

Highlights of the Virtsu Smart Village Strategy

Estonia



About Virtsu

The Virtsu borough is situated on the western coast of Estonia on the Virtsu peninsula, surrounded by the Baltic Sea. Virtsu was originally an island that became a peninsula in the 19th century as a result of land uplift and the construction of a road dam. The local municipality center Lihula is located 25 km away from Virtsu. The state main road to Saaremaa Island passes through one side of Virtsu, to the ferry harbor where gravel, peat and wood chips are exported.

Today, Virtsu has close to 500 inhabitants, living in mixed dense and rural-type habitat areas. Fifty percent of the population is elderly people and this proportion is slowly increasing. Virtsu is still home to many abandoned old fishery industrial buildings from the Soviet era, which co-exist side by side with an old manor building remains dating back to 1459, and a small medieval seaside castle ruins.

Key challenges & assets

Challenges	Assets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Location at the coast :(✗ Elderly and ageing population ✗ Few jobs, no new ones ✗ Very few business opportunities ✗ Lack of vacant living spaces ✗ Increased condition of the municipality's outskirts ✗ Poor environmental appearance - several abandoned buildings in poor condition ✗ Lack cooperative spirit ✗ Unknown to general population (except the harbor) ✗ Risk of young people leaving ✗ Risk of community activism is wearing off ✗ Risk of isolation and lack of investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Location at the coast :) ✓ Open community and active development society ✓ Wind energy funding for community projects ✓ Stable jobs thanks to the harbor ✓ Good local basic school and kindergarten ✓ Stable energy supply, good roads and high-speed internet connection ✓ Existence of vacant real estate for construction ✓ Beautiful and diverse seaside nature ✓ Endured cultural traditions ✓ Existence of a cargo port ✓ Potential new jobs in the new business center (due to open 2021-2022) ✓ Free space in school building to establish a training center ✓ Restored historical objects and the nature may become a tourist attraction ✓ Potential revitalisation of the old fishery area ✓ Potential cooperation with the wind farm operator to create renewable energy center ✓ Production and use of solar energy and hydrogen

Main objectives of smart village strategy



- Objective 1:** Creation of high quality living environment
- Objective 2:** Ensuring local education
- Objective 3:** Preservation of traditions and promotion of tourism
- Objective 4:** Business development
- Objective 5:** Increasing capacity of community self-sufficiency
- Objective 6:** Raising community self-awareness and reputation of Virtsu

What is smart?

In Virtsu we say: "A smart (village) is a local act of a common sense!"

Community Participation in Strategy Development

The Virtsu Development Society has conducted many public meetings on various topics of the local life, to identify mindset of the community and the needs of the residents of Virtsu. Based on these, the development plans and visions have been created and modified earlier. Development of the new smart village strategy was also started by informing the locals about the process and everyone was offered the opportunity to participate in the development of the vision, goals, SWOT analysis and activities. A large number of local people have either expressed their views in these meetings or corresponded with the drafters of the strategy.

Links to other strategies

The Virtsu Smart Village Strategy is well in sync with all strategies from the local municipal level to higher regional (Pärnu County 2035+ and Leader), Estonian national and European levels. Some of these alignment highlights are:

- ✓ **European Green Deal:** green lifestyle, lifelong learning and sustainable economy play an important role in the Virtsu development strategy. Raising community awareness of pollution and waste issues, improving the share of renewable energy, creating a better living environment by preserving the natural environment.
- ✓ **Cork 2.0 declaration guidelines:** in terms of promoting knowledge and innovation, Virtsu's goal is to maintain high-quality local education in cooperation with other educational institutions; investment in the viability of rural areas is linked to the creation of a planned business centre; we are encouraging local co-operational entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, by setting the business goals towards common prosperity of the community.
- ✓ The Virtsu smart village strategy is strongly intertwined with the **development plans of the regional LEADER action groups** in our region. The planned activities in Virtsu help to implement the priority activities of the LEADER at the local community level.



What smart actions are currently implemented?

At this stage, the largest and most influential activity for the Virtsu community is the planning of new entrepreneurship and business centre in the middle of the borough, which will inhabit its first client and one of the biggest employers in the municipality – K.MET metal wire factory – in early 2022. This centre will also be the potential base of the new renewable energy operational and training centre for the wind energy industry active around Virtsu, and site for power to hydrogen plant and storage facility.

All these new opportunities are aimed towards creation of new jobs and attraction of more young and active people. Active and cooperative people will be fuelling the sustainable life in Virtsu.

A smart action that we are planning...

The next big change planned by smart village strategy to be implemented and a challenge to overcome in people's mindsets in Virtsu would be the establishment of co-operational business and communal funding association, which would create additional income for the residents of Virtsu and build up sense of success and joint effort within the community. It would also create the supportive network for dignified ageing.

For that effort, some external expertise and support from SR21 project is needed.

