The cost or potential of public value? Digital administrative burdens faced by clients seeking social assistance

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Abstract

Social services are adapting to an increasingly digital environment, with municipalities expected to engage citizens through digital channels. This study investigates how clients seeking social assistance perceive and use digital tools as well as the challenges and opportunities that arise when implementing such technologies in line with public service values. The analysis draws on municipal digitalisation documents and interviews with ten clients across three Swedish municipalities of different sizes. Client experiences were interpreted through the framework of aspirational municipal value positions — efficiency, professionalism, service and engagement — as well as administrative burdens, including learning, compliance and psychological costs. The findings show that although municipalities articulate ambitions across all value positions, service and engagement require more direct client involvement. Clients reported benefits and difficulties when applying for assistance digitally. Addressing these challenges requires balancing value positions while mitigating digital burdens. Key areas for improvement include user-centred tool design, human support integration, streamlining application procedures and client and caseworker participation in system development. The study also highlights how experiences in one value position may influence others (e.g. efficiency through time savings enhancing service). Overall, the findings elucidate how digital social services can move from policy to practice while promoting participation and empowerment.

Keywords

Social assistance, Client, Digitalisation, Public value, Administrative burden.

Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation of public services is reshaping how citizens interact with the welfare state. In Sweden — as in many other countries — municipalities in general, and social services in particular, are increasingly expected to digitalise their services and encourage citizens to interact with public authorities through online platforms (Jørgensen et al., 2022). This shift has been promoted as a means of improving public values such as efficiency, accessibility and client engagement (Rose et al., 2015; Luna et al., 2024). However, as public services become more digital, they also risk becoming less accessible for some groups — particularly those who lack the necessary resources, knowledge or support to navigate digital systems. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated this process.

For example, in Italy, challenges and opportunities with digitalization were scrutinised from a professional perspective (Zenarolla, 2024). Zenarolla's study showed that much of the resistance that social workers showed towards information and communication technology before the pandemic was overcome. However, public values that are part of plans and strategies (aspirational value positions) (Rose et al., 2015) and digitalisation must also be investigated and discussed from a citizen perspective (Distel & Lindgren, 2023).

This study focuses on one such group: social service clients applying for social assistance, i.e. means tested financial assistance. These individuals often face complex life situations involving economic insecurity, low educational attainment and health issues. Such vulnerabilities can make them especially susceptible to what has been termed the digital divide — not only in terms of lacking access to devices or the internet but also in terms of digital literacy, institutional trust, language proficiency and the emotional burden of navigating opaque systems (Madsen et al., 2022; Heggertveit et al., 2022). For this group, rather than enhancing access and autonomy, the digitalisation of application processes may impose new administrative burdens that complicate their ability to receive support.

In this context, Sweden is an analytically interesting case because it is one of the world's most digitally advanced countries and because it has strongly promoted e-government initiatives. Nonetheless, it maintains a decentralised welfare model in which municipalities have considerable discretion regarding the organisation of social assistance. This entails variations in the implementation of digital tools and allows us to study not only municipal policy intentions in the form of aspirational value positions (Rose et al., 2015) but also how these translate into practice across local contexts. Moreover, the Swedish system is not unique; many other countries are pursuing similar paths towards digital transformation. Therefore, the Swedish case can provide insights that are relevant beyond the national setting, particularly for countries seeking to balance digital efficiency with inclusion of all citizens.

Despite the growing push for digitalisation, we still know relatively little about how clients themselves experience digital interactions with welfare systems. Previous research

has mostly focused on the organisational or professional implications of digital tools (e.g. de Boer & Raaphorst, 2023; Zenarolla, 2024), with clients' voices remaining underrepresented (Cacopardo, 2025; Madsen et al., 2022; Tarshish & Holler, 2023). Equally important, municipal ambitions are formulated in policies and plans expressing aspirational value positions, which have often been studied from a general viewpoint (Rose et al., 2015). This study addresses this gap between municipal ambitions and client use by analysing clients' experiences with digital tools in the social assistance application process in three Swedish municipalities.

To explore these experiences, we draw on two conceptual frameworks — aspirational value positions (Rose et al., 2015; Distel & Lindgren, 2023) and digital administrative burdens (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Madsen et al., 2022) — as they can help us understand new emerging digital relationships between clients and social services.

In this context, aspirational value positions refer to normative ideals that guide public sector strategies and digitalisation efforts as well as reflect ambitions for how citizens should interact with services. These values — efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement — shape both the design of digital services and the roles assigned to citizens, ranging from passive data providers to active co-creators in policy and service development. The digital administrative burden framework, in turn, helps us assess actual client experiences, through learning, compliance and psychological costs. By using these frameworks, we aim to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and tensions involved in digitalising core welfare services, especially among individuals at the margins of digital societies.

The study responds to urgent questions facing social work and welfare policy today, as it discusses what digital transformation means in practice for vulnerable groups. It also focuses on how their experiences may serve as inputs to attain municipal ambitions when going from policy to practice. Through the lens of aspirational value positions and digital administrative burdens, we asked the following research questions:

- What ambitions do municipalities express regarding the digitalisation of social assistance?
- How do clients describe their experiences with using digital tools when applying for social assistance?
- What challenges and opportunities emerge in municipal efforts to implement digital technologies for social assistance?

