

# Highlights of the Smart Village Strategy of Virtsu

Estonia



## About Virtsu

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 also gravel, peat and wood chips are exported.

Virtsu has today close to 500 inhabitants, living in mixed dense and rural type habitat areas. 50% of the population is elderly people and the proportion of them is slowly growing. There are still many sights of abandoned industrial buildings (old fishery) from the Soviet era in Virtsu, side by side with old manor (noted already 1459) buildings remains and a small medieval seaside castle ruins.

## Key challenges & assets

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

## Main objectives of smart village strategy

Strategic goal and six main objectives of the Virtsu smart village strategy together with directions of actions to achieve it are presented on the figure below.



## What is smart?

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

### Community Participation in Strategy Development

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 were offered the opportunity to participate in the development of 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

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

- ✓ Green lifestyle, lifelong learning and sustainable economy play an important role in Virtsu development strategy. Raising community awareness of, among other things, pollution and waste issues, improving share of renewable energy, creating a better living environment by preserving the natural environment. These are just a few examples of Virtsu commitment to European Green Deal for greener and better future.
- ✓ In terms of promoting knowledge and innovation, our 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 center; we are encouraging local co-operational entrepreneurship and crowdfunding, by setting the business goals towards common prosperity of the community. This is how Virtsu follows the Cork 2.0 declaration guidelines.
- ✓ It can be stated that 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 center in the middle of the borough, which will inhabit its first client and one of the biggest employer in our municipality - K.MET metal wire factory - in early 2022. This center will also be the potential base of the new renewable energy operational and training center 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 mindset 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 and success of joint efforts within the community. It would also create the supportive network for dignified aging

For that effort Virtsu needs additional external expertise and support from Smart Rural 21 project.

