

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

Ireland

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1 Legal and policy framework

1.1 National legislation on digital public administration

As it stands, Irish digital public administration largely emerges from policy rather than law. However, some relevant legal instruments interact with the policy, such as the Disability Act 2005,¹ the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014,² and the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015.³

Under Section 26 of the Disability Act 2005, all public services are to be accessible to persons with disabilities “where practicable and appropriate”. This will be highly relevant to the transition to the digitalization of public services, and to persons aged 60 and older, as 31.4% have a disability.⁴ Under this Act there is a code of practice which offers guidance to service providers in ensuring accessibility.⁵ The guidance could be more ambitious. For example, it only requires the production of plain language versions of documents where the information is ‘directly relevant’ to persons with intellectual disabilities.

Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 legally created the public sector human rights and equality duty. Under this, public bodies must account for the elimination of discrimination, the promotion of equality, and the protection of human rights while carrying out their functions. This would cover the design and implementation of digital public services, including offline alternatives.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 provides for a Decision Support Service which has yet to come into force.⁶ This service will assist persons with limited decision-making capacity and could play a role in the consent and safeguarding aspects of digital public services, particularly e-health. However, the Act only provides safeguards in cases where the service user has limited capacity. For service users with full functional capacity, other safeguarding legislation is necessary.

¹ Houses of the Oireachtas, [Disability Act, 2005](#) (Act 14 of 2005).

² Houses of the Oireachtas, [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014](#) (Act 25 of 2014).

³ Houses of the Oireachtas, [Assisted Decision-Making \(Capacity\) Act, 2015](#) (Act 64 of 2015).

⁴ Data from the National Census 2016, issued by the [Central Statistics Office of Ireland](#).

⁵ Government of Ireland, Minister of Justice, [S.I. No. 163/2006 - Disability Act 2005 \(Code of Practice\) \(Declaration\) Order 2006](#) (S.I. No. 163 of 2006).

⁶ The [Decision Support Service](#) (DSS) would be operational in mid-2022.

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

Harnessing Digital: the Digital Ireland Framework. The most recent policy instrument that deals with the digitalisation of public services and digital inclusion is the latest national digital strategy, “Harnessing Digital: The Digital Ireland Framework” (2022).⁷ This policy approach to digital skills is overwhelmingly focused on their development in the workforce. Its discussion of digital inclusion and broader society reiterates commitments and values found in the “Adult Literacy for Life” (2021).⁸

One of the four dimensions named in the strategy is the digitalisation of public services. It wants online services to be co-created with stakeholders, including the public. The Digital Ireland Framework commits to expanding digital public services so 90% of transactions are conducted digitally by 2030. Simultaneously, it recognizes the commitment in the “Adult Literacy for Life” to reducing the proportion of the population who lack basic digital skills from 47% to 20% by 2030. This means that at least 10% of engagements with digital public services would be with persons who lack basic digital skills. It may be higher, as those who lack basic digital skills may have other disadvantages that bring them into more frequent contact with state support schemes. The 20% still lacking basic digital skills by 2030 will be disproportionately comprised of older persons. However, the Digital Ireland Framework commits to ensuring that groups within society are not left behind. Service delivery is to be user-focused and assisted digital supports will be available where appropriate.

The national digital strategy provides limited detail on assisted digital support. These are not intended to totally replace offline options, which should still be available “where appropriate”. Assisted digital implies some level of training, as those who receive assisted digital support are expected to become increasingly able to independently navigate digital services.

The national digital strategy references the National Development Plan which spells out commitments to e-health, including to the development of an integrated financial management system. The national digital strategy enumerates further e-health systems to be developed over the 2022-2025 period: electronic prescribing, Electronic Health Records, Shared Care Record, National Medical Imaging System, Integrated Patient Management System, and the Maternal and New-born Clinical Management System. It also commits to the delivery of a new e-health strategy by 2030.

⁷ Government of Ireland, Department of the Taoiseach (2022), [Harnessing Digital. The Digital Ireland Framework](#), February 2022.

⁸ Government of Ireland, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021), ['Adult Literacy for Life' - a 10-year adult literacy strategy](#), September 2021.

Finally, the national digital strategy states that Ireland will develop a national Digital Decade Strategic Roadmap for up to 2030, working closely with the EU Commission, which will set out Ireland's plans for achieving EU level objectives and targets.

