

■ GOOD PRACTICE BROCHURE

Rural housing

- 01** Supporting village renewal and local housing development in Tyrol through integrated planning
- 02** Integrated regional housing strategy counters demographic change in rural Castilla y León
- 03** Preventing rural homelessness and energy poverty through community-led housing solutions in Ireland
- 04** Strengthening island communities through senior co-housing in rural Denmark
- 05** Promoting healthier and more sustainable rural housing in Zasavje through materials and design
- 06** Revitalising rural villages in Brandenburg through community-led co-housing models

Housing plays a vital role in maintaining vibrant rural communities, supporting local economies, attracting and retaining residents, and ensuring access to services and employment opportunities. Affordable and quality housing is essential for individuals' well-being and for the long-term resilience, social cohesion and attractiveness of rural areas.

Across Europe, rural housing faces challenges linked to demographic change, housing shortages, ageing populations, vacant and underused housing stock, renovation and energy efficiency needs, pressure from tourism and second homes, and rising property prices. Responding effectively to these challenges requires integrated, place-based approaches and locally adapted solutions.

This edition of the Rural Pact Good Practice Brochure features six diverse initiatives that are improving access to housing and quality of life in rural areas, through strategic governance approaches, community-led solutions, and renovation and revitalisation of existing housing stock.

Together, these initiatives show how integrated policies, strong local partnerships and innovative, place-based solutions can address rural housing challenges while contributing to social inclusion, energy efficiency and territorial cohesion.

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Supporting village renewal and local housing development in Tyrol through integrated planning

This long-standing initiative supports rural housing in Tyrol through integrated planning, community participation and targeted funding. By prioritising the re-use of existing buildings and strengthening village centres, it delivers locally adapted solutions that preserve heritage, reduce land use and sustain liveable rural communities.

In Tyrol, Austria, limited land availability and strong development pressures shape rural housing challenges. Only around 12% of the region is suitable for permanent settlement, while demand is influenced by tourism, second homes and changing living patterns. Ensuring access to housing while maintaining liveable and sustainable villages has therefore become a key priority for regional policy.

Addressing rural housing challenges in a constrained territorial context

A long-standing village renewal approach, led by the Tyrolean regional government since 1985, provides a structured response. It **combines planning, advisory support and targeted funding within an integrated framework** designed to strengthen village centres, promote the re-use of existing buildings and guide settlement development.

A central feature of the approach is its **strong focus on participation**. Municipalities, residents and experts work together to define local priorities and develop solutions tailored to each village. Awareness raising, design quality, cultural heritage and climate considerations are all integrated into the process, ensuring that development reflects both local identity and long-term sustainability.

Revitalising village centres and housing stock

Translating this into practice, the neighbourhood development programme applies a **holistic planning model**. Architects, urban planners and other specialists collaborate with local users to design settlement strategies based on existing structures. This enables the development of new housing models that respond to current challenges, such as the rising cost of single-family homes, while maintaining valued qualities such as proximity, shared spaces and integration within village centres.



Image: © landsmann on Pexels

-  Tyrolean Regional Government, department for land use and development
-  Since 1985-ongoing
-  Around EUR 1.5 million annually
-  Funding sources:
 - Administration of the federal state of Tyrol
-  www.tirol.gv.at/dorferneuerung
-  **Video overviewing the practice**
-  Diana Ortner, diana.ortner@tirol.gv.at

In parallel, the village centre revitalisation scheme focuses on **activating vacant or underused buildings**. It provides **financial support and construction advice to municipalities and private owners**, encouraging the conversion of existing structures into housing or community uses. Funding is targeted at buildings vacant for at least three years, with additional support for culturally significant properties. This approach helps reduce land consumption while preserving architectural heritage.

Building trust and delivering long-term results

The effectiveness of the initiative lies in the combination of **integrated planning, long-term institutional commitment and close cooperation with local actors**. By bringing together technical expertise and local knowledge, projects are both context specific and feasible. The programme's continuity has helped build trust among stakeholders and ensured sustained engagement over time.