Literature review: Public values and administrative burdens

The notion of public value (Moore, 1995) highlights the role of public services in enhancing societal welfare through important ideals such as efficiency, inclusiveness and democratic participation. In their oft-cited theoretical and empirical study, Rose et

al. (2015) identified four aspirational value positions in digital governance that capture assumptions and aspirations about how digital tools contribute to good governance and are linked to distinct ideals: effectiveness (efficiency), accessibility (service), rule-based consistency (professionalism) and participation (engagement).

Subsequent research has shown the prominence of these value positions in strategy and practice in the public sector in general (Persson et al., 2017; Sundberg, 2019) as well as in social work (Ranerup & Svensson, 2024). Interestingly, efficiency, service and professionalism were well represented as aspirational value positions in social work in Swedish municipalities, whereas engagement values were much more unusual (Ranerup & Svensson, 2024). Distel and Lindgren (2023), in a literature review of previous studies using Rose et al.'s (2015) framework, refined the framework by emphasising citizens' roles — as external actors in the efficiency and professionalism positions (focused on self-service and data provision) or as internal actors in service and engagement positions (as co-creators and policy participants). Simply put, according to the efficiency ideal, to save resources, the organisation should have as little interaction as possible with citizens; according to the engagement ideal, citizens participate as active agents in service design and delivery. Thus, the value positions also structure digital service design and clients' roles. The digitalisation of social services is evaluated both in terms of operational efficiency and its alignment with broader societal values, particularly those directly and concretely connected to citizens' actual and perceived activities (Distel & Lindgren, 2023; Luna et al., 2024).

We contribute to the discourse on aspirational value positions from a citizen/client perspective, particularly as clients are in a vulnerable position affected by using digital tools in an especially sensitive relationship (Cacapardo, 2025). Clients' experiences with using digital systems must also be examined through the lens of administrative burden (Burden et al., 2012; Herd & Moynihan, 2018), which refers to the costs imposed on individuals when interacting with public services. These include learning costs (e.g. understanding eligibility and procedures), compliance costs (e.g. repeated data entry) and psychological costs (e.g. stress and stigma). Recent research has called for more attention to how these burdens manifest in digital contexts (Peeters, 2023; Madsen et al., 2022; Heggertveit et al., 2022), including in social work (Tarshish, 2023).

Digital administrative burdens are especially relevant in social assistance contexts, as vulnerable groups, such as clients, often face complex systems with multiple steps (Madsen et al., 2022). While some users appreciate automation and anonymity, others encounter technical and emotional obstacles (Hofman et al., 2024). These experiences vary by digital literacy and access and can be exacerbated by poorly designed systems (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023).

Efforts to reduce digital administrative burdens may target, for example, formal procedures (Benish et al., 2024) or redesign systems for clarity and proactivity (Scholta & Lindgren, 2023). Still, not all support reaches those with low digital literacy (Giest &

Samuels, 2022; Cacopardo, 2025). Thus, client participation in system design becomes critical for aligning aspirational value positions with client needs.

In sum, our investigation of municipal ambitions ('aspirational value positions') and citizens' experiences with using digital tools ('digital administrative burdens') serve as grounds for our discussion of going from policy to practice from a citizen perspective in general (Distel & Lindgren, 2023) and a social assistance client perspective in particular.

Methodological framework

Setting

This study was conducted in three Swedish municipalities — Smalltown, Midtown and Bigtown (with 27,000, 77,000 and 325,000 inhabitants, respectively) — which were selected for their diverse demographic and digital service contexts.

Application process

In Sweden, municipalities independently organise their social assistance application processes, as no national standard exists. All three municipalities in this study actively encourage digital applications, and in two of them, over half of all applications are submitted digitally. Applicants (clients) must use a digital ID and complete an e-application, and sometimes they must provide supporting documentation. Typically, an initial in-person meeting with a social worker is followed primarily by digital communication.

Applications are submitted monthly, with repeat applications being less extensive. The applicant (client) can follow the process through a general tool (My Pages) that shows the application, its result and important dates (e.g. when the money arrives). Social workers use digital decision-support systems to assess eligibility and calculate assistance while also supporting clients' self-sufficiency, often through digitally accessible plans (Nordesjö et al., 2023). Administrative tasks are largely digitalised, with case management systems transferring data between services and providing real-time updates on decisions and payments. The applicant might also use text messages and e-mail in their communications with social workers as well as various applications for digital meetings.

Data collection

The empirical material consisted of policy documents and interviews with clients applying for social assistance (Table 1 further below). The three municipalities were se-

lected through a purposive sampling strategy to ensure variation in size, demographics and digital maturity. This variation was intended to create a broad empirical base rather than to allow for direct comparisons between municipalities. Instead, the material was treated as a collective whole, enabling an analysis of general patterns, challenges and opportunities in the digitalisation of social assistance.

For each municipality, we collected official policy documents and strategic plans issued between 2019 and 2022, covering digitalisation strategies, political directives and follow-up reports. These documents provided insights into how municipalities formulate their digitalisation ambitions and articulate aspirational value positions such as efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement (Rose et al., 2015; Distel & Lindgren, 2023).

