RURAL PACT

Empowering Rural Europe

GOOD PRACTICE BROCHURE

Generational renewal

Rural employment and entrepreneurship

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Generational renewal is essential to the long-term vitality of rural economies and communities. Across Europe, rural areas face demographic challenges linked to depopulation, the outmigration of young people and population ageing, affecting both local economies and the fabric of community life. Rural regions are particularly exposed to the departure of young and skilled workers, while older generations often face difficulties in transferring businesses and knowledge to successors.

Decisions to stay in, return to or invest in rural areas are influenced not only by economic opportunities but also by housing, services, connectivity, mobility and quality of life. Integrated, place-based strategies are needed to create attractive environments for young people, entrepreneurs and skilled professionals and to respond to demographic challenges in rural areas.

This edition of the Rural Pact Good Practice Brochure features six initiatives illustrating different dimensions of generational renewal in rural areas and businesses. They show how approaches such as intergenerational mentorship, support for entrepreneurs, ensuring business succession and attracting new talent enhance the attractiveness of rural areas, support intergenerational collaboration and strengthen local economies.

Discover a wealth of knowledge on the topic!

Funded by the European Union

A training programme fosters entrepreneurship and talent retention in rural Slovenia

This initiative supports aspiring entrepreneurs in developing and launching their business ideas. Through structured training, mentorship and co-working opportunities, it promotes local job creation and stronger regional entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Gorenjska, a predominantly rural region near Ljubljana, benefits from access to wider business networks and the metropolitan labour market but faces outmigration of young people and businesses towards the capital.

PONI (short for 'Podjetno nad izzive', or 'An entrepreneurial approach to challenges') is a national programme aimed at fostering entrepreneurship. In the Gorenjska region, it supports two cohorts of 10-12 aspiring entrepreneurs per year, providing **four months of full-time employment, mentorship support** and **co-working opportunities** while they develop their own businesses.



Image: © BSC Kranj

Full good practice description

BSC Kranj – Regional Development Agency of Gorenjska
12/2019-ongoing
EUR 1 538 272 for 1 November 2023 to 31 December 2029
Funding sources:
- European Regional Development Fund
- National funds

www.bsc-kranj.si/poni-gorenjska-podjetno-nad-izzive

Maruša Bonča, **marusa.bonca@bsc-kranj.si**

Creating local employment opportunities

PONI Gorenjska was established as part of Slovenia's national decentralised entrepreneurship support programme, with funding from the European Regional Development Fund and national funds.

The initiative is structured around four components. An **initial outreach and selection phase** is run by BSC Kranj (the Regional Development Agency of Gorenjska) and the co-working space Kovačnica, inviting permanent or temporary residents with a business idea to apply, regardless of age, education or employment status.

During their four-month employment contract, participants receive a salary, paid annual leave, holiday allowance, proportional severance pay and full employment benefits to allow them to develop their business ideas.

The cohorts have **access to a co-working space with two to three workshops held per week**, covering business model development, business planning, marketing, finance, sales and market validation. An **internal and external mentor additionally provide continuous support**.

During the final phase, **participants present a business plan** and a minimum viable product, and many register their own business entity.

Reducing barriers to entrepreneurship

After the end of the programme, around 70% of PONI Gorenjska participants establish their own business, which amounts to the highest start-up rate in Slovenia.

A key enabling factor of the initiative is the **economic and social security** provided through the four-month paid employment contract, which reduces financial risks and **enables participants to focus fully on developing their business ideas**.

The programme is supported by **regional partners with long-standing experience** in start-up support, alongside an active network of local mentors and entrepreneurs. Continued engagement of former participants with Kovačnica's co-working infrastructure further strengthens **Gorenjska's entrepreneurial ecosystem** and encourages the development of **informal peer networks**.

By supporting aspiring entrepreneurs to build their businesses locally, the initiative contributes to **talent retention** in Gorenjska, turning the region's proximity to Ljubljana into an advantage for rural entrepreneurship rather than a driver of talent outmigration.

Reconnecting generations to keep rural businesses alive in Asturias, Spain

This initiative supported the continuity of small rural businesses by identifying enterprises approaching succession and connecting them with potential successors. Combining business mapping, local engagement, mediation and tailored support, it treated generational renewal as a planned process involving both business and wider community considerations.



Image: © Alto Narcea Muniellos LAG

Alto Narcea Muniellos Local Action Group
01/2025-03/2026
EUR 40 000
Funding source:
- Caja Rural de Asturias Foundation – Impact Projects Call

www.altonarceamuniellos.org/11947254/reconectando-generaciones
Video overviewing the practice
Belén Liste, **gerencia@altonarceamuniellos.org**

In the territory covered by the Alto Narcea Muniellos Local Action Group (LAG), in Asturias, northern Spain, small businesses form an important part of the local economy. The area has a diverse entrepreneurial base spanning livestock farming, trade, services, tourism and small-scale industry, with self-employment accounting for 36% of jobs. However, many established entrepreneurs are approaching retirement, putting businesses, accumulated knowledge and local services at risk.

