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Delivery of Essential Services in Lagging Regions (DESIRE)

Conclusions and recommendations

Final report/December 2024

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Abbreviations

LCS	Long Case Studies
NTA	National Transport Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SCS	Short Case Studies
VHRs	Virtual Health Rooms

1 Introduction

This report presents the conclusions and recommendations of the research project ESPON DESIRE "Delivery of Essential Services in Lagging Regions", focusing in particular on Task 4 of the project scope, which deals with the synthesis of findings, the clarification of key concepts and the formulation of principles of good practice. The aim of this analysis is to provide actionable insights that can support policy development aimed at improving public service delivery in lagging regions, which often face unique socio-economic and geographical challenges. The core of this report is based on a comparative analysis of several case studies in different European regions, each selected for their particular service delivery context. The research collates and compares findings from these case studies to identify patterns, successes and challenges in the delivery of essential services such as health, education, transport and social care. Through this process, the report identifies critical factors that either support or hinder service delivery in these regions, focusing on governance models, the roles of public, private and third sector actors, and the accessibility and equity of service delivery.

In line with the objectives outlined in Task 4, this report also seeks to conceptualise the essential service 'package' required to promote sustainable development and quality of life in lagging regions. In doing so, it sets out principles of good practice that can be applied to improve service delivery, addressing issues such as market failures, socio-economic inequalities and the role of digital and mobile services in overcoming geographical barriers. The recommendations offered here are informed by the lessons learned from the case studies and aim to support policy makers in developing strategies to improve the accessibility, equity and sustainability of services. Ultimately, the report provides a framework for understanding how tailored and innovative service models can address the specific needs of lagging regions and contribute to their long-term development and resilience.

2 Comparative analysis and interpretation

2.1 Service Provision and its Importance for Quality of Life and Economic Development

Often characterised by geographical isolation, low population density and economic challenges, lagging regions face significant barriers to accessing essential services such as education, healthcare, social care and transport. These challenges require targeted strategies to improve the quality of life of residents while addressing the unique difficulties of their remote location. Maintaining equitable access to these services is complicated by geographical and demographic constraints. For example, Finland's Wellbeing Services County reform aims to centralise services at county level to mitigate the effects of long distances and staff shortages, but smaller municipalities still face financial challenges, particularly in education and social care. Mobile service delivery has emerged as a key solution in such regions. Programmes such as Hungary's Catching-up Settlements, which uses mobile health and social care units, and Finland's Mallu mobile health service provide vital care to isolated communities, particularly benefiting vulnerable populations such as the elderly and those with chronic illnesses by bringing essential services directly to them.

Latvia's Samaritan Mobile Care Complex integrates health and social care in a mobile setting, allowing elderly people in rural areas to receive care without having to leave their homes. This approach has proved particularly effective in rural areas transitioning from institutional to community-based care, where access to services is limited. By providing care in familiar surroundings, this model improves the quality of life for older people and reduces the need for costly moves to long-term care facilities.

Transport connectivity is another important factor in ensuring access to essential services. Reliable transport links are essential for rural residents who need to access education, healthcare and retail services. In Ireland, the Local Link and Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan initiatives aim to improve rural transport networks and reduce the time and effort required to access centralised services. However, despite these initiatives, many rural communities continue to face challenges such as insufficient service frequency and limited connectivity, which contribute to social exclusion. Dedicated transport services such as the Mayo Bus in Ireland, which transports cancer patients from rural areas to treatment centres, highlight the role of targeted transport solutions in improving health outcomes. Such services reduce the burden on patients who would otherwise have to travel long distances, making healthcare more accessible and reducing the burden on rural populations.

In Spain, Valencia's decentralised healthcare system offers a different perspective, particularly in rural and mountainous regions such as Valencia. These areas face challenges in providing consistent healthcare, especially during emergencies or adverse weather conditions. To address this, Spain has integrated healthcare with community-based support networks, focusing on physical health as well as social and emotional well-being. This model highlights the importance of addressing broader determinants of health, especially in geographically isolated regions. Cross-border cooperation is also a strategy used to improve service delivery in remote areas. The ARIEM-112 project, a collaboration between Portugal and Spain, ensures that emergency services reach remote populations in border regions. This initiative highlights the importance of cooperation between regions to improve service delivery, particularly where geographical barriers make access to care difficult.

In addition to mobile services, technological innovations are helping to fill gaps in service delivery. Sweden's Virtual Health Rooms (VHRs) allow residents in remote areas to access healthcare services through telemedicine, reducing the need for long and difficult journeys to distant healthcare facilities. By using digital technology, VHRs help to improve access to healthcare and reduce inequalities in health outcomes for geographically isolated populations.

In summary, the provision of basic services plays a key role not only in improving the quality of life in lagging regions, but also in driving long-term economic development. Access to services such as healthcare, education and transport addresses immediate needs and enables residents to lead healthier and more fulfilling lives, regardless of geographical constraints. But the benefits go beyond individual well-being. By ensuring that rural and remote populations have equitable access to education, health and social care, these services help to break cycles of poverty, create economic opportunities and promote human capital development.

The provision of services plays a key role in promoting economic resilience. For example, improved transport connectivity increases mobility, making it easier for people to access jobs and markets, while advances in health

and education enable individuals to participate more effectively in the workforce. Innovations such as mobile service delivery and telemedicine help bridge gaps in access to services, while reducing the cost and complexity of service delivery, contributing to the sustainability and competitiveness of remote regions. Longer Case Studies from Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, and Spain show how targeted, context-specific strategies can offset the disadvantages of geographical isolation and lead to improved living standards and economic opportunities. By addressing regional challenges with innovative solutions, policymakers can promote inclusiveness and ensure that even remote areas benefit from wider development efforts, fostering both social cohesion and sustainable growth.

2.2 Addressing Market Failures: The Role of Public, Private, and Third-Sector Providers

Market failures in lagging regions typically arise in the provision of services that require significant infrastructure and long-term investment, or that serve sparsely populated areas where profitability is low. Health care is a prime example, especially in remote rural areas. In Finland, for example, the costs of establishing and maintaining healthcare facilities in remote regions are high, while the potential for revenue generation is low due to the small and dispersed population. As a result, these services are often not always attractive to private investors. The public sector therefore steps in to fill this gap. A clear example of this is the Wellbeing Services County reform in Finland, which aims to centralise health services at county level to ensure that all residents have access to essential health services, regardless of where they live. This approach helps to mitigate the risks of market failure by ensuring that service provision is not dependent on market profitability. A similar issue can be seen in Hungary's rural regions, where the state has invested in mobile health and social care units to address the lack of local services. The mobile units, supported by public funds, travel to remote villages where there is no traditional health infrastructure and provide essential services that the private sector finds unprofitable.

