



**EASPD**

**The future is now: Person Centred  
Technology to empower persons  
and disability services**

Conference Report

# The future is now: Person Centred Technology to empower persons and disability services

## Conference Report

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European Association of Service providers  
for Persons with Disabilities

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## Executive Summary

The use of technology and the increasing digitalisation of our societies poses both opportunities and challenges to persons with disabilities and the social services who support them. Across the world innovative uses of Person-Centred Technology (PCT) as well as Assistive Technology (AT) are driving the provision of ICT-enabled services, which increase the participation of persons with disabilities in society and improve their quality of life.

In many sectors the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the uptake of digital solutions; accelerated the transition towards digitalisation and driven innovation in the sector. The current innovations of today are driving the future of support provision and the delivery of high-quality, person-centred disability services which promote the full implementation of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. EASPD's conference: *'The future is now: Person Centred Technology to empower persons and disability services'* brought together participants to explore the way forward for the use of technology in service provision for persons with disabilities.

The conference was organised to cover the following five key areas:

- Sharing good practices and the direction of the digital transition in the area of service provision for persons with disabilities.
- Building on the impact of COVID-19 on moving services online for persons with disabilities and present lessons learnt.
- Proposing new ways to address the digital divide in the context of persons with disabilities.
- Presenting the most relevant technologies in area of service provision for persons with disabilities.
- Presenting the latest innovative European projects on technology.

The conference also touched on the importance collaboration among the stakeholders to encourage the co-production of future activities. This will help the sector to recover from the pandemic and ensure a digital space that is accessible for persons with disabilities, older persons and those who are on the verge of exclusion. Any economic recovery must put underrepresented communities in the centre, not on the periphery, in order to truly be a step forward. The solutions that EASPD's member will create using different aspects of technology, will not only help their communities and the wider society, but will be essential as we continue to respond and recover from this pandemic and future crisis.

EASPD navigated through growth and challenges in past 25 years ensuring high-quality, and user-centred services for persons with disabilities by running in an accountable, efficient and effective way. This report outlines the snapshots of EASPD's annual conference hosted to bring together its members and key stakeholders. It also outlines EASPD's continued commitment and actions that will support the members to strengthen their capacity in the field of technology to develop service of future.

## Introduction

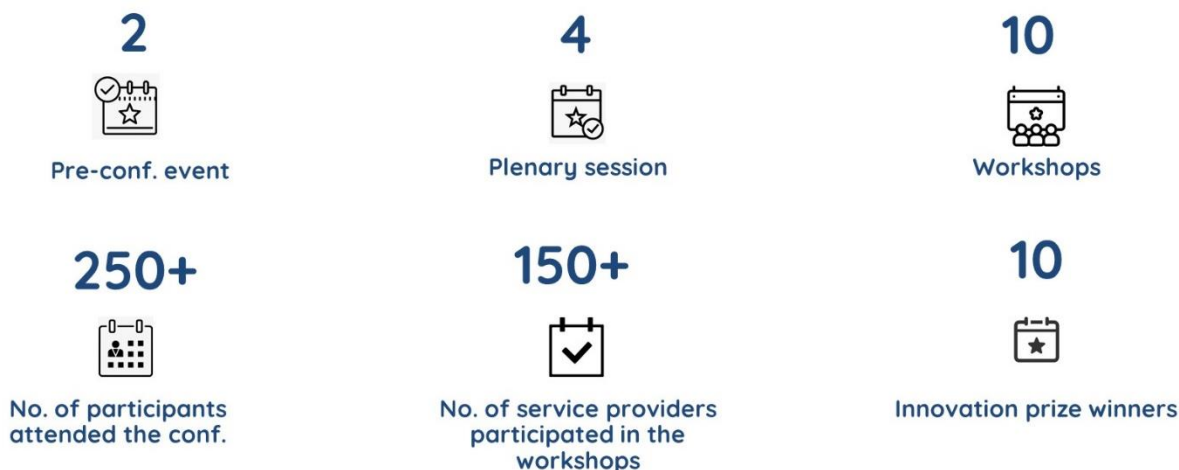
The digital revolution must not be seen as an isolated phenomenon or trend. It comes with a set of challenges that are interlinked to other trends in society, such as demographic and social-economic trends, as well as the changing perception of disability, which need to be properly analysed as well, to get a clear picture of what we can expect or aim for, as a sector.

The way services are provided to persons with disabilities has been undergoing substantial change over the past decades. Many services are moving towards the human rights-based approach supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This fundamental change brings to the core of service provision the needs and preferences of each individual and their self-determination. At the same time, the changes in the design and delivery of services are clearly yet to be fully accomplished, at a policy and practical level. This represents a challenge for the service provision of tomorrow as well as for policy makers at EU and national level.

To steer this process in the right direction and create services of the future that are respectful for the rights of the individual, empowering, effective and efficient, whilst valuing the role of the staff, different barriers must be overcome, at societal, community and personal level.

