Response by the Government of Estonia to the questionnaire on the use of digital technologies in the social protection systems

*1) There appears to be relatively little attention paid to the impact of digital technologies on national social protection systems. It would therefore be most helpful if written submissions could focus on specific case studies involving the introduction of digital technologies in national social protection systems, and address some of the following elements:*

*a) In which part of the social protection system were digital technologies introduced;*

*b) What kind of digital technologies were introduced;*

*c) What were the stated objective(s) cited by politicians and government when introducing those technologies, and how did these reflect the broader political context;*

*d) Were any international organizations involved in the domestic debate about the introduction of digital technologies in the national social protection system;*

*e) Was there a specific legal basis for the introduction of these digital technologies in the social protection system;*

*f) Whether any analysis was undertaken by the government, legislative branch or other state institutions of the implications of the introduction of these technologies in the social protection system from the perspective of existing legal frameworks;*

*g) The extent to which governments relied on the private sector for the design, building and operation of these technologies in the social protection system;*

*h) The costs involved in the design, building and operation of these technologies in the social protection system;*

*i) The expected and actual cost-savings realized through the use of these digital technologies in the social protection system.*

Digital solutions in social care, in addition to healthcare, are beginning to support the well-being of people with disabilities as well as older adults in many areas of their daily lives, at home, in their communities, and in the health and social care system itself. We believe that fostering innovation presents an opportunity to relieve major problems related to care coordination and caregiving, for example, lack of awareness and evidence-based knowledge and care skills, high caregiver burden, uneven availability of care services and insufficient support systems for informal caregivers. The social workforce in local municipalities, caregivers’ networks as well as stakeholders can be greatly empowered by resources, knowledge and best practices of implementing innovation and expanding the use of assistive technology in social care solutions.

With an aim to use digital technologies in welfare and social services that are offered to the public in Estonia, we have recently initiated two open calls [including one using the European Social Fund (ESF)] to financially support converting innovative ideas into service solutions. It is important to note, however, that the projects funded by the calls are still in a very early phase and therefore we cannot give any more concrete examples or data on the solutions yet.

Firstly, the ESF Innovation call, with the goal to aid in the development and piloting of new services and solutions in the social sector. The general aim of this measure is to decrease care burden and to support people with care needs as well as high care burden in having access to the labour market and finding suitable employment, as well as increasing their skills that are needed for staying in employment. The call enables to apply for two separate grants - the small project grant and the main project grant. The small project grant could be used for building a prototype out of a preliminary idea whereas the main project grant could be used to scale up the service or finish the particular stage of the development of a service or product for it to be market-ready and accessible to the end-user. Both local municipalities and private companies can participate.

With the ESF Innovation call grants, various projects will be funded, including projects developing e-service environments, digital communication platforms, status monitoring applications, etc. The digital solutions developed with the grants are in large part developed and provided by the private sector. The ESF Innovation call is coordinated by the education competence centre Innove. The budget of the ESF Innovation call is 5 million euros, however, the actual spending amounts are pending ongoing project activities.

Secondly, the open call for long-term care homes for adapting the physical environment to better suit the care needs of people with dementia. As for the legislative background, the Social Welfare Act and User Data Act were used in the wording of this call. Additionally, the Estonian Data Protection Inspectorate and the Bureau of the Chancellor of Justice were consulted with, prior to the announcement of the call. The objectives of this call are to improve the security of persons diagnosed with dementia in receiving long-term care services, also to increase the capabilities of service providers to provide long-term care services to persons with dementia, and to encourage the use of assistive technology meant for persons with dementia. The grant from this call could be used for the physical adaptions of the care facilities’ outdoor and indoor areas that are used for providing services, as well as acquisition of necessary equipment for ensuring security, maintaining good quality of life, and for supporting everyday self-sufficiency of persons with dementia. This call is applicable both for adapting existing care service facilities and for creating new facilities for providing long-term care services. The acquisition of different assistive technologies, for example a GPS garden and detectors for falling, could also be covered by this grant. The applicant should be either a public body or a private legal body that is providing general care services.

The funded projects will introduce various digital technologies, including GPS tracking, fall detectors and various other monitoring systems, multi-sensory environments, and others. The breadth of the technologies is pending the realization of the projects (the call has just ended and the partners are starting their respective project actions). The digital solutions are in large part provided by the private sector. This open call is coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs. The budget of the call is 1.5 million euros, however, for this call as well, the actual spending amounts are pending ongoing project activities.