

European Partnership Programme on 'Ageing well in a digital society'

Challenge and opportunity

The population of Europe has undergone a fundamental change in its age structure, with people living longer than ever before. Higher life expectancy through economic, social and medical progress has meant that our population is becoming steadily older. The ageing population brings many challenges surrounding quality of life for older people, as well as having a big impact on the labour market. These challenges need to be addressed if we are to continue to live healthy, active and independent lives into our old age.

The ageing population also represents a big opportunity. Digital solutions in health and care can support the wellbeing of older adults in many areas of their daily lives, at home, in their communities and in the health and care system itself. They can also support care professionals and informal carers and help tap into the labour potential of fit and healthy older people.

The AAL Programme

Since 2008, the AAL Programme has been contributing to the improved wellbeing of older people by developing and adapting digital products and services that address the challenges we all face as we grow older. In turn, this has helped strengthen industrial opportunities in the field of active and assisted living technology. The programme, which is a partnership of member states supported by the EC through its research funding programmes, has been funding projects to do this work. Each project consists of SMEs, research bodies and end-user organisations and more than 220 projects have been funded since AAL began.

The projects have addressed a number of issues, including management of chronic conditions, social inclusion, access to online services, mobility, management of daily activities, and support from informal carers. AAL has helped lay the foundation for a new market segment for older adults. Innovative home assistance solutions, community initiatives for pooling health, care and social services, and ways to redesign the workplace have all entered the market.

Perhaps as important, however, is that AAL has created an active network of experts and stakeholders that is unique in Europe. As well as being involved in the development of new products and services designed for the older person, many of these stakeholders have also been involved in the strategic direction of AAL. This has helped drive the focus of the organisation that has had to evolve as technology and attitudes to ageing have changed over the years, too.

Another important tenet of AAL has been putting the end user at the centre of all projects. Collaborating with older people, carers, industry and health providers to find out what works and what doesn't has brought about a number of exciting new technological developments and provided great insight into what is needed now and in the future.

Where we are now

Now, in 2019, we find ourselves in a very different world to the one that existed when AAL started. Technology is developing at lightning speed and in many different directions. There are rapidly expanding digital markets such as in health and social care, in smart home environments, as well as the emergence of technology for the ageing workforce. Ageing well in the context of these markets is now a growing reality.

As well as this, a new narrative is emerging around age itself and what is "old". Many older people are now familiar with technology, have money to spend, and aspirations to remain active and socially connected. These 'new old' adults also possess an enormous pool of skills, competences and experiences that can enrich our labour market. Meanwhile, there is a growing awareness of the

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considerable commercial potential of an active older population, the increasing care needs of those who need assistance at home and the potential of older people to work.

Huge potential

Europe has a long way to go if it is to help all older people benefit from the technological and social innovations that AAL has championed. More investment in delivering innovation to this growing market is needed if we are to see the triple win of improving quality of life for older adults, transforming health and care systems and strengthening Europe’s industrial base.

We propose the formation of a new partnership programme that will bring together people from various European initiatives that already address ageing. Bringing together stakeholders from AAL alongside others from programmes such as EIP on AHA, our mission will be to support the medical advances that have helped to extend the length of people’s lives with digital solutions that improve their quality of life.

While the emphasis on research and innovation into technology and digital solutions will remain, there will be a greater effort to ensure that these solutions are being delivered in the right way to those who need them. Funding for example will be provided both to test solutions at a regional level, and then to work out how these can be made to work in other regions, taking into account differing contextual, social and economic factors that may exist.

Collaboration for success

The proposed new partnership programme will centre around the idea of ecosystems – interconnected collaborations through which technological and social innovations can be quickly shared, as well as the experiences of using and developing them. The partnership will help organisations and innovators in a flexible way in the areas that they need support, such as through targeted pilot projects or system-wide learning and development measures. This ecosystem approach will be the cornerstone of the partnership programme. They will operate at local and regional level, but the aim will be to bring them together and federate their outcomes at the European level to help grow a European-wide market.

Maximising opportunities in the “ageing well” market

This partnership programme will not need to be built from scratch. Past experience and the achievements of AAL will be used. Lessons have been learned about getting innovations to market, while the AAL’s vibrant transnational network of different stakeholders has already been created. The new programme will use these experiences and resources to provide much-needed support for innovative SMEs and to ensure the direct participation of end-users. Such an approach is essential for enabling ecosystems to implement technological solutions on a large scale.

In a broader context, the core value of the new programme will be simple: help people to age well. Wellbeing needs to be considered central to our healthcare systems, as people want to continue leading the lives they have lived as they age.

Moving forward

Support for such a partnership has been growing over the past few years from funding authorities in European countries and regions, as well as from key stakeholders. Currently, 12 funding authorities from 9 countries have expressed their written intention to join such a programme. There is a shared belief across Europe that a programme like this will help to accelerate innovation in this growing market. Connected ecosystems sharing ideas and knowledge will attract public and private investment for products and services that will contribute to the wellbeing of older people as they age well in our increasingly connected society.