



# Vital Update 7

## Vital Rural Area Newsletter



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## Empowering SMEs

Empowering SMEs to innovate and grow is a key theme representing the projects carried out under the Vital Rural Area banner. The main aims of the projects and pilots undertaken within this work package include:

- Fine-tuning the needs and potentials of SMEs
- Promoting partnership working between SMEs and educational institutes
- Encouraging SMEs to develop new commercial products and processes
- Facilitating SMEs to find potential successors, especially for lifestyle businesses
- Monitoring the activities, results and long-lasting impact of the SMEs' approaches

Empowering SMEs is important for realising the potential that all rural areas across Europe possess. We hope that other rural areas within the EU will be inspired by the growth, which has been facilitated across the rural areas supported in our partnership.

## Norfolk Knowledge: Innovation Awareness

Innovation in products and processes is critical to the survival and growth of Norfolk's economy and yet many of Norfolk's businesses, in particular smaller businesses and more rural businesses, struggle to perform in terms of innovation.

The Norfolk Knowledge Innovation Panel was created to encourage these companies to innovate. The Panel supports business activity and operates as a hub of creativity and assistance for businesses in Norfolk's rural economy. With a

large number of experienced mentors, and a connection with the University of East Anglia, the panel offers valuable advice and guidance on a range of areas including assisting with compiling a comprehensive business case, helping to secure loans or funding and making the business aware of the priorities and problems that are likely to arise in future.

In addition to the Innovation Panel, Norfolk Knowledge also ran a business growth programme, which aimed to provide and develop an integrated package of growth support, with a professionally delivered series of workshops, complemented by individually focused mentoring.

Norfolk Knowledge continues to be sustainable, one of the main aims at the start of the project. With a large number of experienced individuals still involved with the scheme, it continues to deliver information to SMEs striving to innovate and grow.

More information can be found at: [www.NorfolkKnowledge.co.uk](http://www.NorfolkKnowledge.co.uk)



### Vital website

[www.vitalruralarea.eu](http://www.vitalruralarea.eu)

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### Vejen Digital Commerce



*Fibre installation.*

Vejen Kommune's Digital Commerce project aims to engage SMEs in the use of online retail infrastructure, aiming to empower SMEs in the municipality to grow their Business to Business (B2B) operations via online channels. With more than 95% of Vejen able to access broadband, the infrastructure is in place, but companies in the region do not see themselves as doing B2B activities globally, using the internet as their main sales channel.

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Reports commissioned by the project have identified that there is a large potential for SMEs to use e-commerce and the internet as a route to growth. But SMEs are reluctant to explore this avenue, as they are unclear of the benefits and what ultimately can be achieved.

The project is aiming to understand all the problems that SMEs face when implementing online systems, and in doing so will aid in the development of a number of digital commerce strategies and best practices designed to advise and guide rurally-based SMEs.

### Projects aimed at increasing educational attainment

Increasing the knowledge and educational attainment in specific regions has been a major common theme resonating through a number of projects that have been developed in this work package. Empowering SMEs begins with a workforce that is able and qualified to do the jobs which will drive growth.

### De Kenniswerkplaats

De Kenniswerkplaats is an initiative designed to encourage SMEs to engage with educational institutions and influence and direct the knowledge that is being imparted by the courses offered. It is also attempting to address a number of regional knowledge questions, using innovation and ideas from the educational institutions to overcome problems.



*Field test using rock flour as a mineral fertiliser.*

As a "Centre of Innovation and Knowledge creation", De Kenniswerkplaats is not only aiming to have a positive impact on educational attainment, but also showcase a number of projects to SMEs and the public, demonstrating how their ideas and innovation are helping the wider area. One pilot that has been commissioned since the launch of De Kenniswerkplaats is Rock Flour; which is looking at the lack of minerals in soil and developing a solution using rock flour, leading to sustainability and stronger farms.

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## STEPS

The STEPS project in Norfolk aims to aid vulnerable individuals gain basic skills through a programme of vocational activity, for example embedding literacy and numeracy within a construction course. Through this, individuals are actively re-introduced to education, gain useful skills and working towards qualifications in a positive environment.



The sustainability aspect of this project ensured that the community organisations involved in delivering the pilot courses on offer had been introduced to a best practice strategy for developing future courses at the end of the pilot.

## E-learning Development - Solar Water Heating

By linking together an experienced renewable energy company (Kenteq) and an educational institution (Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen, Leeuwarden), this project is aiming to develop and implement courses relating to Solar Water Heaters. Kenteq is producing the basic module for the course, which will provide exactly what the company and the energy sector are expecting from this type of qualification.

Delivering the course online to employees of SMEs and students at the Academy offers an ease and flexibility to all involved and, being entirely digital, the proposal cuts down on travel times, costs and energy waste. Delivery in this manner means that not only is this project increasing educational attainment for students, it is up-skilling workers who are currently in employment too.

Translations into German and the creation of other courses, initially geothermal energy, are being developed with German Vital partner Wirtschaftsakademie Schleswig-Holstein, Büro Husum. Extension to other partners and regions is planned, and the dedicated website [www.educationer.eu](http://www.educationer.eu) has been set up to facilitate this. Modules of the course are available here in English, German and Dutch.



Entrepreneurs testing the solar water heating course material.

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## Partners Vital Rural Area Project



NOFA, Buitenpost, The Netherlands - lead partner, Norfolk County Council, Norwich, United Kingdom, Streekplatform+ Meetjesland, Eeklo, Belgium, Province of Fryslân, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands, City of Langenhagen, Germany, Wirtschaftsakademie Schleswig-Holstein, Büro Husum, Germany, Vejen Kommune, Denmark, Municipality of Sluis, Oostburg, The Netherlands, Rogaland Fylkeskommune, Stavanger, Norway, Finnøy Kommune, Judaberg, Norway, Friese Poort Bedrijfsopleidingen, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands, Intercommunale Leiedal, Kortrijk, Belgium, Province of West Flanders, Brugge (Sint Andries), Belgium.