Education also faces significant market failures in these regions, particularly in areas with declining populations. In Sweden, for example, the Remote Teaching initiative was developed to address the shortage of teachers in remote villages. The public sector facilitates this by using information and communication technologies to connect students in rural areas with teachers in larger cities, ensuring that educational services remain accessible even in sparsely populated areas. This initiative highlights the role of the public sector in overcoming the inability of the market to provide sustainable education services in sparsely populated areas.

In rural and remote areas, public transport is often unsustainable for private companies due to low demand. To address this, public sector initiatives are stepping in to ensure that communities in these regions continue to have access to essential services despite geographical constraints. In Romania, for example, the Diakónia home care service provides a vital transport function in remote villages. Funded and managed by a faith-based NGO in partnership with local public authorities, the service ensures that elderly residents can access health and social care services despite the lack of regular public transport. This public/third sector partnership demonstrates how market failures in transport can be mitigated through collaborative efforts.

While the public sector is essential in addressing market failures, private and third sector organisations can play a complementary role, particularly in areas where public sector capacity is limited or where innovative approaches are needed. These organisations are often more flexible and able to tailor services to the specific needs of local communities. For example, in Portugal and Spain, the ARIEM-112 project, a cross-border emergency service, demonstrates how third sector organisations can enhance the capacity of the public sector. The project, which operates in border areas between the two countries, addresses the unique challenges of emergency response in remote regions. It is a collaborative effort between public administrations and private entities, ensuring that emergency services are available in areas where the market alone would not sustain such operations. This initiative demonstrates how public-private partnerships can overcome market failures in critical services such as emergency response.

In Germany, the EcoBus project in rural Lower Saxony is another example of how the private sector can complement public services. This demand-responsive transport service, developed by the Max Planck Institute in collaboration with local public transport operators, uses advanced technology to optimise routes based on real-time demand. This service addresses the market failure of providing regular, affordable transport in low-density areas and demonstrates how private innovation can improve public service delivery. Similarly, Sweden's Virtual Health Rooms (VHRs) demonstrate how third sector organisations can support public health efforts by providing digital access to healthcare, eliminating the need for residents in remote regions to travel long distances for basic services. The initiative, led by the Västerbotten region in collaboration with local communities, addresses the market failure in healthcare by using technology and community involvement to deliver services effectively.

2.3 Governance and Geographic Scale in Service Delivery

The interaction between governance structures and geographical scale is central to the effective delivery of public services. Both the Long Case Studies (LCS) and the Short Case Studies (SCS) illustrate how governance at national, regional and local levels shapes the success of public services in different geographical and socio-economic landscapes. The challenge is to balance centralised control with localised adaptability to meet the diverse needs of communities in different regions.

2.3.1 National and Regional Governance: Centralisation and Decentralisation Dynamics

At national and regional levels, governance structures often aim to standardise services across large geographical areas, but the degree of centralisation or decentralisation within these structures can have a profound effect on outcomes.

In Ireland, the National Investment Framework for Transport is a national-level initiative aimed at improving connectivity, particularly in regional and rural areas. However, the centralised governance of the National Transport Authority (NTA) often limits the flexibility of regional bodies such as the Northern and Western Regional Assembly to address local challenges such as car dependency and sustainable transport. This highlights a key problem with centralised governance: while it ensures national priorities, it can stifle regional and local innovation tailored to specific geographical contexts. Conversely, Spain's decentralised health system provides a stark contrast. Regional authorities in Spain are empowered to design and implement health services based on local demographic and geographic needs. This flexibility allows regions to effectively prioritise urban versus rural health services. For example, densely populated areas focus on high-density healthcare, while rural regions address issues such as accessibility and primary care. However, decentralisation can also exacerbate disparities in service quality between richer and poorer regions, as richer areas may have more resources to devote to health care than economically disadvantaged regions. Decentralisation of governance therefore offers flexibility but can lead to inequalities if not balanced by strong national oversight.

Finland's recent reform of health and social services represents an interesting middle ground, centralising services in new Wellbeing Services Counties and moving away from a highly localised, municipal-based system. The aim is to standardise service provision across the country and address inequalities in remote and sparsely populated areas. However, this reform also highlights the difficulties of reconciling centralised decision-making with the need for regional and local adaptability. While central government provides a uniform framework, the success of the reform depends on how well regional authorities can adapt services to local geographical and demographic conditions.

2.3.2 Local Governance: Flexibility and Responsiveness

At the local level, governance structures often play a critical role in the delivery of services that require a deep understanding of the local community and geographical challenges. Local governance tends to be more flexible and responsive, particularly in addressing the specific needs of rural or remote areas.

The Skrunda region of Latvia provides an example of how local government can overcome geographical challenges through the provision of mobile social care services for the elderly. This service, run by the local public administration in cooperation with NGOs, adapts to the needs of the rural elderly population and ensures that care reaches even the most isolated areas. The success of such localised governance lies in its ability to tailor services to individual client needs, demonstrating how smaller-scale governance can often outperform more rigid, centralised systems in addressing specific community needs. A similar example of effective local governance can be found in the Mayo Bus Service in Ireland, which provides transport for cancer patients in remote areas. Managed by a local charity in partnership with private sector organisations, the service illustrates how local governance structures can address specific community needs that may be overlooked by national or regional bodies. The success of the service is due to its strong community involvement, which allows it to be flexible and responsive to local needs. In Portugal (Alentejo) an on-demand transport initiative is led by several local municipalities. The service draws upon previous infrastructure (existing bus stops) and commercial firms -taxis operating in the area- covering the gap in regular transport services to connect rural sparse areas with main towns and cities. This example shows how local governance allows adapting the service to specific needs (enhancing access considering opening hours of other services) and ensuring a reasonable cost to the public budget and users.

The ARIEM-112 project, a cross-border emergency response initiative between Portugal and Spain, further highlights the importance of localised governance in addressing complex geographical challenges. This regional governance model enhances cooperation across national borders by establishing a coordinated framework that works effectively across different levels of government, while remaining responsive to the geographical realities of border areas.

2.3.3 Multilevel Governance: Challenges and Opportunities

The interaction between different levels of governance - national, regional and local - presents both challenges and opportunities. A key challenge is to ensure that policies at higher levels of governance are flexible enough to accommodate local adaptation, while maintaining consistency and equity across regions. Centralised policies that do not take account of local geographical conditions can lead to inefficiencies and inequities in service delivery. Conversely, localised governance can struggle with resource constraints and effectively scaling up services over larger areas.

