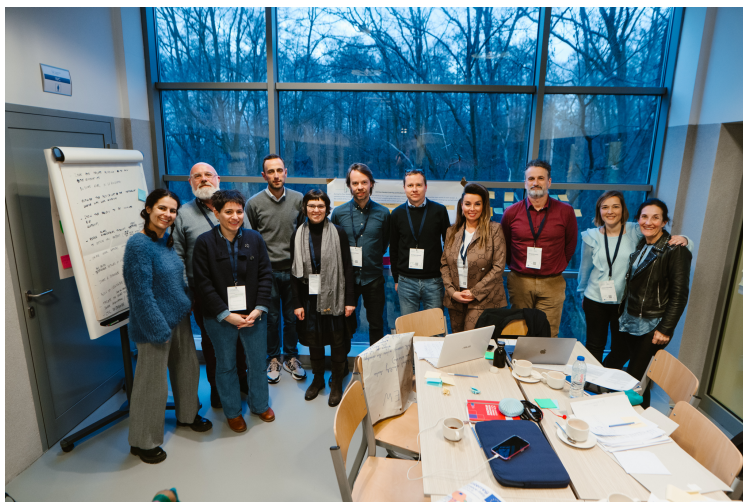


Peer Review 3
Sustainable Urban Development – art. 11 (2021-2027)
Location/ Date – Kalisz, Poland. 31st January – 1st February 2024
City of under-review: Pleszew
Strategy name: Sustainable development strategy for the Town and Commune of Pleszew

Name of the expert: Martina Pertoldi, Levente Polyak / Date: 19 February 2024

PEER-REVIEW FEEDBACK REPORT



Representatives of Pleszew presented their current work on their integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy during the Peer Review workshop organised by the European Urban Initiative and hosted by the Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration on the 31st January – 1st February 2024. The presentation was followed by peer discussions, which have provided the bases for this report.



Co-funded by
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PART 1 | PEER-REVIEW APPROACH

STRUCTURE OF THE 'PEER-REVIEW'

The second EUI Peer Review took place in Kalisz, Poland on 31st January – 01st February 2024. A total of 46 participants including 6 representatives from the 3 cities under review, 16 peers from 12 urban authorities representing 6 different countries, 1 representative from DG REGIO European Commission, 7 peer review experts, 4 additional representatives from the Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration were also present.

The three cities under-review and their peers are presented in the table below:

CITIES UNDER REVIEW	PEERS
Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration, Poland	CIM Coimbra, Portugal Municipality of Vicenza, Italy Municipality of Padova, Italy Municipality of Viladecans, Spain Municipality of Novo Mesto, Slovenia
Pula, Croatia	Municipality of Lodz, Poland Municipality of Serres, Greece CIM Coimbra, Portugal Municipality of Iqoumenitsa, Greece Municipality of Malaga, Spain
Pleszew, Poland	Municipality of Cluj Napoca, Romania Municipality of Maia, Portugal Municipality of Rinconada, Spain Municipality of Bergamo, Italy Municipality of Fundao, Portugal Municipality of Iqoumenitsa, Greece

In total 11 of the 16 peers had not previously acted as peer. Six peers from 3 municipalities had previously taken part in a peer review as a city under review. The remaining peers had been involved in at least one previous event.

The Peer Review approach had three main phases: preparation, peer review event, and follow-up.

BEFORE THE PEER-REVIEW WORKSHOP – PREPARATION

Prior to the event in Kalisz, each city under-review worked on:

- A background document with relevant information on the city context and an explanation of the three guiding questions which frame the challenges the city is facing.
- A PPT presentation on their integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy and further elaboration on the guiding questions including what has already been tried in terms of solutions.

- The filling of the online self-assessment via the [SAT4SUD tool](#). This was done as part of the Background Paper and allowed the cities under review to formulate their questions based on the areas of their SUD strategy which scored the lowest.
- The presentation of their questions during the online Peer Meeting which took place a few weeks before the event and participation in the Preparatory Webinar which took place on 16th January 2024.

DURING THE PEER-REVIEW WORKSHOP - WORKSHOP

The Peer-review workshop ran for two full days (31 January – 1st February 2024).

The agenda included a combination of plenary and break-out sessions. Below is a list of sessions which structured the peer review event:

- Day 1 Welcome and Introduction to the host city by the Vice-Rector of the University of Kalisz.
- A panel debate with representatives from European, national, regional and local government to explain the SUD landscape in Poland.
- An introduction to the three cities under review through a short ‘pitch’ presentation explaining their challenges to set the scene for the intense break-out sessions.
- Two rounds of Break-Out sessions (approx. 1.5 hours each) to address questions 1 and 3 of each city under review. These small groups were a chance for the peers to share ideas and solutions from their own experience. After a short introduction to the challenge from the CUR, each peers outlined their experience using concrete project examples. The participants used the Learning and Action Grid to log anything interesting they heard ready for possible future collaboration. See part 3 of this report for more details.
- An interactive World Café style peer discussion (2 hours) addressing the broad topic of collaboration. All three CUR identified a question linked to some form of collaboration (cross sectoral, between municipalities or departments inside them). The World Café format allowed for a mix of peers between groups offering the CUR access to all the knowledge in the room. See part 4 of this report for more details.
- A series of active and varied Study Visits were organised to allow participants to visit the three cities from this region (Kalisz, Ostrow and Pleszew).

In Ostrow we saw the Practical Education Centre funded through ERDF providing vocational training for young people, this facility works in partnership with local business to support access to local jobs. We also visited the Mediatek building housing a multimedia library catering for people with disabilities.

DAY 1: VISIT TO OSTRÓW WIELKOPOLSKI



PRACTICAL EDUCATION CENTER

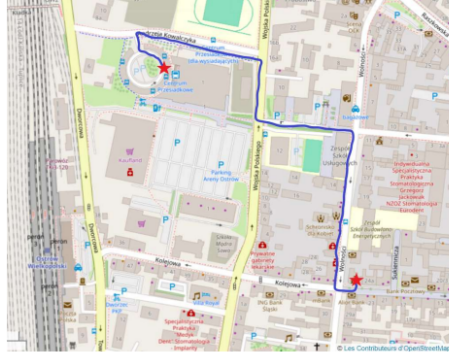
Another programme, the Wielkopolska Regional Operational Programme for 2014-2020 has supported the modern Practical Education Center. This center is not only a response to the needs of students, but also the local labor market.

In eighteen modernly equipped vocational laboratories and five classrooms, students are educated in twenty professions from several leading industries: construction, mechanical, electrical engineering, energy, automotive and transport. Students gain skills in, among others, professions such as construction technician, bricklayer, fitter of sanitary networks and installations, carpenter, electrical technician, cutting machine operator, locksmith, mechanic, etc.

The directions of education at PEC were agreed with employers from the beginning. An integral part of PEC is a programme of training and vocational courses for students and teachers of district schools which is supported by external funding.

<https://www.powiat-ostrowski.pl/artykuly/8803>

Start 16h30 at the bus station, walk 650 meters to the Mediateka



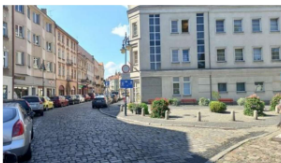
MEDIATEKA

This project is part of the ITI Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration and supported by the Greater Poland Regional Operational Programme for 2014-2020. The project concerns the reconstruction of a commercial and service building into a multimedia library. The facility has been designed "barrier-free" - all rooms are adapted to the needs of disabled people, wheelchair users and the blind. An elevator is present in the facility, and special stations will be equipped with a Braille communication system.