We also conducted ten semi-structured interviews with clients applying for social assistance. Participants were recruited through municipal social service offices, ensuring a diversity of digital experiences, including frequent users, non-users and recent adopters. The sample included five men and five women, with an equal distribution of clients under and over 50 years of age. Nine interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; one was documented through detailed field notes at the participant's request. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted in Swedish, either in a quiet room at the social service office or in a public library to ensure privacy and comfort.

The interview guide focused on four thematic areas:

1. The general experience of applying for social assistance, including application duration and frequency. *Example question: Can you tell me about your experiences with applying for social assistance? Have you been applying for a long time, or have you only started applying recently?*
2. Use of e-application systems, including barriers, perceived benefits and usability. *Example question: Have you used the digital application? If so, what works well and what is difficult? If not, why not?*
3. Use of digital follow-up platforms (e.g. My Pages), including perceptions of control and transparency. *Example question: Have you used the My Pages platform to follow your case? How do you feel about the information available there? Can you influence what is written?*
4. Changes in interactions with social workers and perceived support. *Example question: Since the introduction of digital tools, has your contact with social services changed? What is better or worse now compared to before?*

Each interview concluded with open-ended questions to allow participants to share additional experiences or suggestions: «What are the best and worst aspects of digitalisation in your experience? Is there anything you would like to see improved?».

Location	Policy document (D)	Client (C) sex and age	Client computer skills	Client interview duration
Smalltown	D1: Policy document 2013-000626 (2022) D2: Political statement (2019)	C1: M > 50	None	40 min
		C2: M > 50	None	45 min
		C3: F > 50	Experienced	Approx. 30 min
		C4: F < 50	Experienced	40 min
Midtown	D3: Digitalisation Strategy for the Social Service Office (2022)	C5: M < 50	Experienced	30 min
		C6: F < 50	Experienced	38 min
		C7: F > 50	None	Approx. 30 min (not recorded)
Bigtown	D4: Measurement of efficiency (2022) D5: Records from the Social Services Board (2022)	C8: M > 50	None	Approx. 40 min
		C9: M < 50	Experienced	45 min
		C10: F < 50	Experienced	35 min

Table 1 A brief overview of municipalities, documents and clients

Data analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) stepwise framework for thematic analysis and was applied consistently to both the policy documents and interview transcripts. Our analytical approach combined deductive coding, guided by our theoretical frameworks, with inductive coding to capture unanticipated patterns in the data.

1. *Familiarisation*

    All researchers independently read the policy documents and interviews at least three times. Initial readings focused on gaining a deep understanding of the material and taking notes on potential codes, recurring patterns and contradictions. For example, in policy documents, we noted repeated mentions of efficiency and service, while in interviews, we flagged recurring accounts of confusion during the application process.

2. *Initial coding*

   In this phase, we applied deductive coding frameworks tailored to each data source: Policy documents were coded using the framework of aspirational value positions (efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement). For example, a passage describing the introduction of chatbots to speed up case handling was coded under efficiency, while sections describing the training of caseworkers to better support clients were coded under service or professionalism. Interviews were coded using the framework of digital administrative burdens (learning, compliance and psychological costs). For example, statements such as «I had to ask my son to help me log in every time» were coded as learning costs and «technical self-doubt». Across both sources, inductive codes were also developed to capture patterns not anticipated by the theoretical frameworks, such as «trust in specific caseworkers» or «positive surprise about digital tools».

3. *Theme development*

   Related codes were then clustered into broader preliminary themes. For example, in the documents, codes highlighting ambitions for «secure handling» and «real-time integration» were grouped under the theme «professionalism and accountability». In the interviews, codes such as «difficulty navigating homepage', «uploading PDF files in batches» and «needing to ask for help» were grouped under the theme «high learning costs».

4. *Theme review and refinement*

   Themes were reviewed against the full data set to ensure that they were both theoretically coherent and empirically grounded. Overlapping or weak themes were merged or redefined. During this phase, the team met to discuss interpretations and ensure consistency across interview and document analyses. This step ensured that our treatment of documents as empirical data was as systematic as it was for the interviews.

5. *Presentation of themes*

   In the final phase of the analysis, we organised the coded material under the predefined categories derived from our analytical framework — aspirational value positions for the policy documents and administrative burdens for the interviews. For each category, we selected two to three relevant excerpts from the documents (D1-D5) and representative quotations from the interviews (C1-C10) for inclusion in the results. This approach ensured a clear connection between our theoretical framework and the empirical material, while illustrating how institutional ambitions intersect with clients' lived experiences. The process is illustrated in Table 2.

Excerpt	Coding	Theme
«At first, it was really hard to find the right page on the municipality's website. I had to Google it…» (C5)	Navigation difficulties, Google-assisted support	High learning costs
«I had to upload PDF files in batches; it took several e-mails» (C6)	Batch-wise upload, time-consuming	High learning costs
«Everything stays in place the next time I log in, so it saves time» (C4)	Positive feedback, automatic data retention	Reduced learning costs

Table 2 Examples – from excerpt to theme

This systematic process allowed us to examine how municipalities articulated digital ambitions and how clients perceived and navigated digital tools (for some examples, see Table 2).

By applying the same analytic logic across documents and interviews, we were able to treat the material as an integrated empirical base, highlighting patterns that cut across different municipal contexts. As a very last step, based on research about digital innovation and this result we pursued a discussion about opportunities and challenges when going from policy to practice from a client perspective.

Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent, and municipality names were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Ethical approval was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2022-06674-01). Given the vulnerability of the participants — all of whom were clients seeking social assistance — special ethical precautions were taken. Interviewing individuals in precarious life situations raises concerns about power dynamics, voluntariness and potential distress.

We ensured that participation was entirely voluntary, with no influence from caseworkers or service providers. Participants were informed that declining to participate would have no consequences for their ongoing contact with social services. The interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner, and participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable sharing.

The researchers remained attentive to emotional cues and offered to pause or terminate the interviews if needed. We followed the recommendations on ethics in research and good research practices of the Swedish Research Council (2024).

The research team reflected continuously on how their own roles and the institutional context might affect participants' willingness to speak openly. This reflexive approach was especially important given the sensitive nature of the topic and the asymmetrical relationship between clients and the welfare system upon which they depend. Ensuring anonymity and protecting participants' narratives were therefore essential.

Results

This section consists of two parts. We first present an overview of existing aspirational value positions (Rose et al., 2025; Distel & Lindgren, 2023) related to digitalisation as expressed in the municipalities' policy documents — namely *efficiency*, *service*, *professionalism* and *engagement*. Second, we present our findings from the interviews related to clients' experiences of administrative burdens when applying for social assistance (Madsen et al., 2022; Heggertveit et al., 2022; Tarshish, 2023).

The thematic analysis of interview data revealed significant insights into social service clients' experiences of digital administrative burdens, which are categorised as *learning costs*, *compliance costs* and *psychological costs.*

Efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement

Across the municipalities, efficiency emerged as a key ambition, with a focus on optimising resources and streamlining application processes. The documents highlight efforts to improve internal workflows, reduce errors and create space for more direct client interaction. For example, one document (D4) refers to the goal of increasing operational efficiency and reducing handling errors.

Another emphasises that «administrative tasks should be simplified to reduce stress and free up time for direct client work» (D1). Similarly, one municipality notes that it has «taken inspiration in digitalization from both Trelleborg and Helsingborg [two high-profile municipalities related to digital services] but picked what they consider to be the best parts and developed their own «robot» tailored to their own needs» (D2). Together, these statements illustrate a shared focus on efficiency despite variance in the specific strategies and levels of digital maturity.

Across the municipalities, digitalization is framed as a way to improve service quality and accessibility, making it easier for clients to access support and interact with social services. Policy documents emphasise ambitions to streamline processes and adapt services to individual needs. For example, one municipality highlights an initiative to expand access among clients who previously faced barriers due to residency or age restrictions: «By stopping applications that lack ongoing intervention, we will be able to remove the

population registration barrier and age limit [associated with this category of applicants], allowing residents outside the municipality to reapply digitally» (D5). This refers to adjustments in eligibility rules to enable broader digital access among clients who are not currently active in the system. Another municipality underscores continuous availability and convenience: «The service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week» (D2). Similarly, another document stresses that digital services should be simple to navigate and tailored to clients' abilities: «It is easy to contact the social service office. The design of the office's digital services and solutions is adapted to the individual's knowledge and ability» (D3). Together, these examples show a shared ambition to enhance accessibility and provide client-centred solutions through digital tools.

Across the municipalities, professionalism is framed as a combination of competence, security, user-friendly technology, robustness, equity, legality and accountability. Together, these ideals emphasise that digital solutions must be reliable, legally sound, accessible and ensure fairness and secure handling of sensitive information. One policy document highlights ambitions for robust integration to minimise technical problems: «Through a more robust integration solution in the form of real integration, the administration is expected to be simplified and the handling of errors in the technical process to be reduced» (D5).

Another municipality underscores the importance of comprehensive security measures and standardised frameworks: «Security work shall include preventative, detection and improvement measures to minimise the risk of serious damage» (D2). Similarly, a third municipality emphasises user-friendly tools and continuous competence development among staff: «The IT tools are user friendly, and all employees can handle them correctly. Training and support are continuously offered, and support is easily accessible» (D3). These examples illustrate a shared ambition to build digital systems that are not only efficient but also reliable, secure and aligned with legal and professional standards.

Across the municipalities, engagement is described as the active involvement of both employees and citizens in the development of digital services. Policy documents highlight ambitions to design systems that are user friendly and responsive to local needs. For example, one document notes, «The project therefore aims to address the needs of residents for both increased user-friendliness and functionality» (D5).

Another emphasises the importance of employee participation in shaping work processes: «We have received positive reactions because the staff themselves have been involved in developing how we should work» (D2). A third document stresses the need for inclusive processes, stating that «those affected by the change should be involved in its development» (D3).

Together, these statements reflect a shared commitment to participatory development, where both frontline staff and clients are seen as important contributors to the design and refinement of digital services.

Learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs

Learning costs was a significant theme, highlighting clients' initial challenges of engaging with digital social assistance platforms. Some participants expressed difficulties navigating digital systems, underscoring a lack of intuitive design and clear guidance. Digital literacy emerged as a crucial factor, with participants lacking prior digital experience facing higher learning costs. One older woman (C7) without previous computer experience relied on digital support from family members. This highlights the necessity of external assistance for users unfamiliar with digital tools, indicating a significant barrier to independent use.