The interaction between governance and geographic scale significantly impacts public service delivery effectiveness. Centralised governance offers consistent, nationwide policies but struggles to adapt to local needs. Conversely, decentralised governance tailors services to local contexts but can create regional inequalities if not managed well. Balancing these models is crucial for equitable and efficient public services. Key findings highlight the importance of multi-level governance in managing service delivery complexity across regions. Central frameworks provide strategic direction and resource allocation, while local governance adapts services to community needs. Flexibility at the local level, combined with strong national and regional coordination, results in more responsive and sustainable services. Successful governance structures are supported by cooperation mechanisms between levels, ensuring effective communication and resource-sharing. This coordination is vital for addressing geographical challenges like rural isolation and urban-rural disparities.

Community involvement is also crucial in successful governance models. Local involvement makes governance more responsive and accountable to specific population needs. Empowering local authorities and communities fosters innovative solutions and a sense of ownership. The analysis concludes that while centralised models ensure consistency, localised governance offers adaptability and responsiveness. The key to success lies in multi-level governance that balances national strategic direction with local flexibility, making public services more equitable and efficient regardless of geographical scale or complexity.

In conclusion, the future of effective public service delivery depends on governance structures that are flexible, collaborative and able to meet the diverse needs of both urban and rural populations. By promoting greater coordination between different levels of government and involving local communities, it is possible to overcome the challenges posed by geographical diversity. The aim should be a governance framework that adapts to local contexts while ensuring consistent standards and making public services accessible, equitable and sustainable for all.

2.4 Transferability and Adaptability in Service Provision

When discussing service models, two important concepts come into play: transferability and adaptability. These concepts help explain how well a service can be applied in new regions or under different conditions, which is key for policy development and regional planning.

In developing the framework for transferability and adaptability in service delivery, the foundational insights from Williams and Dzhekova's (2014) work on cross-national policy transfer and Virkkala and Niemi's (2006) findings on innovation policy in peripheral localities were used as a starting point. While these studies provided an understanding of locally embedded practices and conditions for adaptation, the framework here goes beyond these foundations. The framework in this report addresses the specific challenges, strategic pathways and tailored good practice principles required for sustainable service delivery in lagging regions.

Transferability refers to how easily a successful service model can be replicated in different regions or sectors. This depends on factors such as how culturally embedded the service is and the level of technological infrastructure required. For example, services that rely heavily on digital platforms may face challenges in regions with less developed technology. On the other hand, culturally specific services may need to be adapted when transferred to regions with different social norms.

Adaptability focuses on a service's ability to adapt to new social, economic, or cultural conditions. It ensures that a service can still function effectively when applied to a different context. For example, a service that works well in an urban setting may require significant modifications to be effective in a rural area.

Throughout this report, these concepts are explored at a high level, and they are related to policy recommendations. Rather than delving into theoretical depth, the focus is on how transferability and adaptability help to design services that work in different settings.

2.4.1 Process of High Transferability

High transferability refers to service models that can be replicated across regions or sectors with relatively few adjustments. This transferability is based on several critical dimensions:

- **Technological flexibility:** Models with adaptable technologies, such as telemedicine or digital services, can easily overcome geographic and resource constraints.
- **Scalability:** Services that can expand or contract based on population size or available resources without losing their core effectiveness are more likely to succeed in different regions.
- **Cultural neutrality:** Services that are not deeply embedded in specific local customs or social norms tend to transfer more easily. These models can be applied in different social and economic contexts with minimal adaptation.
- **Policy support and regulatory frameworks:** Successful transferability also depends on a supportive policy and regulatory environment. Clear frameworks and public-private partnerships can facilitate the transition process and provide the necessary resources for scaling up.

In summary, high transferability requires models that combine flexibility, scalability and supportive governance to ensure smooth replication in different settings.

2.4.2 Process of Moderate Transferability

Moderate transferability refers to service models that require significant adaptation due to local social, cultural, or economic dependencies. Key dimensions include

- **Cultural embeddedness:** Services rooted in specific local traditions or community structures often require adaptation to fit different cultural contexts.
- **Technological dependence:** In regions with less developed technological infrastructure, services must adapt delivery methods to local capabilities.
- **Governance and local stakeholder engagement:** These services are often more dependent on local governance and community participation. Successful transfer requires active engagement with local stakeholders and capacity building to ensure the model takes root.
- **Resource constraints:** Moderately transferable models often need to be adapted to the financial, human and technological resources of the receiving region.

Moderately transferable services can be successful when tailored to local conditions, taking into account governance, cultural context, and available resources.

2.4.3 Comparing the High and Moderate Transferability

Transferability and adaptability are essential for effectively scaling up services across regions, sectors and contexts. Services with **high transferability** tend to succeed when they are designed with flexibility and scalability in mind. Key factors include a modular design that allows core components to be easily adapted, and the presence of a robust technological infrastructure that can support cross-regional or even cross-border operations. In addition, the availability of strong legal frameworks and policy support enables services to navigate complex regulatory environments and operate effectively across jurisdictions. Adequate funding, including public-private partnerships, ensures that these services can expand without compromising quality or sustainability. Together, these factors contribute to high transferability, ensuring that services maintain their impact when replicated or scaled up in new regions.

In contrast, **moderate transferability** is often characterised by the need for significant adaptation, particularly in settings where local cultural, social and economic conditions differ significantly from the original context.

Services in this category face challenges related to contextual dependency, where social norms, economic resources and governance structures vary from one setting to another. Successful transfer requires deep engagement with local communities and building relationships with key stakeholders. Community engagement and capacity building are not only beneficial, but often critical to ensuring that services can take root and thrive in new environments. This may involve adapting governance models, service delivery methods or even the overall objectives of the initiative to better suit the local context.

Both high and moderate transferability require careful consideration of the specific challenges and opportunities presented by new environments. For high transferability, the use of technology and policy support can accelerate the process. For moderate transferability, however, success depends on cultural sensitivity, stakeholder involvement and the ability to foster local ownership of the service. While the path may be different, both approaches emphasise the importance of sustainability - financial, operational and social. Without proper attention to these elements, even well-designed services may falter when applied in new regions.

In summary, transferring services to different contexts is a complex process that requires a balance between maintaining the integrity of core service components and adapting them to the needs of new environments. Whether a service is highly transferable or requires moderate adaptation, understanding the interplay between technological infrastructure, community engagement, legal frameworks and local capacity is critical. Ultimately, the success of these initiatives lies in their ability to address the unique challenges of each new context while maintaining their overarching mission and effectiveness.

3 Six Pathways for Sustainable and Inclusive Service Delivery

The following chapter outlines six key pathways, each based on the principles of transferability and adaptability discussed in the previous section. These pathways are designed to emphasize the structured and strategic approaches needed to achieve sustainable and inclusive service delivery in different contexts. By using the term "pathway," we emphasize the importance of having a clear, navigable path to address specific challenges while taking advantage of unique opportunities in different regions and sectors.