<https://www.biblioteka-ostrow.pl/O-bibliotece/Biblioteka-i-filie/Mediateka>

In Kalisz our tour started at the renovated Town Hall with a visit to the clock tower and an explanation of the history of the city. It was followed by a walking tour through the city's revitalised low traffic zone. Finally we were able to visit the Cultural Accelerator, a building which had previously been a hospital and a shopping mall now through the support of ERDF funds is an open access cultural facility for local people:

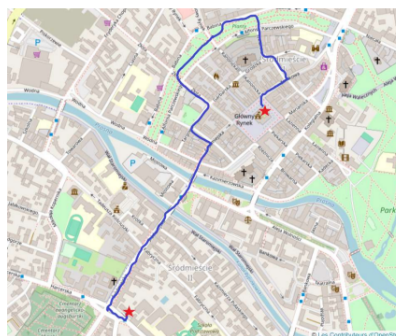
DAY 2: VISIT TO KALISZ



WOONERF AND CITY PLANTY

As part of the ITI Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration and supported by the Greater Poland Regional Operational Programme for 2014-2020 a "woonerf" was created, i.e. a traffic-calmed zone with high aesthetic values, which combines the functions of a street, a promenade, a parking lot and a meeting place for residents. Also the City Planty was restored. The Planty area has become an attractive space for residents by creating a zone for rest and spending free time.

Start 9h at the Town Hall, walk 1,6 km to the Culture Accelerator



TOWN HALL

The aim of this ERDF supported project was to preserve, protect, promote and develop the cultural heritage of the city of Kalisz and the region. The scope of the project includes the adaptation of the rooms of the historic town hall (town hall basement, patio, town hall tower with a viewing platform and the corridor at the entrance to the tower, hall) and the adaptation of the entire building to the needs of people with disabilities in order to create an exhibition dedicated to the city and the Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration and tourist services.

<https://wrpo.wielkopolskie.pl/dowiedz-sie-wiecej-o-programie/poznaj-projekty/przyklady-najciekawszych-projektow/adaptacja-pomieszczen-zabytkowego-budynku-ratusza-miejskiego-na-eksponicje-poswieconej-dziedzictwu-historyczno-kulturowemu-kalisza>



CULTURE ACCELERATOR

Another ITI project is the reconstruction and adaptation of the building at ul. Nowy Świat 2a in Kalisz for the "Culture Accelerator", which allows for equalizing opportunities related to access to cultural services, for people at risk of social exclusion in the revitalization area. It is also a new space on the map of Kalisz serving the development of tourism potential, creative industries and culture.

<https://www.akceleratorokultury.pl/>

Finally, we visited Pleszew where we walked through the city to see several EU funded initiatives including the local cinema, library and primary school. The visit ended with a presentation from the Mayor of Pleszew about the 15-minute city concept adopted by the city:

DAY 2: VISIT TO PLESZEW

Start 11h15 at the parking, walk 1,2 km to the Culture Center



CAFÉ & CINEMA, MULTI-FAMILY HOUSE, PRIMARY SCHOOL NO. 2, WORLD BICYCLE PATH

The cinema modernization process included digitization, followed by renovation and the creation of a café. The cinema in Pleszew is now also a meeting place for various social groups. The multi-family house is part of the transformation of the center of Pleszew, the concept of which was developed in the SMART Pleszew project financed from the Cohesion Fund. The facility includes 21 apartments, an underground parking lot, a restaurant and a service point.

The bicycle route is one of the few bicycle paths in Poland commemorating the World Bicycle Day established by the United Nations. Construction of bicycle paths in Pleszew is a project supported by the ERDF.

Primary school nr 2 is the largest primary school in Pleszew. Educational projects and the purchase of equipment in this school were financed by the ESF and the ERDF. The school has modernized teaching facilities and necessary equipment. In addition to acquiring digital, linguistic, mathematical skills, etc., children also learn practical activities such as sewing and drilling.

REVITALIZED AREA

The transformation of the revitalized area and the construction of the new Public Library in Pleszew are projects financed by the ERDF. In the revitalized area there is a transfer point: B&R parking, P&R parking, local bus lanes and narrow-gauge railway line. The entire revitalization area is now an eco-friendly neighborhood where inhabitants can enjoy a mix of housing, culture, free time, recreation, public transportation, education and health care.

Innovation of the project was noticed by The Society of The Polish Town Planners giving the main award in the category of "The best planned public space". The project was also nominated for the European Prize for Urban Public Space in Barcelona, Spain.

PUBLIC LIBRARY & CULTURE CENTRE

The hub, consisting of a youth center and library, is located in the old narrow-gauge railway building. It provides numerous activities for children, teenagers and adults (also cinema, theatre and open-air concerts). The aim was to create a new accessible, safe and inclusive public space, with respect of culture heritage.

- A final review of the main recommendations and actions proposed to the CUR was done in a dedicated session where the CUR used their Learning and Action Grid to prioritise the actions they will follow up after the event back in their city. The result of this session is summarised in Part 6 of this report.
- To conclude the event a wrap up session took place to get quick fire feedback from participants about the quality and usefulness of the peer review in terms of both content and logistics. This session also included a short exchange of ideas to match cities for future EUI City to City exchange type collaboration.
- The event closed with a look ahead to other Capacity Building activities offered by the European Urban Initiative and a short presentation of the PORTICO tool for knowledge sharing and community building.

AFTER THE PEER-REVIEW WORKSHOP - FOLLOW-UP

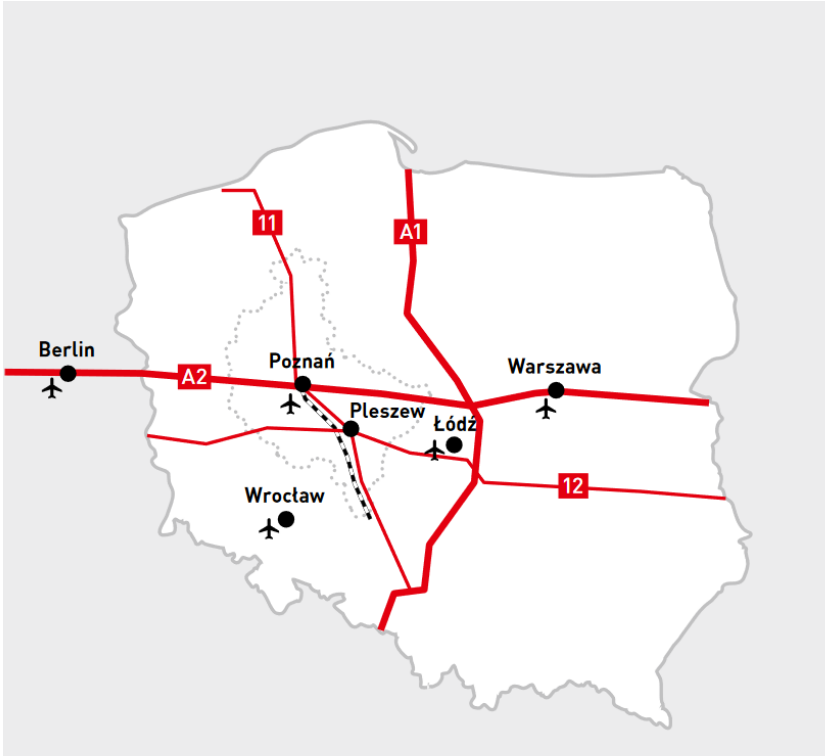
After the peer-review event, all city representatives receive this Feedback Report that summarises the results of the Break-Out discussions, outlines the agreed actions using the solutions provided by the city peers and makes some further recommendations concerning the existing shortcoming in the reviewed strategy.

