CATEGORY
DIGITAL FUTURES

NOMINEE
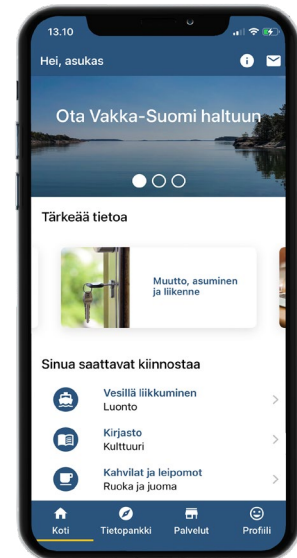RURAL INSPIRATION AWARDS
2022

EAFRD-funded projects

Mobiililuotsi 🇫🇮
Mobile Guide for refugees and other new rural residents

An app to favour social integration and use of services by newcomers

The Mobiililuotsi app was designed to help migrants and new residents in the Vakka-Suomi region to adapt, integrate and settle down in their new living environment. The app gathers information from local public and private services, mostly using open data. It provides information on five different standard topics: Housing and Transport, Work and Study, Health, Leisure and Local Guide.

The project involved designing and implementing the app in cooperation with local stakeholders. It helps people access national, municipal and commercial services, which are usually scattered across multiple sources and difficult to access for people who do not speak Finnish.

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Location
Vakka-Suomi Region (Finland)

Programming period
2014 - 2020

Priority
P6 - Social Inclusion and Economic Development

Measure
M07 - Basic services and village renewal in rural areas

Funding (EUR)
Total budget 59 611
EAFRD 20 027
National/Regional 27 656
Private 11 928

Project duration
2021 - 2022

Project promoter
Ukipolis Oy

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Website
mobiililuotsi.fi

Results

The app is available in Finnish, English and Ukrainian.

Since its launch in January 2022, the app has gathered over 1 500 users. It successfully targeted the key user group identified by the project, i.e. foreign-language migrants (57% of the users). The high average operating time – 3 minutes and 27 seconds – indicates the app's usefulness.

A user survey among the participants in the Vakka-Suomi integration training confirmed that the app is useful (16 out of 19 respondents), easy and straightforward to use (rating: 4.32 on a scale of 1 to 5) and they found what they wanted and needed (rating: 4.37).

Lessons & Recommendations

The project is still in progress and reports and final conclusions will be available shortly. However, the project beneficiaries report that this initiative taught them how to bring service providers together and to cooperate widely with different organisations. Building the application for wider use from the start was a clever idea. The application and its implementation process have proved attractive for users across the whole country.

Funded by the European Commission

Context

The Vakka-Suomi region (Finland) consists of six rural municipalities: Uusikaupunki (15 500 inhabitants), Laitila (8 500), Vehmaa (2 300), Pyhäranta (2 000), Taivassalo (1 600) and Kustavi (950). Within a brief time, many people, including many foreigners who do not speak Finnish, came to work in the region due to the presence of Valmet Automotive and associated industry operators. Some moved to the region, some commute to work from other areas. The increase of newcomers put pressure on the services of small municipalities. On the other hand, immigration can be a positive trend if people decide to settle in the region.

There are 30 850 inhabitants in the Vakka-Suomi region and 10 % of them are employment-based immigrants. Within five years, 2 500 new jobs have been created in the region and the number of newcomers – both Finnish and foreigners – an increase of 4% between 2018 and 2021. The number of permanent inhabitants in the area has not increased much, since many workers live there only on weekdays. However, the population of the region has become more international and diverse.

A considerable proportion of the newcomers are under 40 years old and for them building a new social life in a new place is particularly important. However, in smaller rural municipalities, crucial day-to-day information, such as the principles of the Finnish society, information on municipal services, schools, healthcare and childcare services, access to job opportunities, events and recreational activities was fragmented and often passed by word of mouth, without official information sources. Finding information on the websites of the different municipalities was especially challenging for non-Finnish-speaking migrants.

The rapid demographic change resulted in an increased need for a wide range of information and guidance, yet the local institutions did not have enough capacity to offer counselling and guidance services for migrants. On the other hand, customer service staff were repeatedly dealing with easy and routine-like questions that could have been easily answered without customer service.

Objectives

The project aimed to produce an easy-to-use and accessible mobile service (app) targeting newcomers to the region, particularly those who do not speak Finnish. The app would help people move around the region and visit it.