Another participant described the complexity of initially finding and using digital services: «Initially, it's a bit confusing to find the digital service to apply for financial assistance. What I had to do was to google the municipality, financial assistance, and then, at the top, there it says Financial Assistance. Here you can apply digitally... So yeah, a bit complicated» (C5). This reflects the need for more user-friendly navigation and better guidance within digital platforms to reduce learning costs and facilitate user engagement. Technical limitations also contributed to learning costs, with some clients facing challenges in submitting the required documents.

One participant noted, «I have to save everything on the computer as a PDF file or a document of some kind and then attach this... you have to send it in separate messages... I really had to send it in batches» (C6). This indicates that current digital systems, necessitating multiple steps that could deter effective use, may not be fully optimised for user convenience. However, there were also positive experiences related to learning. Some clients found the digital system user friendly and practical, demonstrating that with adequate design, the learning curve can be minimised.

As one client remarked, «Yes, I use it because it feels simple and it's convenient. And I don't have to pay for postage. I have no problems understanding it. It works well» (C4). This suggests that a well-designed system can effectively reduce learning costs and enhance user satisfaction.

Compliance costs reflect the effort required to adhere to digital application procedures. Participants frequently mentioned the tedious nature of data entry, especially the need to input repetitive information. One participant elaborated, «You have to write zero in all fields where you don't have anything... It's a bit annoying» (C3). This redundancy in data entry tasks adds unnecessary time and effort, indicating inefficiencies in the digital application process that could be streamlined. Clients shared similar experiences across different municipalities, pointing to a consistent issue.

Another participant shared, «[It] doesn't save the application — just fill in parts all over again. My housing and my travel costs are the same. Could have been filled in from the start» (C6). This repetitive data entry not only increases the time burden but also reflects inefficiencies that could be addressed to improve user experience. The digital

format was also perceived as complicating supplementary explanations, which were easier to submit in paper applications or face-to-face interactions.

One participant explained, «The difference is if you make a paper application, it's just two pages… But when it comes to the digital part, there is immediately 100% more that you must do» (C6). This suggests that digital applications may require more detailed input, adding to the compliance burden. Technical limitations further increased compliance costs, restricting access among users relying on mobile devices. One participant highlighted, «The system does not allow the saving of applications on a mobile phone… adding to the compliance cost» (C4). This indicates that a lack of mobile compatibility can hinder accessibility, thereby increasing the effort required among users without computer access.

Psychological costs encapsulate the emotional strain of using digital applications. Resistance to digital tools, rooted in fear or a lack of confidence, points to a psychological barrier. One participant expressed a preference for paper applications due to a lack of interest in digital tools: «I prefer the physical aspect of coming to a meeting or a gathering or the like. It feels more personal… There's too little human contact with those who handle your case, so it's sad, in a way, that I've only met my case officer twice» (C1). This highlights the emotional value of personal interactions, which digital systems lack. Although the simplicity and efficiency of well-designed systems can reduce psychological costs, concerns about the reliability of digital systems persist.

One participant highlighted fears about technical failures: «If an application gets lost digitally or if they perhaps have some problem on the website so your application doesn't arrive on time, then you're without money that month» (C8). This indicates a significant psychological burden related to trustworthiness and reliability of digital systems.

The need for reminders also indicates an emotional burden. One participant stated, «It's often more about not forgetting; it's more personal, and it would have been great if you could receive a reminder like «Don't forget to do this». That would have been really nice, but it's mostly because I need it» (C10). This suggests that additional supportive features, such as reminders, could alleviate some of the psychological strain associated with digital applications.

Concluding discussion

This study explored social service clients' actual experiences of digital administrative burdens when applying for social assistance as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with reducing them. We examined this issue against a backdrop of the aspirational value positions expressed by the municipalities involved (cf. Distel & Lindgren, 2023) and the evolving «digital relationship» between clients and social services when

going from policy to practice. This section discusses the results in light of the research questions posed in the Introduction.

Municipalities' social assistance digitalisation ambitions

Our first research question asked what ambitions municipalities express regarding the digitalisation of social assistance. These ambitions clearly align with all four aspirational value positions (Rose et al., 2015), reflecting an interplay between organisational ideals and expectations of citizens' roles in digitalised welfare processes (Distel & Lindgren, 2023).

In terms of efficiency, municipalities consistently articulate ambitions to streamline workflows, reduce human error and automate routine processes to alleviate caseworkers' administrative burdens. Such ambitions position clients primarily as external actors in the efficiency value position — data providers whose input enables automated assessments (Distel & Lindgren, 2023). However, efficiency is fundamentally relational; smooth and intuitive digital interfaces for clients are prerequisites for realising efficiency gains internally.

When platforms are reliable and user friendly, errors and delays are reduced for both clients and caseworkers, creating a dual efficiency outcome (Nordesjö et al., 2023). Conversely, when systems are opaque or complex, inefficiencies are displaced onto clients, manifesting as heightened learning and compliance burdens (Madsen et al., 2022). This duality highlights that efficiency cannot be isolated from considerations of accessibility and usability.

Regarding service, municipalities express strong ambitions to enhance accessibility and user experience. Digital services are envisioned as available anytime and anywhere, accommodating clients with various degrees of digital literacy. From the perspective of value positions, this aligns with the role of clients as internal cooperative actors (Distel & Lindgren, 2023), engaging more actively in their cases and experiencing greater transparency and control over their applications. Here, ambitions for 24/7 availability and adaptable, client-centred design reflect an understanding of digital services as tools for empowerment, albeit within the constraints of standardised processes.