A follow up webinar will be arranged with each city under review no later than 6 months after the peer review event.

PART 2 | CURRENT WORK ON THE INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

ABOUT THE CITY CONTEXT IN BRIEF

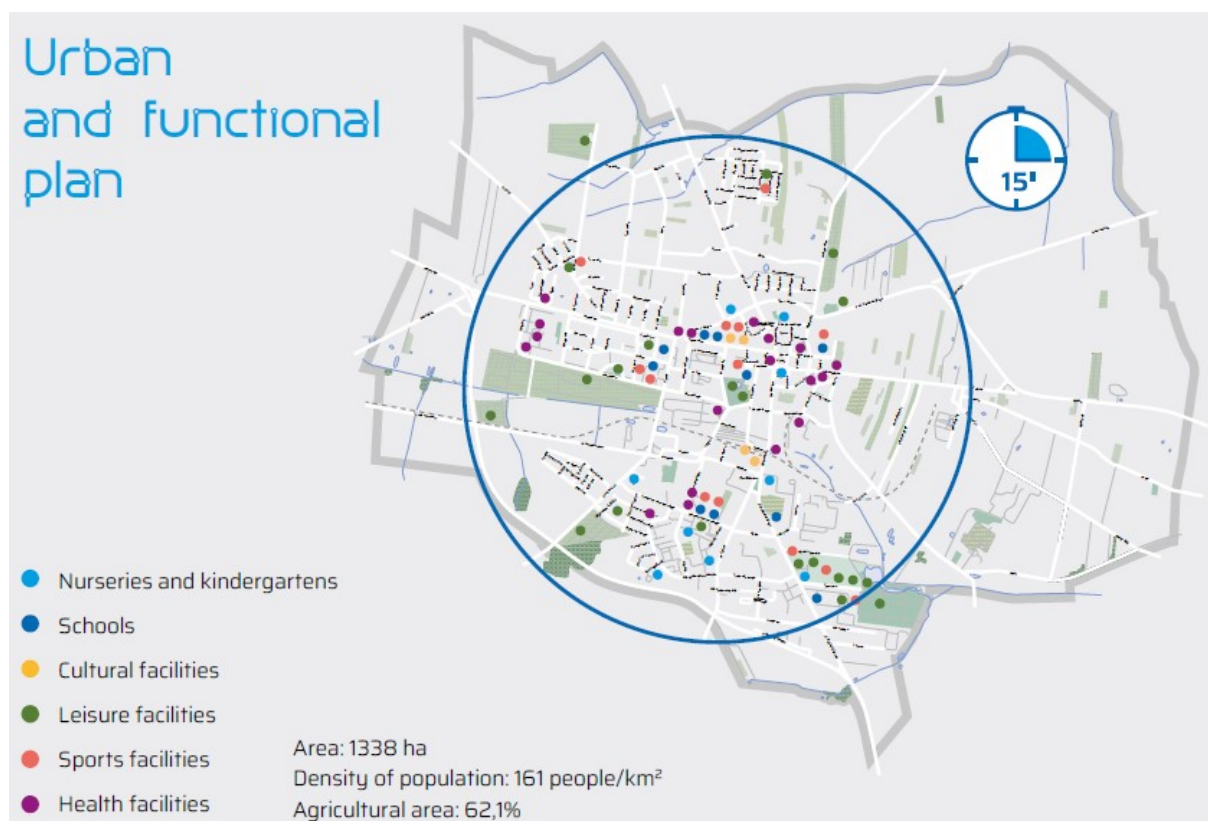
The municipality of Pleszew is located in central Poland, in the Greater Poland region, about 100 kilometres away from the regional capital Poznan, and 25 kilometres from the city of Kalisz, being part of the catchment area of the larger urban agglomeration of Kalisz and Ostrow.



The municipality is classified as an urban-rural municipality according to Polish official statistics and covers both the small town of Pleszew, with around 16,000 inhabitants, as well as the rural villages around it, with approximately 12,000 inhabitants. Pleszew's total population is about 27,000 inhabitants. There are 28 village councils in the rural part of the municipality, of which only two have a little more than 1,000 inhabitants, while the others have a few hundred people each.

The town of Pleszew is home to FAMOT, the largest machine tool manufacturer in Central Europe. Other enterprises employ workers in the sector of machines and devices production e.g. for the food sector, pharmaceutical and chemical industries, and advanced construction products. As a matter of fact, the ratio of people commuting to work in Pleszew vs commuting to other cities from Pleszew is 2,519 against 1,242 (1,277 surplus).

Due to high quality service facilities like elementary and high schools, kindergartens, sporting and entertainment facilities, cultural centre, hospital, music school, cinema, water park and shops, Pleszew attracts city-users from neighbouring municipalities.



Pleszew town main facilities and services

However, recent statistical data illustrate the phenomenon of an ageing society and a shrinking city.

According to national classification, Pleszew is one of the medium-sized cities in the country that are considered at risk of losing their socio-economic functions, i.e. have shrinking population and limited infrastructure investments, among other challenges.

Despite a low unemployment rate (2.8% in 2022), data show that the number of inhabitants decreased by 3.0% (875 inhabitants) in the period 2017-2022. Moreover, the number of non-working age population per 100 persons of working age was 73.4 in 2022. If on the one hand the municipality is suffering from depopulation, on the other hand there are patterns of sub-urbanisation that mainly relate to past choices in planning policies and generate now issues related for example to land consumption, service provision, heavy car traffic.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE SUD STRATEGY

In accordance with national guidelines, the regional operational programme for Greater Poland 2021-2027 has identified Pleszew as one of the Strategic Intervention Areas in the region, making it eligible under the SUD measure 2021-27.

It is the first time Pleszew develops a SUD strategy, which will be implemented in the form of an Integrated Territorial Investment strategy. It covers the entire municipality (the urban core and rural villages around it) and aims at having an impact in neighbouring municipalities.

Pleszew's goal is to become *"a compact city, in line with the idea of a 15-minute city, a green city and a smart city, increasing the quality of life of its residents"*.

At the time of the Peer Review, the SUD strategy is still in the preparatory phase, i.e. the strategy diagnostic part has been completed and main goals and actions have been identified, even if not fully detailed yet.

The municipal Department of Development and Analysis is responsible for the overall management and monitoring of the SUD strategy in cooperation with the Investment Department, the Department of Municipal Economy, the Department of Education. The Spatial Planning department also plays a key role.

Involvement of the local community, social leaders, NGOs, local business and auxiliary units of the Town and Commune of Pleszew is foreseen mainly by means of consultation, i.e. meetings with citizens, local entities, students' competitions, online surveys, etc. For example, the draft SUD strategy will be posted on the municipality's website for consultation and comments.

SUD investments are meant to stimulate economic recovery, create new jobs, and attract young people without affecting the carrying capacity of the urban settlements.