The main goal was to facilitate the independent discovery of information on basic public services, local activities and hobby opportunities by (new) residents, which would then free up working hours of the customer service staff for guidance that must be provided face to face.

The app would also help people who have been living in the area for longer, as it gathers conveniently and easily in one place extensive information on the service offering of municipalities, businesses and the third sector in the region.

Activities

The app gathers basic information from Finland and the Vakka-Suomi region retrieved through open interfaces, as well as data from local companies and associations to help all new residents. Data retrieved directly from resources updated by the organisations themselves do not require continuous updates to the app, which is light and does not take up much space on the phone.

The app was initially made available in Finnish and English.

Smaller local operators (NGOs, small municipalities and village associations) use the app as an opportunity to communicate extensively about their activities, such as hobby clubs, events and classes, and thus to improve their visibility.

The project manager surveyed and collected local data. The project purchased the design and technical implementation of the app's user interface from CYF Digital, a private ICT company which has created similar applications before. Ukipolis Ltd., a regional, non-profit development company owned by the regions' municipalities, was responsible for the project's management, content and communications. Ukipolis Ltd. is the project beneficiary and the initiator of the project; however, the need to create such an application came from the demands of local actors and municipalities.

The project started in February–March 2021 with a planning phase, consisting of several multidisciplinary workshops. Participants came from more than 15 municipalities and many different industries and representatives of the target group were also involved. The workshops were useful for content as well as technical design.

The actual application development work began in April 2021 and continued rapidly until the end of the year.

The first more extensive testing was carried out in September 2021 and at the end of the month, CYF Digital organised the first training sessions in the use of the admin tool. The test groups consisted of migrants, developers and volunteers from local associations and municipal authorities. Moreover, four different test rounds were organised for students of the Finnish language with a migrant background.

In October 2021, Ukipolis started entering content into the app through the admin tool. In technical development, the focus shifted from developing new content to testing, collecting feedback and refining the app. Several testing and training workshops were organised among the stakeholders and Mobiiliinluotsi was continuously improved based on feedback from the demo version.

In January 2022, final adjustments were made to the technical implementation and content. The app was released on 25 January 2022, available now for download at mobiiliinluotsi.fi.

The app can be used without logging in, but a logged user can access information, services, companies, associations and people targeted in their own life situations. The application is agile and easily adapted to diverse needs.

In spring 2022 communications from Mobiiliinluotsi were highly active and the project manager at Ukipolis toured the municipalities to provide guidance on the use of the app.

The app is built from modules, and thanks to this, a first version of the app in Ukrainian was released on 8 March 2022. In May, the entire application was available also in Ukrainian. In addition, a section on Ukraine was quickly added to provide assistance: Ukraine – Give and Get Help.

At the end of June 2022, the app was being connected to the national AuroraAI artificial intelligence network.

Main results

Since its launch in January 2022, the app has gathered over 1 500 users. It successfully targeted the key user group identified by the project, i.e. foreign-language migrants (57% of the users). The high average operating time – 3 minutes and 27 seconds – indicates the app's usefulness.

A user survey among the participants in the Vakka-Suomi integration training confirmed that the app is useful (16 out of 19 respondents), easy and straightforward to use (rating: 4.32 on a scale of 1 to 5) and they found what they wanted and needed (rating: 4.37).

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The app was originally made for regional use, but its portability and replicability (modular structure, use of open data) have already been identified for other areas of varied sizes, not only in Finland, but also in Europe.

The app is beneficial to young people, who are very familiar with the app format.

The project is based on the principles of the EU Digital Strategy and aims at the objectives set out in the EU Rural Vision. EU's long-term rural vision aims at stronger, networked, resilient and prosperous rural communities. The Mobiiliinluotsi project contributes to all these goals.

The implementation is innovative and the first in Finland to combine the data and services of several municipalities and sectors into a single application. Innovation is enhanced by the ambitious objective of providing customized information to each user. This should be enhanced by the recent connection of the app to the national AuroraAI artificial intelligence network.

Key lessons

It is difficult to integrate and immerse yourself into everyday life in a new living environment, whether you move from the other side of the country, let alone from the other side of the world! The new place of residence may be full of services and activities, but it is difficult to find them because the fragmentation of information.

Additional sources of information

mobiiliinluotsi.fi

ukipolis.fi

* This project has been categorised under 'Digital futures' by the nominating National Rural Network