Mapping businesses and connecting generations

The 'Reconnecting Generations' initiative was developed to support business continuity by **helping retiring owners transfer viable enterprises to new entrepreneurs**. Rather than waiting until businesses were about to close, the approach sought to identify succession needs and opportunities and actively connect the generations involved.

The LAG mapped the local business fabric and established a **transfer and entrepreneurship bank**, identifying more than 100 businesses interested in the process. This was accompanied by a **digital business map, dashboard and practical tools** including a transfer guide, incentives report and Renewal Award.

Alongside these tools, the initiative **worked directly with local people**. Activities involving schoolchildren, new residents and people approaching retirement helped the LAG engage with the territory and better understand local needs and possible solutions. Awareness-raising activities reached more than 300 participants, while media activities reached around 90 000 people.

Active mediation supporting successful transfers

A central lesson is that succession does not happen automatically. The initiative combined identification of opportunities with **planning, guidance and mediation**, recognising that transfers involve emotional, social, cultural and heritage considerations alongside economic ones. **Administrative, regulatory, planning and ownership barriers** can also complicate the process.

The LAG provided direct support to 20 succession processes and seven business transfers were completed, with many linked to LEADER programmes. Potential successors were not limited to local young people, but also included returnees, newcomers and external entrepreneurs.

The experience points to the importance of **active local facilitation, tailored advisory support and coordinated public policies and incentives**. The LAG's existing role in LEADER also provided knowledge of the local business fabric and rural opportunities. By bringing together early identification, awareness raising and hands-on support, the initiative provided an effective approach to maintaining viable rural businesses through generational change.

Creating opportunities for young people in Vetren, Bulgaria

Burgas Coliving is attracting freelancers, remote workers and entrepreneurs to the village of Vetren in Bulgaria. By bringing steady demand to the village, this hub for digital nomads is supporting local businesses, stimulating entrepreneurship, and creating jobs and volunteering opportunities for young locals.



Image: © Burgas Coliving

Full good practice description

- Burgas Coliving
- 06/2022-ongoing
- EUR 42 000 for six months' operation
- Funding source:
  - Private investment
- **www.burgascoliving.com**
- Katya Radostinova, **info@burgascoliving.com**

Coastal Bulgaria has long depended on seasonal tourism, which brings intense demand during the summer months but near-empty villages the rest of the year. This makes it hard to sustain local businesses year-round, retain young residents and justify investment in infrastructure such as high-speed internet.

At the same time, remote working and digital nomadism have grown significantly since 2020, creating a new type of long-stay visitors who need certain infrastructure.

Working with local businesses

The village of Vetren is a historic spa resort with 2 500-year-old thermal springs. Located 15 km inland from Burgas on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, the village was affected by the abandonment of communist-era infrastructure after 1990. This included an abandoned 1954 thermal bath complex, purchased by the founders of Burgas Coliving in 2002.

From 2019, the complex was gradually converted into a **co-living and co-working space for digital nomads**, which became operational in June 2022. It welcomes freelancers, remote workers, entrepreneurs and travellers from around the world to a site designed to provide everything needed to live and work in a rural setting, alongside access to Black Sea beaches.

The hub **operates fully for six months a year** and is aiming to run year-round in the future. It has 13 bedrooms, 600 Mbps internet, a 24/7 co-working space, communal kitchens and living rooms, wine and craft beer rooms, yoga and meditation spaces, and an 8 000 m² garden with sports facilities. It is **supplied by local businesses**, including the village bakery, the local craft brewery, cheese makers, wineries and other food producers.

Opening doors for young people

Thanks to the hub, local digital infrastructure has improved significantly. Burgas Coliving also brings more consistent demand to the village of Vetren, **bolstering the area's small businesses** and **providing jobs and volunteering opportunities for local young people**. As the co-livers remain for weeks or months at a time, they generate demand that seasonal tourism cannot, supporting rural revitalisation.

Linking co-livers with locals

Life at the hub is **structured around regular activities**, including Skillshare Evenings, Art Nights, BBQ Nights, workshops, movie evenings and sports events. In addition, local artists and arts organisations set up installations and collaborative events, while the local government co-organises events linking visitors with residents.

This structured community programme is a key strength of the initiative. It **connects the hub's long-stay co-livers with each other and the local community**, helping to avoid the loneliness that can affect remote workers in rural settings.

Another factor contributing to the initiative's effectiveness is the hub's **connection to local suppliers, cultural actors and the municipal government**. This means that co-livers' spending circulates through and supports the village.