With an ERDF total envelope of approximately EUR 20 million, SUD investments address the following objectives:

- Modernisation of the urban space of Pleszew through the transformation of the city centre, which is meant to have a positive impact on economic recovery.
- Improving environmental quality, integrating the latest technologies.
- Supporting social cohesion and inclusion.
- Strengthening the business environment, attracting investments, and creating jobs.
- Creation of a tourism brand (branding) in complementarity with existing cultural and educational assets i.e. library, cultural centre.

Main projects are listed below:

- **New bus transport lines around Pleszew**, which result from an inter-municipal agreement with a neighbouring municipality, and will especially serve students and workers commuting from non-urban areas. Planned budget: 3 million EUR.
- **Pleszew COMPACT LAB**. The project will establish a multi-functional centre for the implementation of innovative solutions in cooperation with enterprises, researchers, and NGOs. It will consist of three components: a business incubator; a hub for social workers and NGOs; a hotel and conference facility. Planned budget: 2 million EUR.
- **Environmentally sustainable kindergarten**, which will provide innovative pre-school education. Planned budget: 3 million EUR.
- **Narrow Gauge Railway Museum "WAŚK"**. The project will convert an old railway station into a railway museum. The new museum will be an important asset for tourism promotion at supra-local level and it will also contribute to the active care of tangible and intangible cultural heritage as a source of local identity. Planned budget: 4 million EUR.
- **Museum of contemporary art "Kamienica"**. The creation of a new cultural facility with a supra-local reach aims at strengthening the tourism and cultural offer directly available in the town through the adaptation of a building in the centre of Pleszew. Planned budget: 2 million EUR.

Monitoring of the SUD strategy will be carried out through output and result indicators consistent with the indicators foreseen in the ERDF regional operational programme 2021-2027. However, the monitoring system has not been detailed yet.

Finally, it is important to mention that while elaborating the SUD strategy, the municipality is implementing other relevant strategic plans, as follows:

- the Development Strategy of the Town and Municipality of Pleszew, based on the 15-minute city concept. Pleszew is more and more often called the first 15-minute city in Poland and is further implementing this concept by participating in the EU "Driving Urban Transitions" programme.
- the Municipal Revitalisation, which focuses on a smaller area in the town centre, and it is assisted by a national support mechanism.
- In addition, since 2022 Pleszew is a member of the Kalisz-Ostrów Agglomeration (AKO) and it is therefore interested also by the larger AKO SUD strategy as well as other urban plans like for example the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan for the agglomeration. The Pleszew's direction of development under the ITI Strategy for the Kalisz-Ostrowska Agglomeration follow four strategic goals: integrated and sustainable transport mobility, green transformation and environmental quality, e-public service for citizens, and high quality of first-level education.

PART 3 | SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

During its preparation for the Peer Review workshop, the city was asked to prepare three questions to be later discussed with peers. The representatives of Pleszew formulated the following *questions*:

QUESTION 1	How to minimize the outflow of young people from small European city?
QUESTION 2	How to foster cooperation and build strong alliances to be able to implement all the many actions that are needed to make the city centre lively?
QUESTION 3	How to improve urban-rural linkages within a SUD strategy?

Questions 1 and 3 were discussed in small break out groups with the same set of participants, which included the representatives of Pleszew (Poland), Bergamo (Italy), Igoumentisa (Greece), Fundão (Portugal), Maia (Portugal), Cluj Napoca (Romania), La Rinconada (Spain), EUI.

Question 2 was discussed in a dynamic interactive session with all the Peer Review participants. The summary of those discussions is found in Part 4 of this report.

DISCUSSION 1

ORIGINAL QUESTION	<p>How to minimize the outflow of young people from a small European city?</p> <p>Population loss and ageing are the most important issues for Pleszew. It has been explained that young people, i.e. students and population in working age, are moving to other locations like regional capitals and main urban centres, which also host universities and higher education centres. Once they move out of the town, they seldom go back because they find better occupational opportunities there.</p> <p>Investments in housing and facilities for education, sport, free time have been carried out as conditions for retaining local population and attracting new residents, but there is also the need to attract new companies and boost economic development in sectors different from the traditional ones (automotive and machinery). A special economic zone has been created without significant results. The SUD-funded COMPACT LAB project is meant to promote new innovative enterprises.</p> <p>There are also one hundred NGOs, of which 30 are very active, that mainly work with the elderly.</p>
RETHINKING THE QUESTION:	<p>The peers recognised the issue as highly relevant for many regions and communities across Europe, and the explanations provided by Pleszew made clear how relevant and urgent it is for them. Consequently, the question was not changed. However, the question was seen as rather broad, and it was discussed in depth to better clarify the specific context conditions.</p>

POLICY ADVICE

Peers recognised that the question addresses both people and companies. Suggestions were made for both target groups.

Regarding companies:

- Developing better knowledge of the needs of the local companies is key for the municipality, but municipality departments are usually not speaking with enterprises. During the discussion, replacing formal meetings with informal and more frequent “business breakfast” meetings was suggested as an easy way for municipal officers and companies to know each other first, and then start collaborating.
- In Fundão they do not organise meetings any longer, but they promote events instead, for example PechaKucha-kind of events.
- After the Covid-19 pandemic more and more workers prioritise quality of life and a better work/life balance against other factors i.e. salary, career opportunities, etc. There are new ways of working that could be put in practice, especially in collaboration with large companies. For example, Bergamo put forward the idea of introducing 4-day work week schemes, an approach that in Italy is debated more and more, also in production-based local economies.
- Another recommendation was directed to public procurement and how it can be used to boost the local economy as well as innovation by means for example of socially responsible or green procurement. Public procurement should be seen as a way to work with companies to develop novel solutions tailored to local needs.

Regarding people:

Fundão shared how they succeeded in attracting new residents, i.e. young people, thanks to a development strategy anchored on digital transition. Starting in 2012 with the city Innovation plan, they have worked on three dimensions:

1. Infrastructures, i.e. incubator, co-working space, living lab in collaboration with more than forty entities to promote new partnerships. Rehabilitation of existing buildings (no new buildings were realised)
2. Incentives, besides incentives to companies like industrial plots prices, tax incentives, etc., Fundão administration provides incentives to workers, both directly by means of financial contributions for rentals if they move their residence to Fundão, and by offering all the support needed during relocation, for example practical and logistical assistance, cultural and language training, social integration, etc.
3. Talent reskilling programmes, tailored to the needs expressed by companies.

Fundão invested many resources in co-creation practices, working with private and public institutions that were not used to be involved in the

activities of the municipality. In this way, a reliable network of partners was built, and it is now much easier for the municipality to reach relevant actors and institutions. All this represented a radical change of mindset for the local community.

For more information see the Fundão case in the JRC [Policy Atlas of Sustainable Urban Development for Small Urban Areas](#) (Chapter 9).

- The key role of the mayor, especially for small towns like Pleszew, was underlined by many participants. Having a clear vision, building consensus around it but at the same time being ready to take some risks.
- According to Maia, Pleszew administration should create a unit that link up with young people. Alternatively, if resources do not make it possible, colleagues from the Education sector should be involved to build bridges with local schools and “keep the knot tight”. You must speak the same language of the target to be reached.
- Better engagement of the many NGOs is also recommended. More specifically, Maia underlined the importance of giving value to the contribution of the local community. It is not planning and execution but co-design and co-delivery.