The professionalism value position emphasises robust system functionalities, secure data management, standardised workflows and ongoing staff training. Crucially, municipalities' policies also underscore legality and accountability — in particular, ensuring that all digital processes comply with legal frameworks and uphold principles of equity and transparency. While professionalism often casts the client as an external actor, these ambitions have significant implications for clients' procedural rights and experiences. Robust, standardised and legally compliant systems can enhance clients' ability to understand, follow and challenge decisions, thus reinforcing trust and accountability in the digital welfare state. This resonates with Rose et al.'s (2015) notion that professionalism is not only about technical quality but also about ensuring fairness and legitimacy in digital governance.

Lastly, the engagement value position reflects the recognition that sustainable digitalisation requires active involvement from both caseworkers and clients. Policy documents describe ambitions for participatory design processes aimed at creating user-friendly and needs-oriented tools. While such aspirations are more frequently articulated than realised in practice, they point towards an emergent understanding that engagement is key to achieving usability and legitimacy. As Distel and Lindgren (2023) argue, involving citizens in co-design can shift their role from passive data providers to co-creators, fostering ownership, trust and, ultimately, more resilient digital infrastructures.

Taken together, these ambitions illustrate how municipalities conceptualise digitalisation not as a singular value-driven project but rather as a multi-layered endeavour in which efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement intersect. However, as our subsequent analysis of client experiences demonstrates, the realisation of these value positions in practice is uneven, with tensions emerging particularly around accessibility, support and the translation of legal and professional standards into user-friendly digital processes.

In sum, while clients are primarily seen as external actors within the efficiency and professionalism framework, they play a more engaged role in the service and engagement value positions (Distel & Lindgren, 2023). This study illustrates what this might look like in real policies as well as in the actual design and use of digital tools. Although this is consistent with previous studies on municipal value positions regarding social assistance, instances of engagement values appeared less frequently in those.

Clients' experiences with using digital tools in social assistance applications

Our second research question asked how clients describe their experiences with using digital tools when applying for social assistance. Clients in our study provided examples of digital experiences that we interpreted as instances of learning, compliance and psychological costs. Specifically, initial learning costs arise as clients familiarise themselves with digital tools (Heggertveit et al., 2022). Compliance costs manifested in the frustration of repeatedly submitting the same information, which increased time and effort requirements. Despite such challenges, some clients later appreciated the speed and affordability of digital communication compared to traditional methods such as photocopying and mailing documents (Nisar & Masood, 2022). In terms of psychological costs, concerns arose over uncertainties in document submission, and some clients preferred direct interactions with case managers. These findings align with previous research (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023; Hofman et al., 2024) suggesting that digitalisation may inadvertently increase stress and administrative burdens rather than alleviate them.

Moreover, as highlighted by Afrouz and Lucas (2023), the psychological aspects of digital interactions introduce ethical concerns that social services must address. An entirely

digital experience risks alienating clients, making them fear unfair treatment (Hofmann et al., 2024) and weakening the interpersonal support that is crucial to social work. However, unlike in Denmark (see, e.g. Madsen et al., 2022), our study found no efforts to make digital applications mandatory, though the municipalities generally encourage their use.

In sum, consistent with previous research (Tarshish & Holler, 2023; Hofmann et al., 2024), our findings support the idea that clients prefer a combination of online and offline communication options.

Challenges and opportunities associated with social assistance digitalisation

Our third research question asked what challenges and opportunities emerge in municipal efforts to implement digital technologies for social assistance. Our findings reveal a dynamic interaction between challenges and opportunities when going from policy to practice. Municipalities explicitly reference all aspirational value positions (Rose et al., 2015) in their documentation, emphasising key goals relevant to clients' experiences and situations (Distel & Lindgren, 2023). Opportunities include freeing up time for direct client engagement, ensuring secure and robust services, and involving caseworkers and clients in implementation and design. Meanwhile, digital administrative burdens highlight existing problems while serving as a foundation for targeted improvements. For instance, learning and compliance costs can be addressed by simplifying digital tools, while psychological costs can be mitigated by enhancing features' user friendliness.

From a theoretical and empirical perspective, turning challenges into opportunities requires acknowledging the interplay between multiple aspirational value positions rather than treating them as separate policy goals (Rose et al., 2015; Distel & Lindgren, 2023). Ideally, clients should be capable self-servers — the efficiency value position — equipped with intuitive tools that reduce the time and effort needed for repeated applications. Additionally, professionalism requires that clients experience the process as legally robust, secure and standardised, while service and engagement emphasise accessibility, inclusion and opportunities for co-creation.

One key improvement involves refining digital application tools to proactively eliminate unnecessary burdens through better design and usability testing (Scholta & Lindgren, 2023). For example, the repetitive manual entry of identical information each month — a common compliance cost noted by clients — could be addressed by integrating automated data transfer from previous applications while still allowing clients to update or correct their information easily. Similarly, more intuitive document-upload interfaces with clearer instructions and mobile-friendly functionality could reduce the learning costs that currently disadvantage clients with lower digital literacy (Heggertveit et al., 2022).