Concrete results are visible across Tyrol. Vacant buildings have been transformed into housing, community facilities and mixed-use spaces, contributing to **improved quality of life and stronger local cohesion**. By prioritising village centres and supporting locally adapted solutions, the initiative demonstrates how rural housing challenges can be addressed while preserving local identity and promoting sustainable development.

Integrated regional housing strategy counters demographic change in rural Castilla y León

This coordinated regional strategy addresses rural depopulation by expanding affordable housing, supporting access for young people and scaling up energy-efficient renovation. By combining multiple policy tools, it improves housing availability and quality while helping retain and attract residents in small municipalities.

In Castilla y León, a highly dispersed region with more than 6 000 towns and villages, housing challenges are closely linked to demographic decline. A large share of the housing stock remains vacant or underused, while many dwellings are outdated or difficult to mobilise due to legal, financial or market barriers. At the same time, limited access to jobs, services and connectivity reduces demand, especially among young people, resulting in a shortage of adequate, affordable and energy-efficient homes for permanent residents.

A coordinated strategy linking housing and demographic objectives

To address these challenges, the regional government has **positioned housing policy as a key tool for rural revitalisation**. Since 2016, it has implemented a **coordinated set of programmes** tackling social rental, support for young people, energy renovation, taxation measures and spatial planning. This integrated approach **aligns housing interventions with broader territorial and demographic objectives**, targeting small municipalities.

A central component is REHABITARE, which **rehabilitates unused public and ecclesiastical buildings** in municipalities with fewer than 5 000 inhabitants. Through agreements with municipalities, provincial councils and dioceses, these buildings are converted into social rental housing, expanding supply while preserving existing assets.


Improving access to housing and supporting young residents


Several programmes focus on **reducing barriers to housing for young people**. These include mortgage guarantees enabling financing of up to 97.5% of the purchase price, public housing for sale with price discounts, and rental aid covering up to 75% of rent for eligible tenants. **Nearly zero-energy rental housing** is also developed on public land, with some projects incorporating **co-housing formats** to optimise costs.





Image: © Pedro Luis Domínguez Ruiz on Magnific

Full good practice description

 Regional Government of Castilla y León, Department of Environment, Housing and Spatial Planning

 06/2016-ongoing

 Over EUR 900 million mobilised during 2016-2025, including EUR 243 million from EU funds

 Funding sources:

- Castilla y León regional government
- European Regional Development Fund
- Recovery and Resilience Facility
- National government funds
- Private partnerships

 www.vivienda.jcyl.es/web/es/vivienda-urbanismo.html

 Clara San Damián Hernández,
csandamian.cca.cyl@reper.maec.es

In parallel, **favourable taxation measures** in rural areas support housing acquisition, rehabilitation and rental, improving affordability and encouraging permanent residency.

Coordinated delivery and funding

Energy-efficient renovation is a key pillar of the strategy, with grants supporting upgrades to buildings and neighbourhoods to improve energy performance, reduce costs and enhance comfort. These measures are delivered through **collaboration between regional authorities, municipalities and other actors**, combining regional, national and EU funding.

The effectiveness of the strategy lies in its **coordinated design and implementation**. Standardised agreements clarify roles and facilitate cooperation with local partners, while predictable funding calls and clear eligibility criteria support uptake. By **combining supply-side measures, demand-side support and energy renovation**, the strategy creates a comprehensive framework that improves housing conditions and contributes to retaining and attracting residents in rural areas.

Preventing homelessness and energy poverty through community-led housing solutions in rural Ireland

This community-led initiative prevents rural homelessness by purchasing homes at risk of repossession and retaining residents as tenants. Combining housing provision with energy-efficient retrofitting and strong partnerships, it supports long-term housing stability, reduces energy poverty and strengthens local communities.