An additional element that emerged during the discussion is related to the local identity, which seems to be under pressure. In the past, Pleszew was an area of heavy industry, very polluted, and this is how the town is known. At the same time, 25 years ago Pleszew was richer than now and there is “discontent” among the residents:

- According to the representative of Bergamo, the topic of “city reputation” should be explicitly addressed from a policymaking point of view, i.e. the link between reputation and attractiveness of places.
- The representative of Cluj Napoca suggested to work on building a narrative specifically aiming at reversing demographic loss. Here, there are two options, either develop a narrative that praises who stays (seniors are key for this kind of community building strategy) or a branding strategy that focuses on the specific features and benefits of Pleszew that can retain/attract new residents.

LEARNING AND ACTION

Priority recommendations shared among participants were:

1. Create a Living Lab, to test new solutions, open to contributions from different users and from different generations (trans-generational). The COMPACT LAB could be that place.
2. Challenge local and traditional companies with a vision that boost change and make clear what they can gain from it.

3. Revise your education offer, work more closely with the Education sector, in the administration and outside.
4. Manage your SUD strategy by “stewardship”, i.e. taking care of the local community, and being inspirational for people to join you and contribute to it.



DISCUSSION 3

ORIGINAL QUESTION

The question “How to improve urban-rural linkages within a SUD strategy?” addressed a key challenge for the town and its agglomeration and looked for hands-on solutions within the SUD strategy. The question referred to the town’s relationship with the 28 villages situated in the vicinity of Pleszew and the various attempts to improve mobility and communal infrastructure in both Pleszew and the villages.

Urban-rural linkages refer to better Pleszew’s connection with the surrounding villages, better distributing services and activities across

the region, improving the quality of life in the various settlements and overcoming town-village antagonisms and prejudices. The question also reflects current demographic trends in the area, with many families leaving Pleszew for the surrounding rural areas. This trend has created a series of problems in the region: while village citizens have limited access to education, culture, health, sport and other services, the contrasting life experience and style of newcomers creates conflicts with indigenous villagers. Furthermore, commuting has an elevated environmental cost and puts additional pressure on Pleszew's roads and public spaces, challenging the town's quality of life.

In the past years, Pleszew has introduced a series of new bus lines in order to create better connection with the villages. One of the key goals of the city is to monitor the use of the new transportation infrastructure, better understand the dynamics of movement in the area and offer incentives for villagers to leave their car at home. Another goal is to make these changes and the region's improved accessibility more visible and accepted. Overall, it is important for Pleszew to harmonise its strategic aims in the area, aligning action in city centre with action in rural areas, making the SUD meaningful for villagers and potentially aligning the area's CLLD with the SUD strategy.

**RETHINKING
THE
QUESTION:**

The original question, clearly formulated by the Pleszew team, did not need to be reformulated: by connecting the city's territorial challenge to the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy, it offered a pragmatic issue for Peers to contribute to, fitting the context of the Peer Review and the expertise of the Peer Cities.

**POLICY
ADVICE**

During the workshop session, Peers brought a lot of experience and advice to the table. There was an agreement on the importance of **attracting businesses in the area and involving them in territorial development**. As Pleszew concentrates on rural development (7% of the area's inhabitants are farmers and there are companies building machines for agricultural use or organising agriculture fairs), it is important to engage agriculture-related companies.

The city of Fundão (PT) has been promoting rural-urban linkages in agrifood or crafts: "these are good areas to bring initiatives and added value to villages and engage their citizens in a larger strategy." Igoumenitsa (GR) and Maia (PT) are both involved in organising agriculture-related events, while Bergamo has been active in promoting the agricultural diversity and produce of its metropolitan area. La Rinconada (ES) works with companies in its area through a business incubation programme, training entrepreneurs and introducing them to a broader market, as well as awarding them for their social and environmental responsibility. Networking companies around certain

activities or fields can also contribute to a stronger entrepreneurial ecosystem and business.

Another – connected – key topic of discussion was rural tourism as a means to connect Pleszew with its rural surroundings and bring more people to the area's villages. Peers agreed on the importance of **developing a plan for local rural tourism**. La Rinconada (ES) has been organising cultural activities in villages, including summer events (flamenco festival) and winter activities (collective effort to decorate public spaces and the town's Christmas tree). Bergamo (IT) has been working in peripheral neighbourhoods of the city, inviting local artists to organise lessons and courses, or create art pieces that can be shown in other areas of the city as well. Such an approach can inform cultural festivals distributed in different villages of a rural area.

The third key topic was related to territorial governance and cooperation with key actors in the villages surrounding Pleszew. As each of the 28 villages in the area have formal leaders, it was recommended by Peers to **involve local leaders by establishing a local villages network**. Such a network can be energised by organising events every 2-3 months and linking this cooperation with the existing CLLD network led by an association of six rural communities.

The session also brought input to actions suggested in relation with Q1. The importance of **rethinking the local brand and identity** was underlined by many Peers also in the context of Pleszew's cooperation with villages in its rural surroundings. The rural tourism plan for the area must correspond to a stronger local identity that connects the town with the surrounding rural area, based on the identification of important identity assets (music, food, etc.) in the region and allowing for more urban-rural interaction.

Another topic connected to Q1 was the **creation of an incubator in the form of the compact lab / living lab**. Fundão (PT) demonstrated the city's experience in developing business incubators, underlining the importance of focusing on crafts in order to encourage people to bring value into the programme instead of technology that can feel alienating for many stakeholders. By evoking its "Roots and Wings" programme to build innovation on tradition, Fundão also emphasised the necessity to work with existing networks of incubators, and other companies that can act as mentors of start-ups.

LEARNING AND ACTION

The session concluded with three key recommendations:

- 1) **Introduce awards for local companies:** work with companies across the region and develop opportunities for them to bring their produce to Pleszew and the other villages in the area. Focus on the territorial impact these companies can bring to the

region, while awarding companies for their social and environmental responsibility. This goal can support the creation of a business incubator in the form of a compact lab (Q1).

- 2) **Develop a rural tourism plan:** it is important to envision a plan to bring activities and services across the region, in order to attract visitors to various rural destinations besides Pleszew. This objective is closely connected to the ambition to rethink the area's brand and identity, organised around common cultural assets (Q1).
- 3) **Establish a local villages network:** it is necessary to create a territorial governance structure where local leaders from villages can co-create the vision for the area and contribute to decision-making about key investment processes.



PART 4 | SUMMARY OF WORLD CAFE SESSION DISCUSSION ON QUESTION 2

A World Cafe methodology was used in order for each City Under Review to exchange with a different group of peers and stakeholders from other CUR on similar questions related to cross sectoral and cross departmental collaboration. The World Café is an easy-to-use participative method to organise and facilitate meetings. It helps to create an open space for the exchange of ideas and can be used at local level by urban authorities to foster collaboration and dialogue.

The Peer Review World Café in this case had four tables: one for each of the Cities under Review and an additional table addressing a common challenge about embedding cross cutting climate priorities into Sustainable Urban Development strategies. There were three rounds of discussion of 20 minutes each and all participants could choose which table they wanted to visit and contribute to.

The quick conversations at each table were moderated by experts and aimed to:

- provide opportunities for all CUR and peers to contribute/ learn across all CUR cooperation related challenges
- identify potentially effective solutions for CUR

For CUR Pleszew the question addressed was ‘How to foster cooperation and build strong alliances to be able to implement all the many actions that are needed to make the city centre lively?’

The results and ideas captured were as follows.