Connecting Government 2030: A Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland's Public Service (2022).⁹ This strategy suggests offline alternatives should be only available to those unable to access digital services, rather than as a matter of preference, which contradicts the 2021 Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy.¹⁰

Adult Literacy for Life – A 10-Year Adult Literacy Strategy (2021).¹¹ This strategy recognizes persons aged 55 and older as a particular group facing issues around literacy and numeracy, sometimes framed as those specifically in the labour force. As a "vulnerable cohort", they are one of twelve groups identified for targeted funding in the "furthest behind first" section. Strategies for assisting these hard-to-reach cohorts in accessing digital skills training and support include community-based responses and the use of community development groups, peer mentors, learner champions and ambassadors. Educational institutions and organizations, particularly the Education and Training Boards, are expected to develop relationships with community actors, and training is expected to be tied into wider health, community development, and employment systems and practices. It also recognizes the presence of text and numbers in the digital world, and therefore the overlap between literacy and numeracy issues and digital exclusion. The strategy recognizes the risks created by reliance on a wide variety of community-based actors, in terms of end-users being overwhelmed by choices. It proposes the solutions of a nation-wide campaign on digital literacy and the creation of a single entry point into digital and literacy training.

Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy (2021).¹² This strategy, designed to set the course for the civil service, commits to a "digital first" approach to service delivery. However, it ensures that offline options are to be available where service users simply prefer them to digital options, rather than only being available in cases where service users lack basic digital skills or online access. It reemphasizes goals set in the national digital strategy as well as committing to fostering public trust in digital services. A key benefit of the digitalization of public services identified in this strategy is that service users will only have to input information once, which can then be used repeatedly across services. This reduces the burden of paperwork and the deterrent effect that form-filling may have on the uptake of services.

⁹ Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022), [Connecting Government 2030: A Digital and ICT Strategy for Ireland's Public Service](#), April 2022.

¹⁰ Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022), [Civil Service Renewal 2030](#), December 2021.

¹¹ Government of Ireland, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021), ['Adult Literacy for Life' - a 10-year adult literacy strategy](#), September 2021.

¹² Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022), [Civil Service Renewal 2030](#), December 2021.

The eGovernment Strategy 2017-2020.¹³ This earlier strategy commits to “digital by default” rather than digital first. It states that offline options will be preserved and available to those unable to access digital options (including where this is due to personal preference), and assisted digital supports would be explored to be made available to those who feel they might benefit from them. This implies that there would be no test to determine whether someone is entitled to receive assisted digital support. The development of the digital services would conform to accessibility principles of universal design.

Sláintecare (2017). Sláintecare originated as an Oireachtas (parliament) committee report on health and medical services on which implementation plans for healthcare reform were subsequently built. It relies heavily on the expansion of e-health.¹⁴ It also prioritizes older persons’ services. Despite this, it does not address the low levels of digital skills among older persons in Ireland, or the rural urban divide that exists when it comes to both literacy levels and broadband access.¹⁵

Public Service ICT Strategy (2015).¹⁶ This strategy defines “digital first” as a system in which the digital option is compelling and intuitive, and therefore service users will choose it over offline options. This means that digital first is about making digital services preferable rather than creating penalties for or obstacles to availing of alternatives.

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

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021¹⁷ had the acceleration and expansion of digital reforms and transformation as one of its three priority areas. It sees a strengthening of collaboration between the government and the public as part of the digitalization process. It committed to the development of a ten-year literacy strategy, which would become the “Adult Learning for Life Strategy”, to narrow the digital divide. However, its discussion of the digital divide is largely in relation to formal education, rather than the non-formal training preferred by older persons.

¹³ Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022), [eGovernment Strategy 2017-2020](#), February 2021.

¹⁴ For the most recent progress report of the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023 see: Government of Ireland, Department of Health (2021), [Sláintecare Progress Report 2021](#), February 2022.

¹⁵ Jacquemard, T. (2021), [eHealth in Ireland. Social and Ethical Values in Irish Policy on eHealth](#), Library and Research Service of the Houses of the Oireachtas, March 2021.

¹⁶ Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2019), [Public Service ICT Strategy](#), January 2019.

¹⁷ Government of Ireland, Department of the Taoiseach (2021), [The National Recovery and Resilience Plan](#), July 2021.