Connecting international talent with rural labour markets in Central Finland

Career Trips connect international students and jobseekers with businesses and smaller municipalities in Central Finland, opening up rural employment and relocation opportunities. Combining direct encounters with employer and newcomer support, the approach connects an existing talent pool with less visible opportunities outside the regional capital.

Central Finland faces an ageing and declining population alongside high unemployment. At the same time, international talent is concentrated around Jyväskylä, its main city and higher education centre. Around 3 000 international students study at the region's three higher education institutions, while smaller municipalities and businesses can struggle to attract workers.

The challenge is partly one of connection: international students may have limited awareness of opportunities beyond Jyväskylä, while small rural businesses have limited experience and resources for recruiting internationally. Language requirements and discrimination in the labour market create additional barriers.

Bringing talent and rural employers together

Since 2023, Career Trips have brought international students and jobseekers from Jyväskylä to smaller municipalities. Higher education institutions and municipalities help **identify companies with vacancies or future recruitment needs** and select participants in relevant fields. Trips typically combine **visits to two or three companies** with local attractions, introducing participants to employment opportunities and **what living in the area could offer**.

The approach creates **contact between groups that might otherwise not meet**. Students discover employment and relocation options, companies gain access to potential recruits, and municipalities can present themselves to prospective residents. By mid-2026, 17 trips involving more than 300 students had visited 38 locations and generated more than a dozen work or internship contracts. Participant feedback averaged 4.3 out of 5.

The model has evolved into more targeted formats. **Two-day hackathons** allow international students to work with local companies on real business challenges. The newer **Talent Sprint Challenge** combines preparatory workshops, a Career Trip, a hackathon and an internship pathway, with opportunities offered to top-performing participants.

New Career Trips to smaller municipalities are also being planned, focusing more on entrepreneurship: developing students' own business ideas and finding successors for existing businesses.



Image: © Jamk Talent Boost

- Jamk University of Applied Sciences
- Economic Development Centre of Central Finland
- University of Jyväskylä
- International House Jyväskylä
- Municipalities of Central Finland region (Viitasaari, Karstula, Kinnula, Kannonkoski, Muurame, Jämsä)

04/2023-ongoing

EUR 1 000 average cost per Career Trip

Funding sources:

- Jamk Talent Boost annual budget
- Regional funding from Finland's Integration Partnership Programme

www.jamk.fi/en/for-students/degree-student/jamk-talent-boost-for-students-and-graduates

Video overviewing the practice

Anna Tenhunen, Jamk University of Applied Sciences, **anna.tenhunen@jamk.fi**

Taneli Minkkinen, Economic Development Centre of Central Finland, **taneli.minkkinen@elinvoimakeskus.fi**

Collaboration and support beyond the first encounter

An important enabling condition is **cooperation between municipalities, higher education institutions, regional authorities and businesses**. With many actors working with limited resources, there is a **collective effort** in which each partner contributes and **one actor coordinates the wider ecosystem**.

Support also needs to extend beyond matchmaking. Newcomers may require practical guidance during relocation and settlement, while small businesses need assistance before, during and after international recruitment. An **accessible local contact person** for both groups can provide this continuity.

The experience also points to areas for further development: targeting companies actively recruiting workers and connecting entrepreneurially oriented international students with rural businesses seeking successors. The approach thus provides a **practical model for linking talent concentrated in regional cities with employment and business opportunities in surrounding rural areas**.

Building the next generation of rural general practitioners in Czechia

A national programme in Czechia is supporting the recruitment and training of future general practitioners (GPs) in underserved rural areas. By improving awareness of rural medical careers and providing experience in rural practices, the programme contributes to maintaining essential services and strengthening the long-term attractiveness of rural communities.

Rural areas of Czechia are facing a growing shortage of GPs. The rural workforce is ageing, replacements are hard to find, and clinical training is heavily concentrated in urban hospitals, giving future doctors limited exposure to rural practice.

A Czech national programme is promoting **generational renewal in rural primary care** through multiple avenues, such as regional teaching infrastructure, clerkships in rural areas, reform of specialist training and examinations, and continuing education for doctors and nurses.

Expanding training across the country

The programme has established **26 educational centres for general medicine** in 13 regions of Czechia (excluding Prague). Plus, seminars are delivered at the country's eight medical faculties, and **one-week clerkships** (with accommodation support) are provided in rural practices for medical students and young doctors. This **brings general practice training closer to where the shortages are** and exposes future doctors to rural family medicine.

Nationwide seminars for general practice nurses help strengthen the capacity of rural primary care teams, while a podcast series called Praktici (Practitioners) provides **accessible continuing education** for students, young doctors and GPs across the country.

