

SAINT QUENTIN

Including and engaging all citizens in the digital revolution

Situated in the Northeast of France, in the Region Hauts-de-France, Saint-Quentin is the main town of the Aisne department, a rural province made up of 39 small towns, with a population of about 53.000 inhabitants (year 2020). In demographic terms, 38,5 % of the population is under 30 years old, about 20% of the population is over 65 years old, and 6% is of foreign origin. The economy is based on industry and services, including commerce and there are some significant multinationals operating in the area, including Nestlé, L'Oréal, Yamaha, Le Creuset. Despite its socio-economic challenges (with over 13% of unemployment) the city has been gradually building up local expertise and businesses around technology, with an AI / Robotics business accelerator, which is providing jobs in the local labour market.

Governance and strategies for digitalisation

Saint Quentin's context is typical of a set of challenges around digital transition and a digital society and governance in a small city social, environmental and economic sustainable digital transition is being delivered through an **integrated and multi-stakeholder** approach and **medium-long term urban policies** that the city administration has fine-tuned through its participation in two URBACT Action Planning networks: DIGIPLACE and ACTIVE CITIZENS.

Propelled by a strong political desire to face the main challenges of the future together, "Saint Quentin 2050" is the strategic roadmap that the city administration has built with citizen participation and consultation. Its vision for the future is a people-centric city of solidarity and citizenship, an attractive, harmonious and innovative city that "breathes" in a clean environment.

Embedded in this strategy, Saint Quentin has also defined its digital strategy based on three main pillars:

1. Use new technologies to promote sustainable development and lower/reduce costs
2. Support local stakeholders in the ownership of digital tools. Develop opportunities in the field of training, employment and entrepreneurship
3. Focus on social relations and the inclusion of all in a digital world

Initiatives for an inclusive digital community

While digital government has now become the norm for administrative transactions such as taxes, health services etc, the Aisne province has recorded that about 20% of the population feels excluded by digital administrative procedures, due to their lack of digital skills or access to technology. This has prompted the city to invest - mainly through municipality, regional and state funds and other local resources - in activities to get closer to citizens, in simple but effective ways.

The city has established several Solidarity Hubs, community spaces where people can access ICT facilities and support. These support places respond to legislation for all local services to be available online. Started in 2019, "**Solidarity 2.0**" is a city service available in 14 locations around the city, designed to help people struggling with new technologies. All citizens can access Solidarity 2.0 premises to use computers, printers and scanners, and staff are available to assist with simple digital tasks.

In 2021, the city launched the **France Service Bus**, a mobile office with two staff trained to help people with online administration tasks such as filing for taxes, applying for public health insurance, social benefits and pension, all of which can be done on the bus. This service gets the government closer to citizens, using a proximity approach and literally reaching out to homes and neighbourhoods, especially in areas outside the centre.

The municipality has also made available digital assistance tools and professionals, such as the Conseiller Numérique (Digital Advisor), a professional figure working in community centres and a dedicated phone number “Allo Numérique” (Hello, Digital) that citizens can call to get phone assistance and troubleshoot digital issues.

Inclusive digital education and access to technology are also part and parcel of Saint Quentin’s digital society. The **Artistik’lab** is a FabLab funded by the municipality where children and adults can attend artistic workshops and classes using digital technologies. It is accessible to all, in groups or one-to-one, at the Municipal School of Arts Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. The lab is equipped with 3D scanners and printers, laser-cut machines, virtual reality masks and other makers’ tools that can be used to create and develop works or projects.

Citizens’ participation and people-centric urban development and services are an important aspect of Saint Quentin’s governance. It is clear that the URBACT

ACTIVE CITIZEN network has supported the integration of the digital dimension into the municipality’s local democracy principles.

The URBACT Local Group has built on the existing municipal system of citizen participation, in place since 2014, where many councils such as neighbourhood councils, senior and young people councils, community work councils and retailers’ councils have already been actively rethinking their role in the digital transformation.

The plan foresees a **hybrid mode of collaboration** using a digital platform and more traditional “bricks and mortar” councils to co-design policies, develop participatory urban planning and more effective interaction and dialogue between the local authority, stakeholders and citizens.

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