The plan invests significantly in e-health technology, intended to facilitate a community-based model of healthcare. It is meant to make healthcare more efficient, promote independent living, and reduce pressure on acute services. Though the National Recovery and Resilience Plan does acknowledge the digital divide, in line with Adult Literacy for Life, it does not marry this with e-health or examine the particular barriers to fair and effective e-health practices created by digital exclusion.

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

Programmes and practices intended to ensure equal access to public services in the digital age can be sorted into several categories: improving basic digital skills; expanding internet access, including through the development of access to broadband; improving accessibility, such as through promoting Universal Design;¹⁸ developing assisted digital supports; ensuring equitable offline access to public services; and providing support services that are applicable regardless of the mode of accessing public services, such as the Decision Support Service.¹⁹

Under the “Adult Literacy for Life”, the cross-government implementation group is to consider establishing a single digital literacy assessment tool which can be used online. This would be rolled out under a one stop shop to promote and connect people with resources on literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. The Digital Skills for Citizens scheme²⁰ provides ten hours of free training per individual in classroom settings. Given how much technology is likely to change in 20 or 30 years, it is likely that older adults will need more than ten hours of training to remain adequately skilled to access digital public services.

The Government’s National Broadband Plan, published in 2012, seeks to make highspeed broadband services available to all premises in Ireland.²¹ Crucially, this includes the State setting up high speed broadband services in areas, usually rural, where private enterprise is not incentivized to invest. In the shorter term, the Plan provides for the establishment of “Broadband Connection Points”, accessible community spaces with highspeed broadband in areas still awaiting the full

¹⁸The [Centre for Excellence in Universal Design \(CEUD\)](#) was established by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in January 2007 under the Disability Act 2005.

¹⁹ The [Decision Support Service \(DSS\)](#) would be operational in mid-2022.

²⁰ Government of Ireland, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (2021), [Digital Skills for Citizens Scheme](#), April 2021.

²¹ For the delivery of the [National Broadband Plan](#), the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications of Ireland signed a contract in November 2019; this led to the creation of [National Broadband Ireland](#), to build, operate and maintain the network.

delivery of the Plan. According to the national digital strategy, digital skills and literacy courses are being piloted at some of these connection points.

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

According to their most recent report (2020), the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) heard 97 discrimination complaints under the Equal Status Acts, and 242 under the Employment Equality Acts.²² However, the WRC report did not specify the grounds or the age groups associated to the complaints, for which is not possible to determine how many age-based complaints were included or how many of those were related to access to public services. In their 2020 Annual Report, they did break down complaints lodged under the Equal Status Acts: 31 complaints out of 452 were made on the grounds of age;²³ however, there is no indication on how many of these pertained to access to public services. It is important to note that the number of complaints lodged is significantly higher than the number of complaints adjudicated on by the WRC.

For the year 2021, 160 complaints made under the Equal Status Acts – which prohibit discrimination in the delivery of public services, were published on the WRC’s website. None of these were taken by an older person alleging discrimination on grounds of age in accessing a public service. It should however be noted that complaints under employment and equality legislation can only be made to the WRC via a form on their website, which might prevent some older persons making complaints.²⁴

Research was conducted under some of the strategies outlined above. Under the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy, research identified that many adults (of all ages) without literacy or digital skills prefer informal training. The Strategy drew from an in-depth consultation process which involved an online poll, pro-active engagement with hard-to-reach communities, bilaterals, and open public consultations. The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy²⁵ makes use of the Digital Economy and Society Index,²⁶ particularly its metric for evaluating digital basic skills, the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp).²⁷ Under the Public Service ICT Strategy (2015),²⁸ public feedback on digital services was to be

²² Workplace Relations Commission (2021), [Review of WRC Adjudication Decisions and Recommendations, January - December 2020](#), January 2021.

²³ Workplace Relations Commission (2021), [Annual Report 2020](#), January 2021, p. 23.

²⁴ Workplace Relations Commission (2017), [Guide to the Workplace Relations Commission](#), Dublin.

²⁵ Government of Ireland, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021), ['Adult Literacy for Life' - a 10-year adult literacy strategy](#), September 2021.

²⁶ The [Digital Economy and Society Index](#) (DESI) is a tool used by the European Commission to monitor Member States’ digital progress since 2014.

²⁷ The [Digital Competence Framework for Citizens](#) (DigComp) provides a common understanding of what digital competence is. It also provides a basis for framing digital skills policy.

²⁸ Government of Ireland, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2019), [Public Service ICT Strategy](#), January 2019.

gathered through customer satisfaction surveys and ongoing consultations with citizens.