Another improvement involves strengthening the digital infrastructure as a whole (Ranerup & Svensson, 2023) This includes ensuring seamless integration between e-

application portals, case management systems and decision-support mechanisms so that errors and delays are minimised and clients receive real-time updates on the status of their applications. Such integration also supports the legality and accountability dimensions of professionalism by making decisions more transparent and traceable. Clients emphasised the value of being able to «follow the case» and understand when and why decisions were made — an aspect directly tied to procedural fairness and trust.

To further enhance service, municipalities could complement technical improvements with layered human support. For clients struggling with digital tools, access to targeted guidance — for instance, through welfare service centres with trained staff (Kaun & Liminga, 2023) or digital support offered at public libraries (Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2022) — could bridge digital literacy gaps and reduce psychological stress. While such support does not necessarily entail replacing caseworkers, it should constitute a safety net which ensures that vulnerable clients are not excluded by the very systems intended to assist them.

Importantly, engagement requires that clients and frontline staff be included in the co-design and iterative evaluation of digital services (Distel & Lindgren, 2023). Participatory workshops, pilot testing and feedback loops can help ensure that systems are not only technically efficient but also responsive to users' lived realities. This participatory approach can transform digitalisation from a top-down administrative reform into a process that builds trust and strengthens «digital citizenship» by empowering clients to navigate and use public services effectively (Nordesjö et al., 2023).

Besides, the proactive use of emerging technologies, such as AI, offers opportunities to further reduce compliance costs and streamline processes. AI could, for instance, pre-populate applications with available administrative data, summarise complex documents or provide adaptive guidance through chatbots. However, as previous research has highlighted (Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022; Nam & Bell, 2024), such automation raises concerns about transparency and explainability. Clients need to understand not only outcomes but also how decisions are made, both to build trust and to safeguard their rights in a highly digitalised welfare state.

Taken together, these strategies demonstrate that aligning efficiency, service, professionalism and engagement is context dependent and the key to transforming digitalisation from a source of administrative burden into a facilitator of equitable and empowering service delivery.

A second concrete way to enhance efficiency and professionalism while reducing digital administrative burdens, such as learning and compliance costs, is to provide human support during the application process. This support could take the form of specialised civil servants in welfare service centres (Kaun & Liminga, 2023; Hofmann et al., 2024) or broader general assistance in public libraries (Bernhard & Wihlborg, 2022). The latter type of human support requires access to technology but significantly less expertise in the specific subject matter; librarians should not assume the role of social workers or replace them.

More importantly, psychological costs can be alleviated through human support, as it helps reduce stress, potentially leading to improved knowledge and learning, which further lowers psychological burdens. Moreover, as clients become more proficient in using technology — particularly in submitting applications — they will require less assistance from relatives and friends, thereby possibly reducing psychological stress.

In the realm of public policy and economic support, additional objectives may exist beyond merely providing financial or other forms of assistance to promote self-sufficiency. These objectives include functioning as the last safety net (Stranz et al., 2017, 2024; Trygged, 2020). Addressing the challenges posed by digitalisation and the associated digital administrative burdens, particularly for vulnerable clients, is therefore a complex endeavour. Afrouz and Lucas (2023) highlighted the risk of digital administrative systems fostering impersonal interactions, reducing clients to mere «data points» rather than individuals with unique needs. To mitigate these psychological costs, a more ethically designed digital infrastructure should incorporate options for direct contact with a caseworker when necessary or should provide virtual meetings at critical junctures in the process. By prioritising personal interaction, technology can enhance trust and client involvement rather than simply functioning as an administrative tool.

Proactive strategies

We have briefly touched on proactive design (Scholta & Lindgren, 2023), which aligns closely with the efficiency and professionalism value positions and is becoming increasingly relevant as AI and other advanced technologies are integrated into the application process (Nam & Bell, 2024). AI-driven functionalities have significant potential to simplify routine tasks, such as summarising uploaded documents, retrieving relevant administrative data and pre-populating recurring fields in monthly applications. These solutions could directly address one of the most persistent compliance costs identified in this study — the requirement to repeatedly enter the same information for each application period — thereby reducing both the time and cognitive effort required from clients.

However, integrating AI into welfare services is not without challenges. As highlighted in recent discussions on fully or semi-automated social assistance decisions (Author/s, 2022), such systems raise critical concerns about transparency, explainability and accountability.

From the client perspective, decisions produced or supported by algorithms can feel opaque and inaccessible, particularly when the logic behind the outcome is not communicated in a clear and comprehensible way. This lack of visibility not only undermines trust in the system but can also weaken clients' procedural rights, such as the ability to understand, question or appeal a decision. This concern is central to the professionalism value position, which emphasises legality and accountability (Rose et al., 2015).

To mitigate these risks, proactive and ethically grounded design is essential. This involves integrating explainability features into digital tools so that clients can easily trace how their data have been processed and how decisions have been reached. Such transparency mechanisms would not only align with public values of fairness and accountability but also strengthen trust in digitalised welfare processes, particularly for clients in vulnerable positions.