In rural West Cork, Ireland, the aftermath of the housing market collapse in the early 2010s left many households struggling with mortgage debt and at risk of losing their homes. Limited access to mortgage-to-rent schemes further increased the risk of homelessness, particularly for low-income households and those dependent on welfare.

The Carbery Housing Association (CHA), a community-based organisation founded by local residents, developed the 'Mortgage Rescue' programme in response to this challenge. Since 2013, the initiative has focused on preventing homelessness by purchasing homes at risk of repossession and allowing families to remain as tenants under affordable, means-tested rental agreements.

Preventing homelessness through housing acquisition and retention

The programme operates by **identifying properties where residents face eviction** due to mortgage debts. In partnership with local authorities, CHA assesses the viability of acquiring these homes and negotiates their purchase with lenders. Once acquired, the former owners remain in their homes as social housing tenants, ensuring continuity and stability.

This approach directly **addresses the risk of displacement**, enabling families to stay in their communities and maintain social ties, while securing long-term housing solutions.


Improving housing quality and reducing energy poverty

Following acquisition, properties undergo **repairs and retrofitting to improve living conditions and energy performance**. Upgrades include insulation, heating improvements and renewable energy installations such as solar panels. Through participation in EU-funded projects, the initiative has also introduced AI-controlled solar power systems to optimise energy use.



Image: © Wirestock on Magnific

Full good practice description

-  Carbery Housing Association CLG
-  05/2013-ongoing
-  For the financial year ending 30 September 2024, the association had an income of EUR 326 010
-  Funding sources:
 - Periodic payment and availability fees from local authorities (for every family housed)
 - Rent from tenants
 - Membership fees and donations
 - Insurance claims
 - European funding under Interreg North-West Europe programme (2014-2020) – RED WoLF project
-  www.carberyhousing.eu
-  Jose Ospina, jose@carberyhousing.eu

These measures reduce energy costs for residents and contribute to tackling energy poverty, while improving the environmental performance of rural housing.

Community-led delivery supported by partnerships and sustainable financing

The initiative is led by a community-based association **working in close partnership with local authorities**, supported by a combination of public loans, commercial finance and EU funding. Rental income from tenants contributes to financial sustainability, covering maintenance and loan repayments.

Community-led governance is a key enabling factor, ensuring local ownership and responsiveness to needs. The involvement of local contractors in renovation works also supports the local economy. In parallel, CHA provides **training and capacity building** for tenants, promoting energy awareness and community engagement.

Since its launch, the programme has secured housing for around 70 residents and demonstrated how targeted interventions can prevent homelessness in rural areas. By **combining housing acquisition, energy-efficient retrofitting and social support**, the initiative provides a practical and replicable model for addressing rural housing challenges while strengthening community stability.

Strengthening island communities through senior co-housing in rural Denmark

This community-led senior co-housing initiative helped older residents remain on Venø Island while freeing up larger homes for new families. Through local mobilisation, shared facilities and strong partnerships, it supports demographic renewal, social cohesion and the long-term sustainability of a small rural island community.

On the small Danish island of Venø, concerns about population ageing and declining household sizes prompted local residents to explore new housing solutions. Some older residents wished to remain on the island but move into smaller, easier-to-maintain homes. Enabling these locals to sell their homes to new residents was also seen as a way to support demographic renewal and strengthen the year-round community.

The idea of creating a senior co-housing community emerged directly from island residents and was later taken forward by the local community association VenøBoen. From the outset, the project had access to a suitable building plot, owned by a local landowner who supported the initiative. The plot was already designated for residential development by Struer Municipality, removing one of the usual obstacles for housing projects.

A community-led process responding to local demographic needs

The initiative began in 2020 with a public residents' meeting organised by VenøBoen to assess local interest. Initially, 16 residents signed declarations expressing interest in participating and a small working group was established to continue developing the project.