Each pathway represents a distinct strategy that responds to different levels of transferability - high or moderate - and the corresponding need for adaptation. This approach ensures a comprehensive and systematic exploration of service delivery models, optimizing them for scalability and local relevance. Through these pathways, we provide concrete examples and strategic recommendations, enabling policymakers and service providers to navigate complex environments and develop robust, inclusive service models.

3.1 Pathway 1: Tailored and Equitable Service Delivery

The need to tailor services to the specific needs of different regions, while ensuring equitable access, is a key lesson from the case studies. Regional diversity in terms of geography, population demographics, socio-economic status and infrastructure means that a one-size-fits-all approach to service delivery is often inappropriate. Services that are not adapted to local conditions may fail to address the specific challenges faced by communities, particularly in remote or disadvantaged areas. At the same time, promoting equity in service delivery is essential to ensure that all people, regardless of location or socio-economic status, have access to the services they need.

The Remote Monitoring of Patients in Rural Areas pilot project in Comunidad Valenciana, Spain, addresses the challenge of providing healthcare in remote, sparsely populated regions. The project uses the Internet of Things (IoT) to remotely monitor patients' vital signs, such as temperature, blood pressure and glucose levels, without them having to visit a clinic. This service is particularly beneficial for elderly residents in mountainous areas who face significant travel barriers. The pilot has successfully improved access to healthcare, allowing medical professionals to assess patients' conditions remotely and send teams only when necessary, reducing unnecessary travel and improving patient care.

Equity is at the heart of the Dr. Ámbédkar Vocational Secondary School in Hungary, which was established to provide educational opportunities to marginalised Roma communities. The school's flexible educational model, adapted to the socio-economic realities of its students, has successfully raised educational attainment and provided a pathway out of poverty. This case illustrates that tailoring services to the specific needs of disadvantaged groups is not only a matter of efficiency, but also of social justice.

Similarly, Croatia's Government Subsidies for Drinking Water Transport initiative addresses the challenge of providing equitable access to drinking water for residents of remote islands where traditional water infrastructure is not feasible. The government subsidises the transport of water by tankers to ensure affordability for residents, particularly during the dry season when shortages are most severe. This initiative highlights the importance of tailoring services to the specific needs of remote regions, ensuring that geographically and economically disadvantaged communities have access to essential resources.

These examples show that tailored service delivery, combined with a commitment to equity, leads to more effective, sustainable and equitable outcomes. However, achieving this requires a deep understanding of local contexts, proactive community engagement and a commitment to addressing systemic inequalities.

3.1.1 Recommendations for Tailored and Equitable Service Delivery

To achieve tailored and equitable service provision, policymakers and service providers need to adopt a multi-pronged approach that includes thorough regional needs assessments, flexible and adaptable service models, proactive measures to address inequalities, and continuous monitoring and adaptation of services.

1. **Undertake comprehensive regional needs assessments:** Before designing or implementing services, it is essential to conduct thorough assessments of the specific needs, challenges and resources of

each region. These assessments should take into account factors such as geography, demographics, socio-economic conditions and existing infrastructure. By understanding the unique context of each region, service providers can design solutions that are both relevant and effective. For example, the success of mobile social care for the elderly in Skrunda, Latvia, was largely due to its design being based on an understanding of the specific social and health needs of the rural and ageing population, ensuring personalised assistance with daily tasks and enabling elderly residents to remain in their homes.

2. **Develop flexible and adaptable service models:** Services must be designed to be flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of different regions. This flexibility allows adjustments to be made in response to new challenges or changes in local conditions. The Virtual Health Rooms in Sweden are an example of this approach, with their ability to adapt to the health needs of remote populations through the use of telemedicine. Service models should be able to scale up or down, adjust their scope and integrate new technologies as needed to maintain relevance and effectiveness.
3. **Prioritise equity in service design and delivery:** Equity must be at the forefront of service design and delivery. This means not only ensuring that all people have access to services, but also addressing the specific barriers faced by disadvantaged groups. Policies and service frameworks should be explicitly designed to reduce inequalities in access and outcomes. This could include targeted funding for underserved regions, affirmative action to include marginalised communities, and the development of services that address the specific needs of these groups. The Dr. Ámbédkar School in Hungary serves as a model of how educational services can be tailored to promote equity by directly addressing the socio-economic barriers faced by Roma students.
4. **Utilise technology to overcome geographical barriers:** Technology can play a crucial role in ensuring that services are accessible to all, regardless of location. Telemedicine, online education platforms and digital government services can bridge the gap for populations in remote or underserved areas. However, the successful implementation of technology-enabled services requires adequate infrastructure, such as reliable internet connectivity, and training for both service providers and users. The VHRs in Sweden provide a powerful example of how telemedicine can be used to deliver equitable health services in remote areas.
5. **Establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems:** Continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary to ensure that services remain relevant and effective. These systems should track key indicators of equity and accessibility, such as service uptake, outcomes and user satisfaction. Feedback from these evaluations should be used to make ongoing adjustments to services to ensure that they continue to meet the evolving needs of different regions. This approach allows service providers to identify and address emerging issues, making services more resilient and responsive.

In conclusion, tailored and equitable service delivery is essential to meet the diverse needs of different regions and to ensure that all people have access to the services they need. By conducting thorough needs assessments, developing flexible service models, prioritising equity, using technology, engaging communities, implementing robust monitoring systems and securing sustainable funding, policymakers and service providers can create service delivery models that are both effective and equitable. This approach not only improves service outcomes, but also contributes to broader goals of social justice and regional development.

3.2 Pathway 2: Strengthening Community Engagement and Ownership

The critical role of community engagement and ownership in the success and sustainability of public services is a key lesson from the case studies. In different contexts, community involvement in the design, implementation and management of services has been shown to improve their relevance, responsiveness and effectiveness. When communities are active participants rather than passive recipients, services are more likely to be responsive to local needs and enjoy higher levels of trust and use.

An illustrative example is the Diakónia home care service in Romania, where community involvement has been central to the success of the initiative. The service, which provides healthcare to elderly residents in remote rural areas, was established through a partnership between a faith-based NGO and the local public administration. As well as addressing a critical gap in healthcare provision, the initiative fostered a sense of ownership within the community. The local priest played a key role in mediating between the NGO and the community,

ensuring that the service was well integrated and widely accepted. This close relationship between service providers and the community was essential in maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the service, even in the face of logistical challenges and resource constraints.