The Digital Ireland Strategy envisioned that the digitalization of public services would involve greater publication of data by public services for research and policy purposes. This would occur under a proposed Public Service Digital Strategy which would plan for the safe and effective use of public service data.

The Central Statistics Office conducts an annual Information Society survey on people's internet access and use.²⁹ The most recent publicly available findings, from 2020, disaggregate data for persons aged 75 and older as well as 65 and older. Concerning the use of e-government, 55% of persons aged 65-74 used public service websites or apps to access information, up 10% from 2019. 65% of persons submitted official forms to these websites or apps, up 9% from 2019. The average across age groups was 53% for accessing information, and 63% for submitting forms. However, across age groups, 61% of those who did not submit a form online did not need to submit any forms at all. For persons aged 65-74, only 57% cited this as their reason. They were the most likely to have not submitted official forms online because they did not know how, had data privacy concerns, or because someone else did it on their behalf. The sample among those aged 75+ was not significant.

²⁹ The [Information Society survey data](#) is available on the website of the Central Statistics Office.

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	Digitalised (Y/N)	Y ³⁰	N	Y	
	Information is available online (Y/N)	Y	Y	Y	
	Transactions are possible online (Y/N)	N	N	Y	
Recognition of groups at risk of digital exclusion	Service specific regulation recognises barriers to digital inclusion / vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Y/N).	N	N	N	
	If yes , please list the barriers and groups that are mentioned.				
Multichannel access options	Telephone service (Y/N) If yes , please describe what kind of personalised services it provides.	N	Y Applicants can call the Department of Social Protection with queries.	Y Intreo ³¹ centres and local social welfare branch offices may respond to queries over the phone. The National Intreo Contact Centre can be reached over the phone and will direct callers to the appropriate office.	

³⁰ There is an electronic health records programme under the Health Service Executive, but the service has not been rolled out yet.

³¹ Intreo, is the [Irish Public Employment Service](#) (Intreo stands for "Integrated Employment and Support Service") and is part of the Department of Social Protection. Intreo Centers are single points of contact for all employment and income supports and services.

	<p>Physical administrative access points (Y/N). If yes, please specify the level of availability (local, regional, national), the opening days and hours.</p>	N	Y There are 128 Intreo centres and local social welfare branch offices across the country. They are generally open during regular business hours (Monday to Friday).	Y There are 128 Intreo centres and local social welfare branch offices across the country. They are generally open during regular business hours (Monday to Friday).	
	<p>Specific locations that facilitate offline access to the service (Y/N) If yes, indicate the location(s). Please describe what kind of support is provided.</p>	N	Y An applicant's local Intreo centre, social welfare branch office, or citizens information centre can assist them with filling out relevant forms.	Y An applicant's local Intreo centre, social welfare branch office, or citizens information centre can assist them with filling out relevant forms.	
	<p>Specific locations that facilitate online access to the service (Y/N). If yes, indicate the location(s). Please describe what kind of support is provided.</p>	N	N Though not tailored to supporting access to public services, some public libraries and other 'Broadband Connection Points' ³² across the country provide free, open access to the internet through which users can obtain information or submit applications.	N Though not tailored to supporting access to public services, some public libraries and other 'Broadband Connection Points' across the country provide free, open access to the internet through which users can obtain information or submit applications.	
	<p>Other – please indicate any other access channels to the service.</p>		Applicants can receive and submit forms through the post.	Applicants can receive and submit forms through the post.	

³² In Ireland, [Broadband Connection Points](#) (BCPs) are public locations which have been selected to receive high-speed connectivity as part of the National Broadband Plan. The locations of the BCPs have been selected by local authorities and include public areas such as community halls, libraries, sports facilities, enterprise hubs, tourist locations and other public spaces.

<p>Other forms of support for online use</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>The electronic health records programme has not yet been rolled out, so it is unknown what measures will be taken to facilitate its use for older persons.</p>	<p>There is no online service related to pensions, other than website pages providing information. These are available on the government website, gov.ie, and on the citizens information website. Both of these websites partially conform with the Web Content Accessibility Guide 2.1 AA. Compliance with this guide is required by the European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020. Both of these websites are available through the English or Irish language.</p>	<p>The website of the Department of Social Protection, where transactions can occur, partially conforms with the Web Content Accessibility Guide 2.1.</p>	
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