ORIGINAL QUESTION

The original question was “How to revive the city centre in a small European city?” This question lies at the core of Pleszew’s challenges. Despite conceiving it as Poland’s first 15-minute city, Pleszew suffers from **heavy automobile traffic**. This challenge is manifold:

- The market place in Pleszew experiences heavy traffic with 12,000 to 20,000 cars passing daily, despite the city having only 25,000 inhabitants.
- Only 30% of these cars stay in the city centre, affecting the area's atmosphere and contributing to air quality issues.
- Public transportation is less attractive compared to individual car use, leading to low changes in citizen behaviour regarding car access to the city centre.

Another disadvantage of Pleszew is related to the **attractiveness of its city centre**:

- The city centre's attractiveness for both entrepreneurs and shops is low, lacking in food businesses and active only until 6 pm.
- The area is surrounded by retail shops but lacks engagement in terms of dining options and after 6 pm life.
- High commercial vacancy rate

Therefore, Pleszew has been looking for ways to transform the city centre in order to make it more attractive for residents and consequentially for businesses as well. To date, Pleszew has taken a series of **actions to revitalise the centre**:

- Several revitalisation operations focused on cultural and recreational enhancements, including a swimming pool/aqua centre (military area) and a cultural centre (train station area).

- The market place has been identified as the next zone for revitalisation (70% of the market place is also a revitalisation area), with efforts to manage traffic by closing main roads during weekend events.

- Opened a architecture competition for student to propose planning proposals for the area: good results, but low feasibility due to high cost of measures proposed.

Pleszew also improved some of the city's **mobility infrastructure**:

- Developed of bike paths and 16 bus lines to improve connectivity.

While restricting car access requires a strong political will, the city also made communication efforts targeted at children to raise awareness on air quality and urban living concepts (air quality info – signage on school front wall). A part of the city's efforts went into rethinking public spaces and establishing pocket parks, as well as bringing new activities to the city's market square, the Pleszew municipality has also been examining the potential of various business improvement activities in order to attract and develop local companies. One longstanding idea to support this ambition is to establish the Compact Lab – a kind of an incubator or living lab – as a place for start-ups. The high number of vacant properties across the centre is seen as an opportunity to introduce new businesses.

The municipality has been organising a series of regular meetings with citizens from different social groups, including students, NGOs, employers, with a focus on young women and people with disabilities. However, as these meetings always attract the same few active citizens, the city needs to refresh its outreach mechanisms to involve a broader group.

RETHINKING THE QUESTION:

The original question felt appealing in its strong thematic focus but unfocused in its generalist approach. During the preparation process, experts suggested that Q2 could be elevated to a more strategic level in order to make it better linked with the dilemmas related to Pleszew's Sustainable Urban Development strategy and its smart city projects, so that they don't only concern a set of actions but also the alliances, collaborations, governance and finances related to these actions – allowing more space to match with peers. Therefore, experts recommended the reformulation of the question to focus on

**POLICY
ADVICE**

	<p>governance and the cooperation of different actors, in order to shift the question's broad emphasis to a process-oriented focus.</p> <p>The reformulated question was agreed on as "How to foster cooperation and build strong alliances to be able to implement all the many actions that are needed to make the city centre lively?"</p>
	<p>The discussion mobilised experience and advice from Peers at various fields. There was an agreement among Peers about the importance of involving a broad range of stakeholders in the revitalisation of the centre. Bergamo (IT) evoked the demographic misfortunes of the 1980s when the city lost 20,000 inhabitants, before realising that the municipality did not speak to the right set of local actors or spoke to them in their own silos, without reaching different social groups simultaneously. It is therefore highly important to define stakeholders well, in light of what kind of city centre is desirable (for residents, tourists, children, etc.) and to not limit the involvement to the usual suspects. Attracting particular social groups to the city also depends on the city centre's brand and identity: good marketing can increase the attractiveness of the centre and help in community involvement as well.</p> <p>Community involvement in actions is a key element in these policies: Malaga (ES) involved a great variety of stakeholders and different municipal departments in redefining the purpose and functions of central urban areas, closing streets from traffic to organise events and transforming a neighbourhood into an art district. In Malaga, the municipality also reached out to children through schools to raise awareness about air quality and mobility issues. Communicating with children about the urban environment can also change parents' attitudes. For community involvement, however, as several Peers underlined, community management skills need to be developed within the municipality or among its closest collaborators.</p> <p>One specific target group of Pleszew's policies to improve the town's liveability and attractiveness is young families. In Malaga (ES), the municipality supports families with housing renovation as well as proximity of key services. Another important target group is students: Malaga (ES) attracts students to stay in the city centre with low rents, high quality living environment and good access to public transport.</p> <p>Another key discussion topic was mobility: while traffic limitation is an established piece of 15-minute city policies, Fundão (PT) suggested to explore if cars are really the cause of Pleszew's challenges and if it's credible to envision a (relatively) car-free future for such small towns. In order to better understand the traffic dimensions of Pleszew's potential transformation, detailed mobility studies are needed: the municipality could reach out to the Center for the EU on Transport to support the development of a SUMP.</p>

	<p>Peers underlined the importance of addressing commercial vacancy with proactive measures: As an example of providing incentives for pop-up stores or the transitory use of commercial spaces, Fundão (PT) supports start-ups with free rent for the initial phase of setting up their businesses in ground-floor properties. Similarly, in Greece there are programmes that cover all the expenditures of new stores in small towns for five years. Another way to support entrepreneurs is through capacity building and training, as done in Malaga (ES) by the city's economic agency, ProMalaga.</p>
<p>LEARNING AND ACTION</p>	<p>The discussions led to three key recommended actions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Promote local products through organising farmers' markets: a regular market in the city centre would help in both bringing the surrounding villages closer to Pleszew (Q2) and in making the centre more lively. 2) Organise events at the Market Square: the city's main square needs to be the symbol of urban revitalisation: a series of new events, including music and dancing events, street games, etc. would help citizens reclaim their town, spend more time in the centre and change their habits accordingly. 3) Support the use of pop-up shops for revitalising the city centre: the vacancy of commercial properties offers a unique opportunity for the town to take action and revitalise ground floor activities and foot traffic. Free or calmed rent for the first months of activity can be an important incentive for new businesses to test their economic and operational models and for the municipality to stimulate certain kinds of activities in the centre.



Table 4 hosted a discussion on a 4th challenge common to all cities under review:

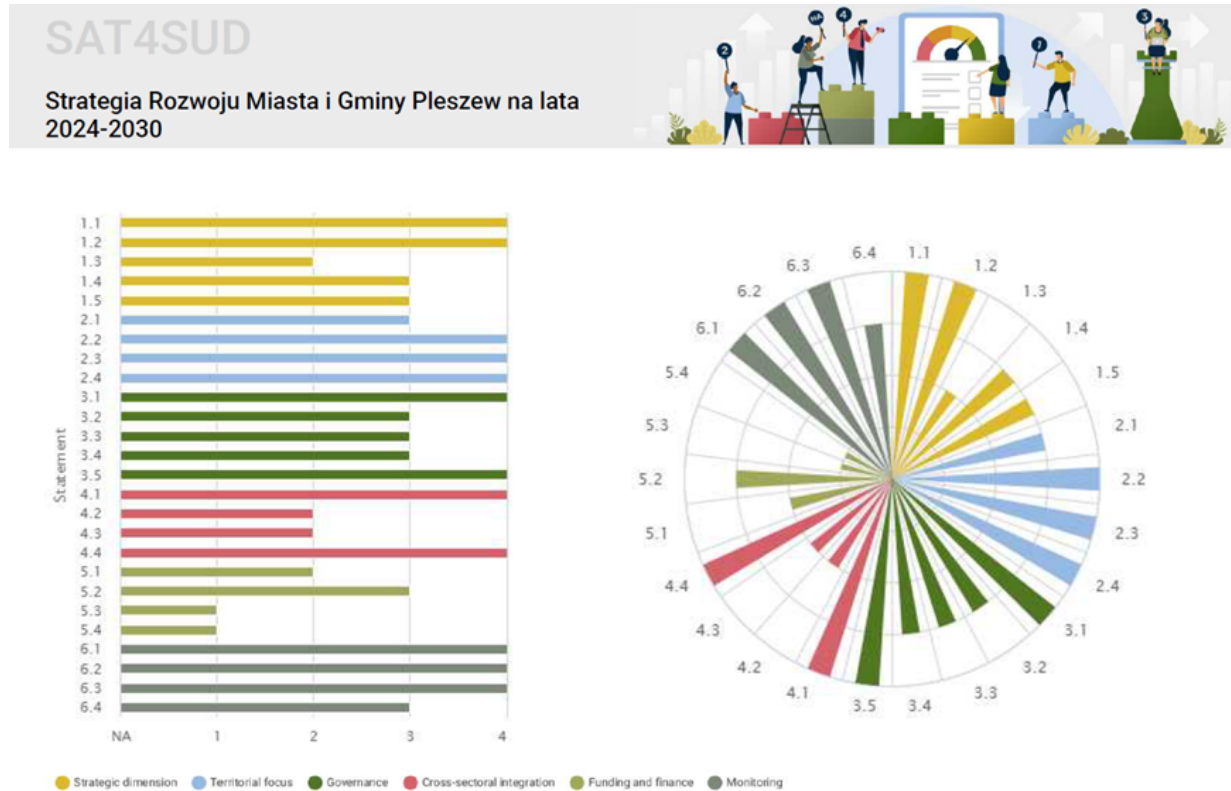
How can we embed and deliver our cross-cutting climate priorities in the SUDS?

The results and ideas captured were:

- Embedding climate into all actions is a must nowadays, because it is a prerequisite for receiving EU funds, and citizens expect it.
- The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a good way to lock in climate actions to planning and strategy. Many cities link their strategy and planning to the SDGs. It would be helpful if the same applied to EU funds.
- In the Sevilla area, water is at the centre of environmental policies. Treating water as a common resource, the local Water Plan connects areas as diverse as water use in social housing units or the role of water in public spaces.
- Such a transversal approach is also present in Łódź where every municipal project needs to have a climate aspect to be eligible.
- In Pula, concerns related to ecological transition often enter in conflict with considerations on the city's built heritage.
- In Viladecans climate is one of four cross cutting themes in the city strategy. There is a new dynamic to make sure that these are embedded across all city planning. It includes training and information sessions to raise awareness amongst all staff. The process is coordinated by the Office of the Future and has a guide with a checklist for those developing policy and plans. It is part of the commitment to be carbon neutral city by 2030.
- In Portugal people feel very exposed to climate change. There have been devastating fires so nothing can be planned without that connection to climate change. The bigger challenge is how to engage people and design new governance modes. Citizens are tired of listening to the same speech. An example is to stress the positives of climate change where for instance vineyards can be planted on rural land. Citizens in rural areas also need quick action not just talking. For instance, soil in burnt areas has to be renewed within a fixed deadline or fertility is lost, linked to erosion and deforestation. The city of Maia is looking for new economic possibilities based on new agricultural opportunities brought by the changing climate.
- Circular and green procurements can be useful but don't always work. Often national frameworks and the judicial process insist on cost being more important than social or environmental clauses.
- In Fundao as part of the educational priorities one of their projects to update schools' infrastructure. Presenting this project to the Managing Authority it is not only about infrastructure but also about the local community being fully involved and understanding the why and the how of the climate related elements. It is a holistic approach combining hard and soft infrastructure.
- In Padova it is part of the vision to be climate neutral by 2030, to reduce consumption, to increase trees and green spaces, to improve housing using special materials, create parks, and utilise electric buses and cycling linked to the SDGs.
- With EU funds it seems at times the EC and MA think the need for infrastructure is satiated but that is not the case in Poland at least. There is still lots to do. People wonder why we are funding bracelets with air sensors when they don't have a bathroom in their flat. This exposes the gap between Brussels and the local reality in 27 member states.

PART 5 | EXPERT ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The self-assessment (SAT4SUD) carried out by Pleszew identifies areas where the municipality thinks there is room for improvement for the SUD strategy to be fully integrated and impactful.



SAT4SUD of Pleszew (2024)

1. Under **Strategic dimension**, Pleszew acknowledges the fact that a detailed action plan is missing, as well as the lack of strong links with strategic frameworks developed at higher tiers of government, and strategic capacity across the policy cycle.

To this regard, it is important to underline that the SUD strategy is at an early stage of development. This means that many operational steps, like the elaboration of a detailed action plan, have not yet been addressed. However, the work developed so far shows a sound intervention logic, which is also consistent with regional development goals at higher level (regional and national). Moreover, the participation in the peer-review at such an early stage of strategy elaboration signals the commitment of the department in charge, and the understanding of the added value of capacity building activities. The involvement in the DUT programme shows a good attitude towards learning and exchange.

This said, Pleszew is a small municipality (less than 30,000 inhabitants), with stretched human resources to follow the SUD strategy, and time pressure for its implementation, also in consideration of the rather high budget available, with several projects to be implemented.

In alignment with the suggestions of the peers, it seems that the SUD policymaking process would benefit from a broader set of stakeholders involved by the municipality that should be ready to test

more collaborative efforts and innovative ways of working with other actors and organisations, moving away from a standard approach based on “information-consultation-decision making”, and embracing more explicit co-design practices. Some hints on how to apply policy innovation to SUD strategies can be found in the JRC [Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies](#) (Chapter 1), which can be particularly useful for small towns and rural territories. Additional help in terms of strengthening strategic thinking when working with issues related to population decline, young out-migration, ageing, rising unemployment, a decrease of purchasing power, a shortfall in public revenues, etc. could also come from the JRC [Policy Atlas of Sustainable Urban Development for Small Urban Areas](#), which offers a recognition of main policy approaches that small administrations can use to tackle the vicious circle of shrinkage, raise the quality of life of citizens and of their living environment, and trigger a sustainable and harmonious development.

2. The **Territorial Focus** of the SUD strategy is the municipality, in alignment with directions from upper-level policy guidelines. Reinforcing urban-rural linkages within the municipality has been indicated as one of the main policy challenges for Pleszew SUD strategy. However, Pleszew is a small town at the border of a larger functional urban area (FUA) around the cities of Kalisz and Ostrow, and it is also interested by the related intermunicipal SUD strategy. Despite this, no information has been provided on what being part of that larger strategy means for Pleszew, and how to avoid the risk of implementing competing projects and build synergies instead.

It is recommended to explore the promotion of urban-rural linkages within the scope of the larger FUA too, to fully understand functional links, dynamics, and development opportunities.

3. Based on the peers’ suggestions, **Governance** is an area where improvements could make a real difference in terms of the potential impact of Pleszew SUD strategy. Although there are several consultation processes in place, it seems that engagement of stakeholders beyond involvement is not fully embedded in the SUD strategy making process.