Another compelling example is the Mayo Bus Service in Ireland, which provides transport for cancer patients in rural areas to urban treatment centres. The success of this initiative was largely due to strong community involvement and support. The service was initiated by a local charity in partnership with transport providers, reflecting the community's recognition of the need for such a service. The high level of community involvement ensured that the service was not only well used but also highly valued by local residents, who felt a strong sense of ownership of its success.

In Hungary, the Dr. Ámbédkar Vocational Secondary School highlights the importance of community involvement in educational services. The school was established in a marginalised, predominantly Roma community with a history of poor educational outcomes. By involving the community - students, parents and local organisations - in the school's operations and decision-making processes, the initiative was able to create a supportive environment that promoted educational attainment and reduced dropout rates. The sense of ownership among community members was instrumental in the school's ability to adapt to challenges and sustain its operations over time.

These examples show that when communities are actively involved in the services that affect them, those services are more likely to be successful, sustainable and responsive to local needs. Community ownership fosters a shared responsibility for the success of the service, leading to better outcomes and greater resilience in the face of challenges.

3.2.1 Recommendations for Strengthening Community Engagement and Ownership

To strengthen community engagement and ownership in public service delivery, it is essential to develop strategies that embed community participation at every stage of service design and delivery. This requires creating inclusive processes that encourage active participation, fostering trust and transparency, and building the capacity of communities to take leadership roles.

1. **Ensure inclusive and transparent decision-making processes:** Communities should be actively involved in decision-making processes related to services that affect them. This can be achieved through mechanisms such as community councils, participatory planning sessions and regular public consultations that ensure that all segments of the community, including marginalised groups, have a voice. Transparency is key to building trust in these processes. For example, the Diakónia home care service in Romania benefited from the involvement of local leaders as facilitators, ensuring that the service was tailored to local needs, while the Mayo Bus Service in Ireland maintained transparency through regular updates on operations, reinforcing strong community support and involvement.
2. **Empower community leadership:** It is essential to build the capacity of community members to take on leadership roles in service delivery. This can be achieved through training programmes, leadership development initiatives and the establishment of local governance structures that enable community members to play an active role in managing services. The Dr. Ámbédkar Vocational Secondary School in Hungary is a good example of this approach, involving community members in the management and operation of the school and empowering them to take responsibility for its success.
3. **Foster collaboration among stakeholders:** Effective community engagement often requires collaboration between multiple stakeholders, including local government, NGOs and private sector partners. These collaborations should be structured to maximise the input and involvement of the community, ensuring that their needs and preferences are at the forefront of service design and delivery. The collaboration between the NGO and local government in the Diakónia home care service illustrates how such partnerships can enhance community engagement and lead to more effective service delivery.
4. **Sustain engagement through ongoing interaction:** Community engagement should not be a one-off activity but an ongoing process. Continuous interaction between service providers and community members helps to sustain engagement and ensure that services remain responsive to changing needs. This can be facilitated through regular community meetings, feedback mechanisms and the establishment of dedicated community liaison roles. The success of the Mayo Bus Service can be attributed to its ongoing dialogue with the community, which has allowed the service to adapt and improve based on user feedback.

In conclusion, strengthening community engagement and ownership is essential for the success and sustainability of public services. By promoting inclusive decision-making, building trust, empowering local leadership and encouraging ongoing interaction, service providers can build a strong foundation for community-led service

delivery. These strategies not only increase the effectiveness and relevance of services, but also ensure that they are resilient and adaptable to the needs of the communities they serve.

3.3 Pathway 3: Building Resilient and Sustainable Service Models

The case studies consistently demonstrate the importance of building resilient and sustainable service models to ensure long-term service delivery, particularly in regions facing economic, environmental and demographic challenges. Resilience in service provision is about the ability of services to withstand and adapt to various shocks - whether financial, environmental or social - while sustainability focuses on the long-term viability of services, including their financial stability, environmental impact and ability to continue to meet the needs of the community over time.

A key example of resilience and sustainability is the Virtual Health Rooms (VHRs) in Sweden. The VHRs were established in response to the challenges of providing healthcare in remote, sparsely populated areas of the County of Västerbotten, where access to medical services is limited due to geographical barriers. By using telemedicine and digital health technologies, the VHRs have created a sustainable model that reduces the need for travel, making healthcare more accessible while reducing the burden on traditional healthcare facilities. The integration of VHRs into the regional health network has also contributed to their resilience, as they are supported by a robust infrastructure that includes reliable internet connectivity and trained health professionals.

In Spain, the ARIEM-112 project is another example of a resilient and sustainable service model. This cross-border emergency service initiative between Spain and Portugal was designed to address the increased risk of forest fires and other climate-related emergencies in the border regions of Galicia and Norte. The resilience of the project is demonstrated by its ability to operate across national borders, integrating emergency response systems and standardising protocols to ensure seamless cooperation. The sustainability of the ARIEM-112 project is further enhanced by its ability to secure diverse funding sources, including European Union funds, which help to maintain and expand the service.

The Mallu Car initiative in Finland is another example of sustainability and resilience in service delivery. This mobile healthcare service, which operates in the rural areas of South Karelia, was developed to address the challenges of providing healthcare to an ageing population in sparsely populated regions. The sustainability of the Mallu Car is rooted in its flexible service delivery model, which is adaptable to the varying needs of different communities. Its resilience is evident in its ability to maintain operations despite the logistical challenges of serving remote areas, such as fluctuating fuel costs and vehicle maintenance issues. The initiative's focus on preventative health care also contributes to its long-term sustainability by reducing the need for more expensive emergency interventions.

These examples highlight the critical importance of designing service models that are both resilient to external shocks and sustainable in the long term. Resilient and sustainable service models are not only better equipped to deal with crises but are also better able to evolve to meet the changing needs of communities, ensuring that essential services remain available and effective.

3.3.1 Recommendations for Building Resilient and Sustainable Service Models

To build resilient and sustainable service models, it is essential to focus on several key strategies, including diversifying funding sources, integrating innovative technologies, fostering cross-sector partnerships, and adopting adaptive management practices. These strategies will help ensure that services are resilient enough to withstand various challenges and continue to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

1. **Diversify funding sources:** A critical component of sustainability is ensuring that services are not overly dependent on any single source of funding. Diversifying funding streams can include combining public funds with private investment, securing grants from international organisations, and developing revenue-generating activities where possible. For example, the sustainability of the ARIEM-112 project is enhanced by its ability to secure funding from multiple sources, including the European Union, which provides financial stability and allows for continuous improvement and expansion of services.
2. **Integrate of innovative technologies:** The integration of technology is critical to both resilience and sustainability. Technologies such as telemedicine, digital health platforms and , remote teaching by using ICT, remote monitoring systems, digital marketplaces and e-commerce solutions can help service providers overcome geographical and logistical challenges. to deliver service to remote and isolated communities. They not only make services more accessible, but also reduce operating costs and increase efficiency, contributing to their long-term sustainability of the. Governments and service. Service providers should invest in technology infrastructure and training to ensure that these tools are effectively integrated into service delivery.
3. **Adopt adaptive management practices:** Resilience requires the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, whether financial, environmental or social. Service providers should adopt adaptive management practices that allow for flexibility in service delivery. This may include regularly reviewing and

adjusting service protocols, engaging in continuous learning and improvement, and developing contingency plans for potential crises. The Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) model in Wales, which adjusts its routes and timetables based on user demand, is an example of the benefits of an adaptive approach. This flexibility allows the service to respond efficiently to the changing needs of the rural population, ensuring accessibility even in sparsely populated areas.