We need to adapt a holistic approach and a vision shared by all stakeholders that move in the same direction, although with different roles and responsibilities. Key-players in this process are policymakers, commissioners of services and care providers themselves.

European Association of Service Providers for Person with Disabilities (EASPD) is an umbrella organisation representing more than 20,000 service providers across Europe. EASPD organised an in-person conference on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2021 in Brussels. The aim of the conference was to help its members and stakeholder understand technological trends along with possible contribution to the development of services of the future for person with disabilities.



## Challenges and opportunities of technology adoption in support service for person with disability

The sessions of the conference covered a range of topics concerning the changing context of social care and support service in Europe with the rise of technological advancement. The session speakers highlighted the impact of technology on the empowerment of persons and organisations, the current challenges, policy framework, opportunities, and collective attempts to build sustainable solutions. The key insights from the plenary sessions and workshops are illustrated below.

### Insights from the plenary sessions

#### **Accessibility is the key to digital inclusion**

It is crucial that online services should be accessible to persons with disabilities. Mr. Klaus Miesenberger, from Johannes Kepler University Linz described the importance of accessible platforms and invites stakeholder in social care sector to adapt and mainstream accessibility at their organisational level through highly effective method such as change management.

EASPD being an umbrella organisation can play a pivotal role in facilitating accessibility training for service providers by putting accessibility at the core. On the other hand, private tech companies need to include users in the development and design phase of products. Commercial companies work more with end users, compared to public sector because it is coherent with business logic. Public and private stakeholders should work together to improve users' involvement in all the steps and users should become accessibility experts.

Susanna Laurin, from FUNKA highlighted the need for user involvement in the process of building accessible platforms. She stressed that the current effort is not enough, we need to include users in the development and design phase of products in the private sector. A lot of service providers are struggling to survive.

It is important to ask ourselves: How can service providers pay for AI technologies? How can the EU help the poorer countries to purchase these devices?

She also mentioned some instruments (recovery Fund, Structural Funds) and funds associated to the universal services in telecommunication available since the 90s to make universal mainstream services more accessible. EU funds can be used and can help. In service provision technology was not a priority many years ago but now it is increasing.

To this end, the European commission is coming out with a study looking into how accessibility is being put in technology in digital and disability plans at the Member State and EU level. However, practical implementation to ensure accessibility remains a challenge. There is still a lot to do to increase the use of technology as a means to empower persons with disabilities and support independent living.

Neil Milliken, from ATOS highlighted the importance of accessibility to foster inclusive education. Accessibility training for teachers is highly important which can be enhanced by building an ecosystem where tech companies can work more closely with users, trainers, and assistive technology experts.

## **Assistive Technologies - the future is now**

Evert-Jan Hoogerwerf from AIAS Bologna highlighted that the aim of using technology should be concentrated more in empowering persons and organisation by bringing a win-win situations such as improved working conditions, skill enhancement of the staffs, users' quality of life etc. He explains the emerging technologies and its benefits for the social care and service sector. These include Swarm intelligence (SI) which is the collective behavior of decentralized, self-organized systems, natural or artificial, awareness of others/environment, autonomy and self-coordination, solidarity.

Nadia Hadad highlighted different aspects of persons with disabilities to find and organise provision of the support they need. Digital Platforms hold a lot of potential. For instance, arranging one's schedule when needing personal assistance, quick way to contact a personal assistant etc.

It is necessary to decentralise the system where citizens and services can report on the services they are receiving. Technology cannot replace human support, it is the responsibility of policy makers to ensure that technology is not used to replace services but is part of a wider policy strategy to increase quality and availability of services, personalization and meeting the needs of persons with disabilities. Any new technology should be developed in consultation with PwD and their representative organisations and involved in policy making.

Sharon Borg from Agenzija Sapport, Malta highlighted the responsibility of the society to help PwD to participate in the political and social sphere, to be able to inform policymakers. She also mentioned some of the key challenges such as lack of policy implementation, lack of funding, lack of skilled human resource etc.

The speakers of the session also responded to a number of questions of the audience. The key conclusions are:

- Technology affects everything we do. The EU lacks a social agenda about technology. All policy has an orientation to benefit the industrial or commercial use of technology and the EU care strategy should include a strong digital agenda.
- Social care and service organisations can be the early adopters of technology; hence, the government should give them space. The EU should adopt a European partnership on the digital divide, making funding available to meet and develop strategies to tackle digital divide.
- Service providers can use technology to create inclusive business models. Social economy can deliver added value by cooperating with the tech-driven economy through promoting the social side of the new innovations.

## **Insights from the workshops**

### **Technology can help foster inclusion of children with disabilities when it mixes accessible digital technology for all and assistive technology**

We are about to experience a paradigm shift towards inclusive education with a redesign of the current education practice to foster the inclusion and participation of all children. Therefore, technologies should be integrated to increase the learners' potential. Every school should also take initiative to start this shift, with careful planning and concrete objectives through collaboration with policymakers, teachers, support professionals which can be a key factor for success behind the change needed.