Looking at the results of the SAT4SUD, it seems that Pleszew representatives are aware of the need to better promote engagement and active participation outside usual suspects, also by means of out-of-the-box tools like many of the tools, i.e. Pecha Kucha nights, business breakfasts, events, etc., recommended by the peers for creating a bond with residents, young people, or even companies.

In order to establish more inclusive governance structures and better understand the key actors in a certain geographical area or thematic field, it is helpful to follow the stakeholder mapping and ecosystem-building methodologies. Stakeholder mapping, as [presented](#) in the URBACT toolbox helps identifying the most important actors who can contribute to the success of the project. Ecosystem-building [methodologies](#) allow for the creation of local cooperation networks, based on mutual exchange and complementarity between local organisations.

4. Enhancement of collaborative practices is also recommended looking at the SAT4SUD results for **Cross-sectoral integration**, which refers to the integration of sectoral policies at both strategy and project level. Low scores signal challenges in promoting dialogue and coordination between different city departments and teams, finding agreement on procedures and deadlines, and sharing of responsibilities among the parties during the implementation of activities.

The JRC [Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies](#) provides advice and examples on how to tackle this relevant policy challenge and the EUI study on Integrated Territorial Development in Innovation Action projects has a specific chapter focusing on the [cross-sectoral approach](#).

Given the development state of the SUD strategy of Pleszew, it is no surprise that 5. **Funding and Finance** and 6. **Monitoring** have been not explicitly addressed during the discussions since these two

dimensions of an integrated approach become explicitly relevant once the strategy enters the implementation phase.

Although the absence of investments from private companies in the SUD strategy relates to the heavy ERDF funding, which makes other types of funding less relevant, it also mirrors a bigger issue with stakeholders' engagement that should be treated as a priority. When Pleszew representatives stress that effective cooperation, especially with private enterprises, but even with other sectors, is challenging, or that it is very difficult to coordinate and monitor a possible joint project, they are illustrating very relevant policy issues, that affect financial aspects and cross-sectoral integration but finally derive from Governance. Similarly, Monitoring should be developed well in advance with strategy-specific indicators instead of standard indicators taken from the regional operational programme. If so, it could be very useful to ensure complementarity and coherence between sectoral objectives and enhance dialogue between departments.

PART 6 | LEARNING AND ACTION GRID

The Learning and Action Grid was completed at the end of the second day, taking into account all the discussions that took place during the breakout sessions, site visits and plenaries. In this sense, the completed Learning and Action Grid is not the summary of the earlier sessions but goes one step further, including confirmation and prioritisation by the Pleszew municipality.



Summary table of agreed actions and key learnings for Pleszew:

Questions	Key Learning	Agreed Actions
1. How to minimize the outflow of young people from small European city?	<p>Address the issue of “city reputation” within the municipality (Bergamo)</p> <p>Build a narrative specifically aiming at reversing demographic loss (Cluj-Napoca)</p>	<p>Rethink the local brand & identity to create a narrative that inhabitants in Pleszew and the surrounding villages can identify with and that can attract more visitors and residents.</p>

	<p>Develop better knowledge of the needs of the local companies, replace formal meetings with events or informal and more frequent “business breakfast” meetings (Fundão)</p> <p>Focus on crafts when designing business incubation services, instead of technology that can feel alienating for many stakeholders. (Fundão)</p> <p>Use socially-responsible or green procurement to boost the local economy as well as innovation</p> <p>Develop new infrastructure including incubators, co-working spaces, living labs (Fundão)</p> <p>Organise talent reskilling programmes, tailored to the needs expressed by companies (Fundão)</p> <p>Provide incentives to workers, contributing to rents or providing support for relocation (Fundão)</p> <p>Support companies in introducing measures for better work-life balance, for example the 4-day working week (Bergamo)</p> <p>Revise the town’s education offer: work more closely with the Education sector, in the administration and outside</p> <p>Create a unit to link up with young people, involve the education sector to build bridges with local schools</p>	<p>Create a Compact Lab / Living Lab to test new solutions, open to contributions from different users and from different generations (trans-generational). The COMPACT LAB could be that place.</p> <p>Create a Local Action Plan for families with a transversal approach that enhances the quality of life of families in Pleszew, through incentives, high quality services, public spaces and mobility.</p>
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	Engage NGOs in the co-design and co-delivery of urban projects	
2. How to foster cooperation and build strong alliances to be able to implement all the many actions that are needed to make the city centre lively?	<p>Organise agriculture-related events and promote the agricultural diversity and produce of the metropolitan area (Ilgoumenitsa, Maia, Bergamo)</p> <p>Involve a broad range of stakeholders in the revitalisation of the centre, define stakeholders well, in light of what kind of city centre is desirable (for residents, tourists, children, etc.) and to not limit the involvement to the usual suspects.</p> <p>Rethink the city's public spaces in relation to new events and the city's narrative</p> <p>Work with local companies through a business incubation programme, train entrepreneurs and introduce them to a broader market, as well as award them for their social and environmental responsibility (La Rinconada)</p> <p>Provide incentives for pop-up stores or the transitory use of commercial spaces (Fundão)</p> <p>Support start-ups with free rent for the initial phase of setting up their businesses in ground-floor properties (Fundão)</p>	<p>Promote local products through organising farmers' markets: a regular market in the city centre would help in both bringing the surrounding villages closer to Pleszew (Q2) and in making the centre more lively.</p> <p>Organise events at the Market Square: the city's main square needs to be the symbol of urban revitalisation: a series of new events, including music and dancing events, street games, etc. would help citizens reclaim their town, spend more time in the centre and change their habits accordingly.</p> <p>Support the use of pop-up shops for revitalising the city centre: the vacancy of commercial properties offers a unique opportunity for the town to take action and revitalise ground floor activities and foot traffic. Free or calmed rent for the first months of activity can be an important incentive for new businesses to test their economic and operational models and for the municipality to stimulate certain kinds of activities in the centre.</p>
3. How to improve urban-rural linkages within a SUD strategy?	Attract businesses in the area and involving them in territorial	Introduce awards for local companies: work with

	<p>development: promoting rural-urban linkages in agrifood or crafts are good areas to bring initiatives and added value to villages and engage their citizens in a larger strategy. (Fundão)</p> <p>Identify important identity assets (music, food, etc.) in the region, allowing for more visits and urban-rural interaction.</p> <p>Organise cultural activities in villages, including summer events and winter activities (La Rinconada)</p> <p>Invite local artists to organise lessons and courses, or create art pieces that can be shown in other areas of the region as well (Bergamo)</p> <p>Cooperate with key actors in the villages surrounding Pleszew, organise events with local leaders.</p>	<p>companies across the region and develop opportunities for them to bring their produce to Pleszew and the other villages in the area. Focus on the territorial impact these companies can bring to the region, while awarding companies for their social and environmental responsibility. This goal can support the creation of a business incubator in the form of a compact lab (Q1).</p> <p>Develop a rural tourism plan: it is important to envision a plan to bring activities and services across the region, in order to attract visitors to various rural destinations besides Pleszew. This objective is closely connected to the ambition to rethink the area's brand and identity, organised around common cultural assets (Q1).</p> <p>Establish a local villages network: it is necessary to create a territorial governance structure where local leaders from villages can co-create the vision for the area and contribute to decision-making about key investment processes.</p>
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