Moreover, while automation can reduce compliance costs and enhance efficiency, there is a parallel need to preserve human oversight and interaction in the decision-making process. Our findings show that clients value personal support and the possibility of discussing their situation with a caseworker, especially in complex or sensitive cases. Therefore, rather than replacing human contact, AI should be leveraged as a complementary tool, enabling staff to spend less time on repetitive administrative tasks and more time providing relational support and guidance, aligning with the service and engagement value positions (Distel & Lindgren, 2023; Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2023).

Noteworthy, AI-assisted applications also open up opportunities for personalised guidance. For instance, adaptive chatbots or virtual assistants could guide clients step-by-step through the digital application, reducing learning costs and providing real-time support without the need for in-person assistance. However, these tools must be designed in an inclusive manner to avoid reinforcing existing digital divides and to ensure accessibility among clients with low levels of digital literacy or language proficiency.

In sum, AI and proactive design hold considerable promise for reducing administrative burdens, particularly compliance costs. However, their implementation must balance efficiency and automation with the equally critical values of legality, transparency and client empowerment, ensuring that digitalisation strengthens rather than erodes the trust and accountability that underpin relationships between clients and social services.

Another crucial consideration is the role of service and engagement values, which emphasise active participation by citizens and clients (Distel & Lindgren, 2023). These values become particularly relevant in the design and development of digital tools, in which municipalities aim to express aspirational value positions through initiatives that reduce learning and compliance costs. This is important to avoid professionals and clients being seen as passive objects (Zenarolla, 2024). Given this context, municipalities and software companies must acknowledge the importance of involving citizens/clients in the design of individual tools or even a more holistic digital infrastructure.

Participatory design offers a tangible strategy for strengthening service and engagement values while simultaneously addressing digital administrative burdens, both immediately and in the long term. Through such efforts, some clients may become better equipped for today's digital society, fostering «digital citizenship» — the general ability to use technology effectively — as well as enhancing their capacity to engage in education and other self-sufficiency initiatives (Nordesjö et al., 2023).

In the specific domain of social work, particularly regarding social assistance applications, our study reveals how citizens' roles and experiences in one value position, as described by Distel and Lindgren (2023), can influence or «spill over» into their roles and experiences in other value positions. For example, within the efficiency value position, saving time is emphasised as a crucial factor, and our study identifies this as an aspirational value. However, efficiency can also benefit citizens through s rapid and transparent process, thus becoming important from a service perspective.

Similarly, within the professionalism value position, legality and accountability processes are essential. Providing such processes through digital means enables citizens to follow the application's progress and its outcomes, which enhances service value. Moreover, involving citizens in co-production and design, both of which are central to the service value position, can foster engagement. These interconnected value positions are particularly relevant in social work, where securing accurate information about sensitive application and decision-making processes — as a last safety net (Stranz et al., 2017, 2024) — as well as obtaining appropriate support and meetings with caseworkers and coaches, is not always guaranteed (Nordesjö et al., 2023).

Recognising these potential benefits is critical given that social assistance is a particularly sensitive issue, especially from the perspective of clients, who often belong to vulnerable groups (Madsen et al., 2022; Heggertveit et al., 2022). Recent research further underscores how digitalisation produces distinct client roles — such as the distant, the capable and trustworthy, and the digitally skilled — which shape how clients are able to engage with and benefit from digitalised services (Nordesjö & Scaramuzzino, 2025). These findings highlight that digital infrastructures do not merely support service delivery but actively co-construct client positions and opportunities for participation in digitalised welfare encounters.

In conclusion, the evolving digital landscape in social work affects relationships among both professionals (Zenarolla, 2024) and clients. On the one hand, policy documents on digitalisation reflect strong municipal intentions informed by expressed aspirational value positions aimed at engaging citizens and addressing their circumstances. On the other hand, our study illustrates how the transition from analogue to digital tools imposes various digital administrative burdens on many clients. We identified several concrete strategies for navigating these opportunities and challenges in the transition from policy to practice. We also outlined how citizens' roles in the standard aspirational value positions (Distel & Lindgren, 2023) contribute to or «spill over» into other value positions within the domain of social work (Luna et al., 2024).

Altogether, our results focus on the evolving relationship shaped by aspirational value positions — between the state and citizens in general, and more specifically between social services and clients — mediated by digital technology. This knowledge is valuable for strengthening clients' participation and empowerment.

Limitations and future research

Since our analysis was based on a limited set of experiences from three municipalities, conducting a detailed comparison of contexts and technologies between municipalities was not feasible. However, this study opens up several possibilities for further research. Future studies could examine the effects of how digital tools are designed. These could involve different tools that encompass the entire digital infrastructure for social assistance applications — from submission to decision follow-up (Ranerup & Svensson, 2023).

Such research would facilitate the identification of best practices for minimising digital administrative burdens while also exploring methods for involving clients in participatory design aligned with aspirational service and engagement values. Since clients often prefer physical meetings or a combination of digital and personal relations, there might be a need to develop a hybrid service model and to study the optimal balance between digital and face-to-face interactions for maintaining trust, reducing stress and enhancing client satisfaction. Such hybrid models should incorporate not only informal and supportive oral communication (Cacopardo, 2025) but also structured opportunities for dialogue concerning the more formal components of the application process. Another promising area of research involves exploring innovative proactive digital solutions (Scholta & Lindgren, 2023), such as AI-assisted navigation or personalised digital assistants, to better integrate aspirational public values and reduce administrative burdens in the ongoing digital transformation.

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