4. **Promote environmental sustainability:** Environmental considerations are increasingly important for the sustainability of service models. Services should be designed to minimise their impact on the environment, whether by reducing carbon emissions, using sustainable resources or promoting environmental responsibility within the community. For example, the Mallu Car's focus on preventative healthcare not only reduces long-term healthcare costs, but also minimises environmental impact by reducing the need for more resource-intensive emergency services.

In summary, building resilient and sustainable service models is critical to ensuring that essential services remain available and effective in the face of various challenges. By diversifying funding sources, integrating innovative technologies, fostering cross-sector partnerships, adopting adaptive management practices, promoting environmental sustainability, building local capacity, and ensuring continuous monitoring and evaluation, service providers can create robust models that can withstand shocks and evolve to meet the needs of the communities they serve.

3.4 Pathway 4: Strengthening Governance through Collaborative Approaches

The need to promote governance and cooperation is increasingly evident in the context of global challenges such as climate change, economic transition and public health emergencies that do not respect administrative boundaries. Effective collaboration across regions, communities and sectors can improve the efficiency, resilience and reach of public services by pooling resources, sharing knowledge and coordinating action. The case studies show that such cooperation is essential to address complex issues that require coordinated responses, particularly in regions where resources are limited, and challenges are shared across jurisdictions.

One of the most compelling examples of cross-border cooperation is the ARIEM-112 project between Spain and Portugal. This initiative was developed to address the common challenge of managing emergencies, such as forest fires, in the border regions of Galicia and Norte. The success of the project lies in its ability to integrate emergency response systems across national borders, creating a unified framework that includes standardised protocols, joint training exercises and shared resources. This level of cooperation has significantly improved the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response in these regions, reducing response times and ensuring that resources are optimally utilised across borders.

In Latvia, inter-municipal cooperation is demonstrated through regional education initiatives that address the challenges faced by schools in rural areas. By forming partnerships, municipalities have been able to pool their resources to provide better educational services, such as shared teaching staff and joint extracurricular programmes. These partnerships have improved the quality of education in areas where individual communities may struggle to provide a full range of services due to limited resources and declining populations.

These examples highlight the importance of promoting cooperation between municipalities and across borders to improve service delivery, particularly in regions facing common challenges. Collaboration not only allows for more efficient use of resources, but also for the development of innovative solutions tailored to the specific needs of different regions.

3.4.1 Recommendations for Strengthening Governance through Collaborative Approaches

To effectively promote governance and cooperation, it is essential to establish frameworks and mechanisms that encourage cooperation, facilitate the sharing of resources and ensure coordinated action. These efforts should be supported by policies that encourage cooperation, provide incentives for joint initiatives and address potential barriers to cooperation.

1. **Establish formal frameworks for cooperation:** Formal agreements and frameworks are essential to promote long-term cooperation between communities and across borders. These frameworks should outline the roles, responsibilities and expectations of each participating entity and provide a clear structure for cooperation. For example, the success of the ARIEM-112 project was largely due to the establishment of formal agreements between Spain and Portugal that provided a legal and operational basis for joint emergency response. Such frameworks can help to institutionalise cooperation, making it more resilient to changes in political leadership or funding.
2. **Encourage resource sharing and joint funding mechanisms:** Resource sharing is a key benefit of inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation. Municipalities and regions can achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness by pooling resources, be they financial, human or technological. Joint funding mechanisms, such as shared budgets for specific services or projects, can also help to spread costs and

reduce the financial burden on individual municipalities. In the case of the EcoBus project in Germany, municipalities worked together to share the costs of a flexible, demand-responsive transport service, making it financially viable and ensuring that all participating regions benefited from improved access to public transport.

3. **Encourage the sharing of knowledge and best practice:** Cooperation between municipalities and across borders provides an opportunity to share knowledge and best practice, which can lead to the development of more effective and innovative service delivery models. Regular information exchange, joint training programmes and joint research initiatives can help to disseminate successful strategies and improve service delivery across regions. For example, inter-municipal education initiatives in Latvia have benefited from the sharing of best practice in teaching and administration, leading to improved educational outcomes in rural areas.
4. **Building cross-sector partnerships:** Beyond inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation, fostering partnerships with the private sector, non-profit organisations and academic institutions can further improve service delivery. These partnerships can bring additional resources, expertise and innovation to the table, enriching the collaborative efforts of municipalities and regions. In Finland, for example, collaboration between municipalities and health care providers in the Mallu Car initiative was strengthened through partnerships with local organisations, which helped to expand the range of services offered and improve overall service quality.

In conclusion, fostering inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation is essential to address common challenges and improve service delivery across regions. By establishing formal cooperation frameworks, promoting the sharing of resources and knowledge, removing legal barriers, incentivising collaboration and building cross-sector partnerships, governments and service providers can create robust, resilient and efficient service models. These efforts will not only improve the quality of services provided to residents, but will also strengthen regional cohesion and stability, ultimately contributing to more equitable and sustainable development across communities and borders.

3.5 Pathway 5: Data-Driven Spatial Planning for Service Accessibility

Promoting a more integral approach to spatial planning of service provision is increasingly needed. Persistent geographical inequalities in service access not only compromise quality of life for affected populations but also hinder overall regional development and economic growth. Furthermore, the increasing complexity of regional dynamics, including demographic shifts, urbanization trends, and evolving transportation networks, calls for a more sophisticated, evidence-based approach to service planning.

As shown by results of the data analysis report, improving road transport may have unexpected effects on inner peripheries, such as increasing disparities at the local level. Furthermore, infrastructure improvements may sometimes trigger closure of services at the local level linked to the reduction of travel times (public or private) to urban areas or service centres, where services concentrate. In contrast, good territorial networks of public transport have been shown to be related to more available services in surrounding areas ¹.

In Spain, the case study of healthcare provision in an inner rural area shows how analysing travel time data together with rethinking service provision from a rural perspective has resulted in improved emergency responses. Additionally, in the Spanish case, when a doctor is the only available service in an area, measures are in place to guarantee the availability of that unique service. This case calls attention to the fact that identifying and protecting critical service points in underserved areas is crucial for maintaining territorial cohesion and preventing the further marginalization of vulnerable communities.