Over the following four years, the group built **partnerships with housing associations, local craftsmen and potential investors**, while maintaining close dialogue with the municipality to retain its support.

The project aimed to allow older residents to remain on the island in more suitable housing while making existing family homes available to new residents. **Increasing the permanent population was also considered important for supporting local services**, including the ferry connection that underpins daily life on Venø.



Image: © Venø Island, Erling Roseth

 VenøBoen (local community association)
 01/2020-06/2025
 EUR 3 million
 Funding sources:

- Private investor

 <https://venoe.dk/foreninger/venoeboen/>
 Jan Bendix, bx@jbx.dk

Shared spaces and partnerships enabling implementation

In 2024, the initiative secured the **involvement of a private investor**. The investor's housing company Mejdalbo ApS reached an agreement with a developer to deliver **five rental apartments of 100 square metres each, combined with shared facilities** such as storage units, a workshop, bicycle sheds and communal outdoor areas.

The homes were constructed as modular units at the developer's factory and the finished modules were shipped to Venø. By the end of May 2025, the five homes and shared facilities were completed and seven residents had moved in, all of whom had lived on Venø for many years.

The initiative highlights the importance of **long-term local commitment, strong partnerships and clear project preparation**. Community ownership of the idea, combined with municipal support, access to land and private investment, enabled implementation. The shared living model has strengthened **social interaction and mutual support among residents**, helping reduce the risk of loneliness.

By combining locally adapted housing, shared facilities and community-led development, the initiative demonstrates how small-scale housing projects can support demographic sustainability and social cohesion in rural and island communities.

Promoting healthier and more sustainable rural housing in Zasavje through materials and design

This initiative promotes healthier and more sustainable rural housing by combining knowledge transfer, participatory design and demonstration projects. By focusing on non-toxic materials and the re-use of existing buildings, it delivers practical, locally adapted solutions for revitalising rural areas.

In Slovenia's Zasavje region, a former industrial area facing structural change and rural decline, many rural areas face loss of population, underused buildings and a gradual loss of local services. At the same time, a gap persists between knowledge on sustainable construction and its practical application, particularly regarding healthier, non-toxic materials. Addressing both challenges, the Non Tox Uni Kum initiative promotes more sustainable and healthier approaches to housing renovation.

Bridging knowledge gaps through collaboration

The initiative is built around a **knowledge transfer approach**, connecting existing sustainable practices with real-life implementation. It brings together architects, end users, construction professionals, the cultural sector and public authorities to **address the disconnect between available expertise and its uptake**. By facilitating communication among stakeholders, it helps ensure that sustainable and healthy construction methods reach those directly involved in housing projects.








The **'Non Tox Hub'**, a knowledge and demonstration hub for healthier materials, adaptive re-use and community-led renovation practices, is at the core of the approach. Using a **participatory approach**, it engages municipalities and local actors in co-developing solutions. Activities such as 'Non Tox Days' and 'Non Tox Talks' support **awareness raising, knowledge exchange and cross-sector learning**.

Demonstrating solutions through local projects

A key principle is the focus on **re-using and revitalising existing buildings**, using a regenerative approach, **rather than constructing new ones**. This is demonstrated through different projects such as the **Healthy Public Living Room** or the revival of a 150-year-old abandoned farm, showing that sustainable, affordable and healthy solutions are feasible in practice.



Image: © Non Tox Uni Kum/Non Tox Hub

-  Avenia-M - Non Tox Uni Kum, Non Tox Hub Institute, Municipality of Trbovlje (Healthy Public Living Room)
-  05/2024-ongoing
-  EUR 200 000 in combined project-based support
-  Funding sources:
 - National funds
 - EU funds (Pathways2Resilience project)
 - Municipal funds
 - Private investors
-  www.nontoxunikum.com
-  [Video overviewing the practice](#)
-  Petra Marinko, petra@nontoxunikum.com

Small-scale 'lighthouse' projects serve as living demonstrators for regeneration and healthier renovation practices and are used to test and showcase approaches that can be adapted to dispersed rural settlements, where large-scale developments are often not viable.

