

Highlights of the Ansó Smart Village Strategy

Spain



About Ansó

Ansó is a small mountain village nestling in the westernmost valley of the Aragonese Pyrenees just below the border with France. The village has 405 inhabitants, is at an altitude of 860 metres and is 102km from both Huesca and Pamplona – the two cities nearest Ansó - and 151km from the regional capital Zaragoza.

With its magnificent landscapes, rich biodiversity, well-preserved traditional architecture and its important cultural and historical heritage, the village is recognised as one of 'Spain's most beautiful villages'.

The main economic activities here have traditionally been sheep and cattle farming, forestry and trading across the border with France. In recent years however, tourism has become the most important economic activity. Despite the difficulties posed by depopulation, Ansó has been able to maintain its basic services with: a school with four teachers, a medical centre, a pharmacy, food shops, bakers and bars, among others.

Nowadays, we see our village as a socially active place with its own energy resources and able to evolve and use technology and innovation to face the future.

Key challenges & assets

Challenges:

- **Depopulation:** We see a steady depopulation (about 100 people in the last 10 years) which threatens the existence of basic services.
- **Difficult access to housing:** growing tourist development and owners lack of interest in selling or renting their empty houses make it difficult for young villagers to set up their own homes and for new residents to find somewhere to settle in the village.

- **Connectivity:** due to its isolation, Ansó is badly connected in terms of infrastructure, mobility and broadband/fibre optic capacity. This hinders professional and personal development and makes it harder for people to stay or settle in the village.
- **Socio-economic decline:** The village's social, economic and cultural activity has declined as a consequence of the factors explained above. This can be specifically seen in the reduction in the number of people willing/able to set up new businesses.

Assets:

- **Location and geography:** being close to nature and a slower pace of life implies a better quality of life for Ansó's inhabitants.
- **Human resources:** the Ayuntamiento (village council) is exceptional for being proactive and independent and for its constant efforts to maintain and increase the population. It is open to new possibilities and innovation with an approach which integrates ecological and social concerns. Ansó School is one of the village's most important assets and its teachers are recognised for introducing alternative and innovative teaching methods.
- **Natural resources:** abundant resources for producing clean energy.
- **Infrastructure:** unused buildings and spaces which can be converted for use by business start-ups and by professional projects.

Main objectives of smart village strategy

Overall objective:

To create the ideal conditions (technological, energy and human) for stabilising the population and attracting new residents. This would improve the quality of life of the whole community and achieve a positive and lasting impact.

Specific objectives:

1. Improve connectivity
2. Facilitate access to housing
3. Promote entrepreneurship initiatives
4. Have a positive impact on the transition to renewable energy
5. Facilitate family and social development

What is smart?

Community Participation in Strategy Development

Smart means approaching our village's problems from an integral, effective, interconnected and participative perspective. In September-October 2020, an active and comprehensive participation process, using consultative methodology was started with the aim of involving the whole local community in doing a SWOT analysis for Ansó. The proposals were included in the action plan for the smart strategy.

Links to other strategies

- ✓ **Population Fixing and Innovation Plan:** a local strategy started in 2019 aiming to enable people to stay in the village and encourage newcomers to settle here. The "Smart Village Strategy" has emerged from this strategy.
- ✓ **Huesca Broad Band:** a regional project aiming to give rural areas the same technological advantages as the cities by installing fibre optic cables. This has provided a much better internet connection to the village.
- ✓ **Housing Development Plan:** a regional strategy (DPH) which helps facilitate housing projects for young people setting up home for the first time. We have used the plan to design 'trampoline housing' allowing prospective new residents to try out living in the village without having to buy a home here first.
- ✓ **Pueblos Vivos/Living Villages:** LEADER 2014-2020 project is a network of villages in the Comarca county working together against rural depopulation.

What smart actions are implemented and planned?

- **Neighbourhood Housing Development and Rental Assistance Programme** (since 2019): the village council offers facilities to the owners of unused/empty homes and to people interested in living here, enabling them to rent. So far, this has allowed a couple of new residents to set up home in Ansó. We are also renovating two of the eight municipal apartments in the village.
- **Nature Classroom:** since August 2020, the teaching community has been developing an outdoor classroom to teach the school curriculum through project-based learning - designing, creating and caring for a small animal farm, garden and installing renewable energy and irrigation systems.
- **Electric car charging point:** in 2020, the first charging point was installed in the village car park.
- **Waste management:** in the beginning of 2020, we installed waste bins around the whole village enabling organic, paper, plastic and compost waste to be disposed of separately.
- **Connectivity:** 100MB capacity fibre optic cable designed to improve internet connection and facilitate teleworking was installed throughout the village.
- **Co-working:** in September 2020 we started converting an underused office space into co-working offices with a positive social impact.

Smart actions that we are planning...

- ✓ **Establish communication with telecom companies** to improve internet connection by installing a symmetrical Fibre Optic cable. This will allow teleworking and other online working and will attract new businesses. We will also improve communications and mountain safety by working with telecom companies to improve the mobile phone signal in the mountains.
- ✓ **Carry out the 'Trampoline Housing' project** with four new homes (finance from the DPH – provincial government) designed for housing new residents in the village who, for a certain time, want to try out living and working in Ansó before committing to buying/renting a more permanent residence here.
- ✓ **Promote and encourage new entrepreneurs** interested in setting up in Ansó: the Ayuntamiento will help new businesses navigate institutional and governmental regulations and help businesses find financing, work spaces and to carry out their projects.
- ✓ Viability studies and **refurbishment of underused spaces** to create multi-purpose buildings available for use by new businesses and innovative projects.
- ✓ **Find financing to implement two, already designed, projects: a mini hydro-electric generating station and a solar panel park.** Both are designed to enable a transit towards renewable energy and supply electricity for municipal buildings and for street lighting.
- ✓ Carry out the 'Valuing Environmental Services' project to **quantify and put a financial value on CO₂ absorption levels by Ansó's forests** and the amount of water the valley produces.
- ✓ **Set up a creche/kindergarten (0-3 years)** to allow parents to go to work, create employment and allow young families to settle here.
- ✓ **Create a community travel share app** to specifically help students and older people get around. Reactivate the cine club (stopped by COVID-19) as a way of bringing the local community together.
- ✓ **Develop a digital marketing plan** and contract a specialist to raise Ansó's presence on the web and to show what rural life is really like in order to attract new residents to the village.
- ✓ **Maintain and improve hiking trails** by using digital technology and by recruiting a group of forest/outdoor workers.