Public transport is also a key link for accessing other services. The case of on-demand taxi transport complementing the bus transport network in Alentejo (Portugal) shows how connecting rural areas with sparse population to main towns and cities can improve connectivity among different municipalities and enhance the region's image among citizens.

¹ OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024): Getting to Services in Towns and Villages: Preparing Regions for Demographic Change. OECD Rural Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1787/df1e9b88-en>. Paris: OECD Publishing.

These examples show the importance of planning access to services from an integral perspective targeting the special challenges of those areas. However, challenges regarding cross-sectoral governance of service provision and integrating the use of spatial information on policy-making still remain.

3.5.1 Recommendations for Improving Service Accessibility through Data-Driven Spatial Planning

This pathway emphasises the use of spatial data and quantitative evidence to inform and improve the planning and delivery of services across regions. By integrating travel time analysis, accessibility measures, population potentials (i.e. demand for services) and the identification of inner peripheries, this approach aims to optimise the distribution of services, address geographical inequalities, adapt service provisions to the needs of different types of regions, thereby mitigating the risk of underserved populations.

1. **Analyse spatial accessibility:** Use travel time bands and accessibility indices to assess regions with limited service reach, focusing on inner peripheries that are less accessible than neighbouring areas. This data-driven approach guides targeted planning to improve access in geographically disadvantaged areas, such as mountainous regions, rural areas away from main road axes, and areas between agglomerations.
2. **Identify and safeguard critical service points:** Recognise and prioritise the protection of service facilities that serve as the only delivery points for entire regions. These critical hubs should be maintained or even further developed to prevent service gaps and ensure consistent access to essential services in areas where closures would leave large populations underserved. Selected crucial hubs may become a nucleus for comprehensive and intersectoral service delivery stations in future.
3. **Implement adaptive planning and monitoring:** Continuously assess the spatial distribution and accessibility of services and adjust plans and interventions as regional dynamics evolve. Improvements in transport infrastructure, demographic shifts or socio-economic changes require adaptable strategies to maintain equitable access to services in all regions. Adapt the way services are provided to regional structures (such as travel times, population potential, demographic structures), bearing in mind that the way services are provided in urban areas and agglomerations does not necessarily suits the needs of population in rural and remote areas.

In conclusion, by leveraging spatial data, travel time analysis, and accessibility measures, policymakers can optimize service distribution, address geographical inequalities, and adapt service provision to regional and local needs. This approach enables the identification of critical service points, particularly in inner peripheries and underserved areas, ensuring equity of access and balanced development. Continuous monitoring and adaptive planning are essential to respond to evolving regional dynamics, such as changes in transport infrastructure or demographic shift. Tailoring service delivery methods to specific regional structures, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all urban model, is crucial for meeting the unique needs of populations in areas with special needs.

3.6 Pathway 6: Strengthening Retail Resilience and Accessibility through Digital Innovation

Rural and remote areas face retail market failures due to low population densities and high operating costs that make traditional stores unsustainable. These regions are often underserved by essential services such as grocery stores and pharmacies. However, digital innovation, supported by public-private partnerships and centralised platforms, can address these challenges. By streamlining operations, improving supply chains and increasing consumer access, digital tools ensure that even isolated communities have access to essential goods, making rural retail more viable and resilient.

The Merkur programme in Norway supports small grocery stores in remote regions by providing financial assistance and digital tools such as online ordering systems, inventory management and customer engagement platforms. This initiative helps retailers remain competitive and sustainable by modernising their operations. By combining government support with private sector expertise, the programme streamlines rural retailing and ensures that essential goods remain accessible in areas where traditional models face challenges.

The Digital Farmers' Market Platform in Latvia connects rural producers with urban consumers, enabling small farmers to sell directly to urban buyers, bypassing traditional intermediaries. By overcoming logistical and transport challenges, the platform expands market access for rural producers and supports the sustainability of local agricultural businesses. Supported by government incentives, these digital marketplaces foster partnerships between the public and private sectors, driving innovation and resources to help rural economies overcome geographic and economic barriers. This platform not only ensures that rural businesses reach wider markets, but also provides urban consumers with fresh, locally sourced products.

On the other hand, the Schleswig-Holstein case illustrates how market failures in rural areas, driven by declining populations and the high cost of providing services, require government intervention. The creation of market meeting centres addresses these failures by pooling resources between the public and private sectors. However, governance challenges remain, particularly in the planning and operational phases, where small communities often lack the capacity to manage complex projects.

3.6.1 Recommendations for Strengthening Retail Resilience and Accessibility through Digital Innovation

The following strategies are recommended to strengthen rural retail resilience and accessibility:

1. **Develop digital infrastructure for rural retailers:** Governments should prioritise the development of digital infrastructure in rural and remote areas to enable small retailers to adopt e-commerce platforms, inventory management tools and other digital solutions. This will improve operational efficiency and ensure that rural shops can remain competitive in a challenging market environment.
2. **Subsidise digital tools for small retailers:** Financial support should be provided to small rural retailers to adopt digital tools that improve their operations. This includes subsidies for online ordering systems, customer engagement platforms and supply chain management tools to ensure that even the smallest retailers can modernise and remain viable.
3. **Encourage digital marketplaces for rural producers:** Governments should encourage the creation of digital platforms that connect rural producers with urban consumers, similar to the digital farmers' market platform in Latvia. These platforms should facilitate direct sales and support local economies by ensuring that rural producers can reach wider markets.
4. **Encourage public-private partnerships for retail innovation:** Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to support the development and deployment of digital solutions for rural retail. By working together, governments and the private sector can create innovative tools that address the specific challenges of rural retail and ensure that these services remain sustainable.
5. **Develop centralised supply chain management platforms:** Inspired by the Croatian Rural Retail Network, governments and private companies should work together to create centralised digital platforms for rural retailers. These platforms would allow small shops to pool resources, optimise supply chains and reduce operating costs, ensuring that even isolated communities have continuous access to essential goods.

The pathways reveal how digital tools, public-private partnerships and centralised platforms can address market failures in rural retailing. By modernising operations and improving supply chain management, these innovations ensure that even the most remote communities have access to essential goods. Governments and the private sector must continue to invest in digital infrastructure to create sustainable, resilient retail models that can thrive in rural areas.

4 Good Practice Principles

This chapter outlines key principles for the effective delivery of public services in lagging regions. Unlike pathways-which represent strategic routes to overcome specific service delivery challenges-principles are basic guidelines that inform how services should be designed and implemented in all contexts. Drawing on different service delivery models across Europe, these principles reflect a range of successful approaches that can be adapted to different contexts. The principles are based on the findings of 32 case studies, each of which provides valuable lessons for overcoming specific service delivery challenges.

