGAA).</p> <p>Improvements are therefore forthcoming.</p>	<p>Online public communication services for public services must be accessible to people with disabilities.</p> <p>The retirement pensions part of the website is currently reported as not complying with the standard laid down for this purpose by the government (the RGAA).</p>	<p>Online public communication services for public services must be accessible to people with disabilities.</p> <p>The social benefits part of the website is currently reported as partially complying with the standard laid down for this purpose by the government (the RGAA), with a percentage of 81.58% on 22 December 2021.</p>	
Multichannel access options	<p>Telephone service (Y/N)</p> <p>If yes, please describe what kind of personalised services it provides.</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>One hotline, available from Monday to Friday, from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>One hotline, available from Monday to Friday, from 8 am to 5 pm</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>One hotline, available from Monday to Friday, from 8:30 to 12:30 am and from 1:30 pm to 17 pm</p>	
	<p>Physical administrative access points (Y/N).</p> <p>If yes, please specify the level of availability (local, regional, national), the opening days and hours.</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>Access to health records can be requested from the health professional or the health institution.</p> <p>It can be requested by the person concerned, his or</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>Local: several family allowance funds (<i>caisses d'allocations familiales</i>) in each Department</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>Local: several family allowance funds (<i>caisses d'allocations familiales</i>) in each Department.</p>	

		<p>her beneficiary in the event of that person's death, the holder of parental authority, the guardian or the doctor appointed as intermediary.</p> <p>Data can be printed on site or sent by post.</p>			
	<p>Specific locations that facilitate offline access to the service (Y/N)</p> <p>If yes, indicate the location(s).</p> <p>Please describe what kind of support is provided.</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The network of "France services" accredited structures comprises 2,197 local one-stop shops, spread throughout the country, and bringing together several administrations, including the health insurance scheme, on their sites.</p> <p>There is no offline access to health records.</p> <p>There is offline access to health insurance matters.</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The network of "France Services" accredited structures comprises 2,055 local one-stop shops, spread throughout the country, and bringing together several administrations, including the retirement pension insurance scheme, on their sites</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The network of "France Services" accredited structures comprises 2,055 local one-stop shops, spread throughout the country, and bringing together several administrations, including the Family Allowance Funds, on their sites.</p>	
	<p>Specific locations that facilitate online access to the service (Y/N).</p> <p>If yes, indicate the location(s).</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The "France services" reception structures, spread throughout the country (2,197), provide access to</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The "France services" reception structures, spread throughout the country, provide access to</p>	<p>Y</p> <p>The "France services" reception structures, spread throughout the country, provide access to</p>	

	Please describe what kind of support is provided.	self-service computer stations. In addition, officers support users in the use of computer and digital tools.	self-service computer stations. In addition, officers support users in the use of computer and digital tools.	self-service computer stations. In addition, officers support users in the use of computer and digital tools.	
	Other – please indicate any other access channels to the service.	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Other forms of support for online use	Please indicate any other form of support to facilitate the use of the online service for older persons such as easy-to-read versions, different language versions, etc.	Public services websites must be accessible to people with disabilities. The standard laid down by the government (general accessibility improvement standard – RGAA (<i>référentiel général d'amélioration de l'accessibilité</i>)), provides for a number of requirements in this regard: text size, easy-to-understand language, etc.	Public services websites must be accessible to people with disabilities. The standard laid down by the government (general accessibility improvement standard – RGAA (<i>référentiel général d'amélioration de l'accessibilité</i>)), provides for a number of requirements in this regard: text size, easy-to-understand language, etc.	Public services websites must be accessible to people with disabilities. The standard laid down by the government (general accessibility improvement standard – RGAA (<i>référentiel général d'amélioration de l'accessibilité</i>)), provides for a number of requirements in this regard: text size, easy-to-understand language, etc.	