'Train-the-trainer' courses help **build the pool of qualified educators** in general practice. These are based on the framework of the European Academy of Teachers in General Practice/Family Medicine. Reforms of final specialist examinations for GPs have also been initiated, to **improve the quality and consistency of certification**.



Image: © IPVZ

Full good practice description

Institute for Postgraduate Medical Education (IPVZ)
01/2025-06/2028
EUR 1 000 000
Funding sources:
- European Social Fund Plus
- National co-financing

www.ipvz.cz/o-ipvz/kontakty/pedagogicka-pracoviste/vseobecne-prakticke-lekarstvi/projekt-opz-vpl
Lenka Omelková, **lenka.omelkova@ipvz.cz**

Introducing future doctors to rural practice

The programme is delivered through the Czech Society of General Practice, which has strengthened legitimacy and buy-in from the profession. A key factor in its success is the use of multiple avenues to tackle generational renewal in rural general practice.

Among these, **establishing general medicine educational centres across the country** was an important enabling condition. It created a **distributed teaching infrastructure** that brings training closer to where the workforce shortages are, rather than being concentrated in the major university cities. This **structural investment will remain after the programme ends**.

Another major success factor is the **programme's rural clerkships**. These give medical students and young doctors **first-hand experience of rural family medicine as a career option** at a point when their choices are still open. This has proved to be a stronger recruitment tool than communication campaigns aimed at doctors already in the workforce.

The programme has also shown that **extending training to general practice nurses** is important for sustainable rural primary care, as investing only in doctors would leave half of the rural workforce challenge unaddressed.

Transferring experience across generations through apprenticeship mentoring in Germany

VerAplus connects apprentices experiencing difficulties in vocational training with experienced senior volunteers. Through confidential one-to-one mentoring tailored to individual needs, the programme transfers professional and life experience between generations, helping young people strengthen their skills, motivation and prospects of completing their training.

Germany's dual vocational education system offers training in around 320 occupations, combining workplace and vocational school learning. However, young people may enter training with limited knowledge of occupations and workplace requirements, unrealistic expectations or uncertainty about their career choices. Parents and schools may not always be able to provide the individual support needed.

The Senior Expert Service (SES) established VerAplus in 2008 to provide **additional support to apprentices who experience difficulties during their training**. Its objective is to intervene early, improve the training process and help prevent apprentices from dropping out before achieving their qualification.

Matching apprentices with experienced mentors

Apprentices who feel they need support can register through the VerAplus platform of SES. SES then identifies a trained senior expert living nearby and brings the two together to agree on the apprentice's needs and objectives. The resulting mentoring relationship is strictly confidential and involves only the apprentice and mentor.

Support is **tailored to the individual**. Mentors can help strengthen motivation and social skills, explain theoretical aspects of vocational training, prepare apprentices for examinations, support practical training and address language difficulties. Drawing on their professional and life experience, mentors act as confidants, **helping apprentices identify solutions rather than prescribing them**.

Requests come primarily from apprentices themselves, but employers, vocational schools, chambers of commerce and trade, and parents can also initiate contact. The only requirement is that the young person has an apprenticeship contract.



Image: © Senior Expert Service

Senior Expert Service, Bonn
2008-ongoing
EUR 3.5 million in 2025
Funding source:
- German Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

www.vera.ses-bonn.de
Video overviewing the practice
Stefanie Mura, **s.mura@ses-bonn.del**

The entire mentoring process is free of charge for apprentices and their employers, and it may continue until the end of their apprenticeship (i.e. maximum of 3 years). The current average mentoring lasts 10 months.

A trained volunteer network enabling individual support

The programme relies on a nationwide pool of **experienced volunteers and a structured matching and training system**. Around 5 000 SES mentors have attended dedicated VerAplus training workshops, providing the capacity to offer individual support across Germany.

Participation has grown from 4 000 apprentices in 2023 to 4 900 in 2025, with 5 000 foreseen for 2026. Around 29 000 mentoring processes have been carried out since 2008, with 75% completed successfully, meaning the apprentice did not drop out. In a 2021 survey, 95% of participating apprentices said they would recommend the mentoring to a friend.

The approach demonstrates how experienced professionals can provide support to younger generations while transferring knowledge accumulated over their working lives. Its **potential for adaptation** has also been tested internationally: through the 2019-2022 Erasmus project EvolYou, SES trained senior volunteer organisations from Finland, France, Italy and Spain in the VerAplus approach, with a mentoring programme subsequently introduced in France.

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Contents and editing: Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, AGRI-D1 and Rural Pact Support Office
Acknowledgements:
- Layout: Rural Pact Support Office
- Cover photo: © MikLav from Getty Images

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Manuscript finalised in November 2026 | Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2026 © European Union, 2026
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Print ISSN: 3094-6042 KF-01-26-025-EN-C
PDF ISSN: 3094-6050 KF-01-26-025-EN-N

Access the online version of the publication



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