Each member states should offer disability specific education services. Education should not be restricted to public school life. The EU can play a role in fostering this shift in Member States, with policies and practices with external monitoring.

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*Digital inclusive education = design (inclusive pedagogy) + technology (assistive) + participation*

*- Katerina Mavrou, European University Cyprus*

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**Technology has the potential to play a key role in the achievement of independent living for persons with disabilities.**

Emerging technologies such as blockchain, cloud computing, big data, machine learning, artificial intelligence will be used to navigate the production of future solution in the social care sector. The use of such technologies has many advantages in terms of security, preventing possible manipulation, tampering and fraud. The potential use can be seen in building cross-sectorial trusted platforms for the social sector to streamline the issuing, validation and sharing of documents between services and particularly between the public administration and persons with disabilities or professionals.

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*Emerging technologies will help to build new ecosystem of services which will ensure improved efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency in resource allocation (housing, benefits, support services) that, in return could speed up the implementation of UNCRPD*

*- Ferran Blanco, SUPPORT Girona*

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**Augmentative and Alternative Communication systems can be important tools to ensure the involvement of persons with disabilities who struggle to communicate.**

There is the need to apply a Universal design approach to create more inclusive technologies for all. Furthermore, Universal Design and Assistive technology must be interoperable to ensure a better adaptability of the products to the target group. Especially for children who do not have the ability to use speech as a primary means of communication.

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*Artificial Intelligence (AI) could be one of the game-changers for persons with disabilities. However, it is important to stress the need for AI to be lawful, ethical and robust*

*-Dr. May Aguis, Agenzija Sapport*

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## **Online Platforms are increasingly disrupting the provision of social care and support services, in particular personal assistance and home, day, and respite care, as well as other day-to-day services (transport, etc).**

Platforms are emerging as they are user driven and easy to use, also they meet the need for flexible support, when subsidies support is not available and not adapted to individual needs. Platforms are tools, that can be established by not-for-profit or for-profit enterprises, and their impact is different according to their functioning. To avoid risks of abuses (on users, on workers) a quality assurance accessibility criterion is needed. Platforms could be complementary or in competition with the social services sector depending on the services they offer. It is therefore important for social services to learn about this model and reflect, together with public authorities and other stakeholder, on how they could be established in a way which is beneficial for workers and users.

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*Platforms fulfil a social need present in our societies where families are shrinking in size, kinship network and communities are broken away, technological fix to put on a bondage but not deal with root causes*

*- Mark Bergfeld, Uni Europa*

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## Looking ahead

The digitalization of support services has accelerated tenfold. In the years to come, considerable attention and investment is needed to make the most of the incredible potential of digitalization in enabling more inclusive and effective support. The use of emerging technology is changing the role of service providers supporting persons with disabilities. Moreover, support services have significant experience and knowhow on accessibility and inclusion. The social care and services sector need to make the most of that by reaching out to a wider pool of stakeholders.

To represent the voice of service providers at a policy level, EASPD published a new position paper titled '[EASPD Proposals for the EU Care Strategy](#)' in October 2021. In addition, EASPD's member forum on person-centred technology produced a policy paper titled '[Technology in Social Care and Support Services](#)' at the conference.

Alongside, the launch of EASPD's new strategy 2022-2025: [Moving Forward: smart transformation and building resilience, a comprehensive focus has been given to the digitalization of support services](#). EASPD will prepare and deliver the following research activities in the coming years supporting the effort to build service of the future.

### Research:

- Market research on the development of online platforms in the field of social care and support.
- Concept note on an incubator model for online platforms in the field of social care and support
- Position Paper on Online Platforms in Social Care and Support - "dos and don'ts"

- Position Paper on Digitalisation of the Social Sector: Challenges and Opportunities.

To strengthen the capacity of more than 20,000 support service providers and the beneficiaries, EASPD will continue its effort to develop new project and partnerships that enhance the knowledge and know-how across different areas of technology including accessibility, assistive technology and other emerging technologies. Few examples of the project and partnerships are mentioned below,

**Projects and partnerships:**

- **ENTELIS+** - aims at developing and implementing innovative methods and practices to foster inclusive education and promote common values, as well as enhancing the digital skills and competences of digitally excluded groups.
- **Smart4Health** - enables citizens to manage and bridge their own health data throughout the EU and beyond, advancing own and societal health and wellbeing.
- **DDSkills** – aiming to develop cutting-Edge Digital Skills for professional care givers of Persons with Disabilities and Mental Health Problems.
- **AccessibiliTECH** – aims to develop a next generation search engine that identifies accessible technologies and solutions.
- **RightToConnect** – aims at fostering the digital skills development of PwID to enhance their participation in society and to express active citizenship.

**EASPD is the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities. We are a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 17,000 social services and disability organisations across Europe. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.**