The principles are grouped into three overarching approaches: Accessibility and digital inclusion, community-centered and participatory models, and hybrid service delivery models.

4.1 Accessibility and Digital Inclusion

Ensuring that essential services are accessible to all populations, especially those in geographically remote or economically disadvantaged areas, is a fundamental principle of good practice. In many lagging regions, infrastructure is underdeveloped and there are significant gaps in digital access and service delivery. Bridging these gaps is essential to promote equitable service delivery, improve quality of life and prevent social and economic isolation.

This section highlights three key principles: One-stop service delivery, digital inclusion and targeted coordination.

One-stop Service Provision

One-stop service centres streamline access to a range of essential services by integrating them into a single location, providing a more efficient and user-friendly experience. By consolidating services, these centres reduce the need for residents in remote or poorly connected areas to travel long distances to access healthcare, social services, administrative support or employment assistance.

Case study examples:

- In Latvia, the Joint State and Municipal Service Centres successfully implemented the one-stop service model, combining local and state government services in accessible locations. This initiative has significantly improved access to public services in rural areas.
- In Sweden, the Virtual Health Rooms in Västerbotten provide health services in rural areas through telemedicine, allowing residents to access medical consultations without having to travel long distances.

Digital Inclusivity

In the digital age, equitable access to services requires more than physical infrastructure - it also requires digital infrastructure. In many lagging regions, access to high-speed internet and digital literacy are unevenly distributed, exacerbating existing inequalities in service delivery. Digital inclusion means ensuring that all populations, regardless of their geographical location, have access to essential services online.

Case study example:

- In Spain, the remote monitoring pilot in the Comunidad Valenciana addressed the healthcare needs of elderly patients in isolated rural areas by implementing a telemedicine system.
- In Sweden, the Use of ICT in Education initiative used videoconferencing to connect rural students with teachers for real-time lessons, improving access to quality education in remote areas.

Targeted Coordination

Targeted coordination involves building partnerships between government agencies, private organisations and community groups to ensure that services are tailored to the specific needs of a region. Effective coordination allows for the pooling of resources and expertise, leading to more efficient service delivery and better outcomes for users.

Case study examples:

- The ARIEM-112 cross-border emergency project between Spain and Portugal demonstrated the power of coordinated service delivery in remote border regions.
- The Network of Primary Schools in Finland is a coordinated project in which schools in sparsely populated rural areas share resources and teachers to continue providing education in the face of demographic challenges.

4.2 Community-Centric and Participatory Models

Involving local communities in the design and delivery of public services is crucial to ensuring that these services are relevant, effective and sustainable. In many lagging regions, local knowledge and community engagement can significantly improve the quality and reach of service delivery.

This section focuses on three principles: Bottom-up planning, Multifunctional use of local spaces, and Harnessing local strengths.

Bottom-up planning

Bottom-up planning ensures that local communities have a say in designing the services they need. This approach fosters a sense of ownership among residents, leading to greater engagement and sustainability. It also allows for the creation of services that are more responsive to the specific needs and challenges of the region.

Case study examples:

- In Ireland, the Community Transport Service was developed through local engagement to address the transport challenges faced by residents in rural areas, particularly those needing access to health services.
- In Switzerland, the Mini.City initiative in Lichtensteig revitalised the town by repurposing underused spaces through a participatory approach, ensuring that residents had a say in how the town developed and used its historic assets.

Multi-functional use of local spaces

In many deprived areas, public infrastructure is underused or in a state of disrepair. Transforming these spaces into multifunctional service hubs can revitalise communities and provide residents with access to a range of services in a single location. These hubs can house educational, social and healthcare services, maximising the use of local resources.

Case study examples:

- In Romania, the Diakónia Home Nursing Service operates from a church community centre, providing health services to elderly residents in a rural community.
- In France, the Educational Cities label has transformed local public spaces in deprived urban areas into educational hubs, offering a range of services to support the academic and social development of young people.

Leveraging local strengths

Every community has unique assets, whether cultural, historical or social, that can be used to improve service delivery. By building on these local strengths, service providers can create solutions that are not only effective, but also culturally relevant and supported by the community.

Case study examples:

- In Sligo, local businesses came together to fund projects and offerings that improve the business climate together with tourism and heritage organisations enhancing Sligo's urban area. By involving the local community, this initiative promoted economic and retail development through the creation of a vibrant and thriving business district.
- In Romania, the Balázs Ferenc Community Home used local cultural heritage to create a sustainable model for service delivery based on local involvement and participation.

4.3 Hybrid Models of Service Delivery

In regions where public resources are limited, hybrid models that combine the efforts of the public sector, private organisations and the voluntary sector can offer an effective solution. These models are flexible and adaptable, allowing a wider range of services to be provided in remote or underserved areas.

This section focuses on three principles: Public-private partnerships, Flexible service models and Community-based human resources.

Public-private partnerships

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) bring together the resources and expertise of both sectors to deliver public services. In less developed regions where public funding may be limited, PPPs can fill critical gaps in service delivery, particularly in health, education and transport.

Case study examples:

- In Alentejo (Portugal), the Integrated Mobility provides high quality and low cost service involving partnerships between the public and private sector (commercial taxis) to provide transport services

tailored to people in worse served areas, enhancing equality of access to public transport in most remote rural areas and connecting them with surrounding towns and local hubs.

- The EcoBus Flexible Mobility Service in Germany uses a public-private partnership to provide on-demand transport in rural areas, helping to bridge the gap between low public transport use and individual mobility needs.

Flexible service models

In regions with fluctuating demand or diverse needs, flexible service models are essential. These models can adapt to changing circumstances, such as seasonal population shifts or sudden increases in service demand due to natural disasters or economic downturns.

Case study examples:

- In Latvia, the Mobile Social Care for the Elderly in Skrunda provides flexible social care services to elderly residents in remote areas, adapting to individual needs and helping them to remain independent in their own homes.
- The Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) system in Wales provided flexible transport services to meet the varying needs of rural residents, particularly for access to health, education and retail services.

Community-based human resources

Employing local people as service providers can improve the effectiveness of service delivery, especially in remote areas. Local staff are more familiar with the unique challenges of the region and can build stronger relationships with the community. In addition, this approach creates jobs and strengthens the local economy.

Case study examples:

- The Village and Homestead Caretaking Service in Hungary employs local people to provide social services in rural areas.
- In Greece, the Karditsa Development Agency employed local residents to support agricultural and social initiatives in rural areas, focusing on cooperative approaches to create jobs and improve local services through community involvement.

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