Enabling conditions for uptake and replication

The effectiveness of the initiative lies in **combining technical knowledge, participatory processes and practical demonstration**. By integrating sustainability, aesthetics and inclusion – in line with the **New European Bauhaus** – it promotes a holistic approach. Drawing on existing infrastructure and vernacular architecture (i.e. shaped by local knowledge, materials and building traditions) further strengthens relevance by reconnecting with traditional building practices.

Strong **stakeholder engagement** ensures that solutions respond to local needs and encourages uptake. **Demonstration projects** make concepts tangible and replicable, while the **focus on affordability** helps address barriers to implementation. Together, these elements support revitalisation of rural housing and healthier living and working environments, while contributing to the regeneration, identity and long-term resilience of rural communities.

Revitalising rural villages in Brandenburg through community-led co-housing models

This community-led co-housing initiative revitalises rural areas by combining compact private homes with shared spaces and re-used buildings. By promoting efficient use of space, strong local partnerships and cooperative governance, it enhances quality of life while addressing housing shortages, vacancy and social isolation.

In rural Brandenburg, Germany, depopulation, vacant buildings and underused infrastructure present ongoing challenges for local development. At the same time, rising housing costs and changing lifestyles are increasing demand for alternative living models. The KoDörfer (co-villages) initiative responds to these challenges by developing community-led co-housing solutions that combine private living with shared spaces and the re-use of existing infrastructure.

Rethinking housing through shared spaces and efficient use

The concept is based on a clear principle: **reducing the size of private living spaces while expanding shared facilities**. Individual homes are relatively small, ranging from around 25 to 80 square metres, while functions not needed on a daily basis – such as large kitchens, guest rooms or workspaces – are relocated to communal areas. These contain co-working areas, workshops, social spaces and other facilities that support daily life and interaction.

This approach enables **more efficient use of space** while maintaining – and often enhancing – quality of life. By **sharing infrastructure**, residents gain access to a wider range of facilities than would be feasible individually, while reducing construction and housing costs.








Revitalising existing infrastructure through community action

A key feature of the initiative is **its focus on re-using existing buildings and sites**. One of the main projects involves transforming an abandoned sawmill into a co-housing settlement, with the former industrial building converted into a central communal hub. Around this hub, approximately 40 small homes are being developed, creating a community for around 100 residents.

The initiative is embedded in a broader territorial development process, **with multiple actors contributing** to the revitalisation of the area. Some other existing buildings have already been re-purposed, demonstrating how **incremental activation can support wider regeneration**.



Image: © Uwe Manteuffel

-  Cooperative (community-led initiative)
-  2018-2028
-  Around EUR 18 million
-  Funding sources:
 - Coop membership (share sales), public funding, loans
-  www.neulandia.de/kodoerfer
-  **Video overviewing the practice**
-  Frederik Fischer, frederik.fischer@neulandia.de

Partnerships, cooperative governance and demand enabling development

The development required a **long preparation phase**, with around five years of planning involving a **cooperative of residents, municipalities and other partners**. This highlights the importance of strong partnerships and sustained commitment. The cooperative model plays a central role, enabling **collective ownership and decision-making** while aligning the interests of residents and local stakeholders.

The initiative also demonstrates strong demand for alternative housing models, suggesting **potential for replication and upscaling**. Additional projects linked to the initiative – such as temporary community residencies and the conversion of existing housing stock – further expand its impact.

By **combining community-led governance, efficient use of space and the re-use of existing infrastructure**, the KoDörfer initiative shows how rural housing challenges can be addressed while strengthening social cohesion and local development.

Managing editor: Hugo Almeida, Head of Unit – Rural Areas and Networks, AGRI-D1, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission

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