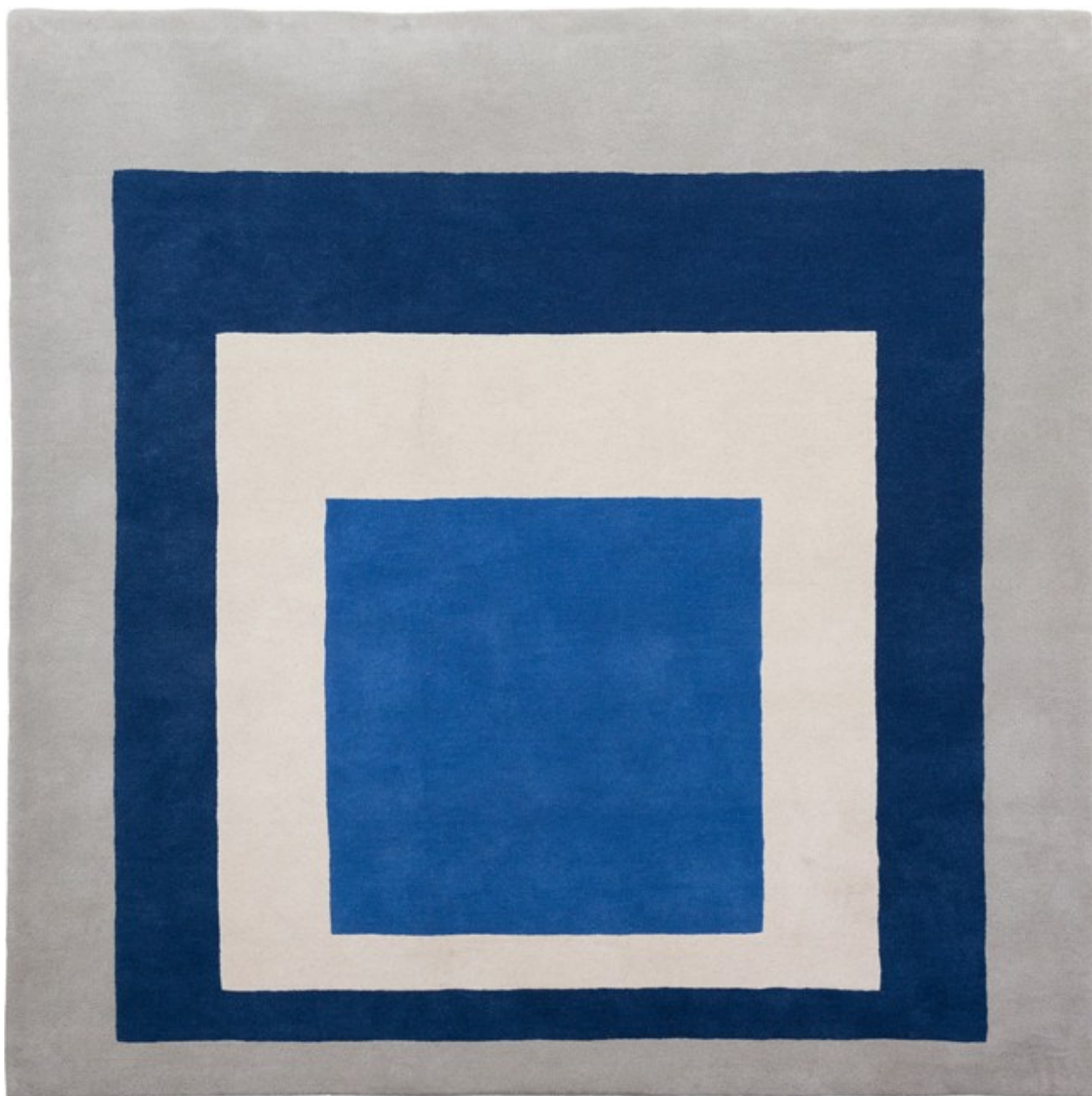


RE:START

Boosting the attractiveness
of mid-sized cities

TRANSFERABILITY STUDY



URBACT



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg

RE:START – Boosting the attractiveness of mid-sized cities
Transferability Study
URBACT IV Programme

CREDITS

This report has been sourced by the series of exploratory visits carried out by the lead partner representative along with the network lead expert to all partner cities, and by the in-depth questionnaire kindly filled out by all network cities.

The Network

RE:START is a URBACT Transfer Network on boosting the attractiveness of mid-sized cities. The Net will capitalize the brilliant experience of Idanha-a-Nova [Portugal] reversing depopulation by creating new pathways for growth, using innovative place branding as a catalyst for change. Along with Idanha, the transfer cities are Jonadi [Italy], Loutraki [Greece], Marina Alta functional area [Spain], Nyborg [Denmark] and Khotyn [Ukraine].

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Cover image: Josef Albers. Series Homage to the Square.

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Addressing the attractiveness of mid-sized cities

Place attractiveness as an integrated approach

Place attractiveness is an overarching concept, more comprehensive than the focus on attracting residents, and it embraces the different local challenges and expectations within the RESTART partnership more properly. It's multi-target, in the sense that it may cover all the different city's target groups, helping to build up a compelling value proposition and a subsequent meaningful dialogue to each of them.

Attractiveness also brings the **capacity to retain**. For instance, young people to stay in the place they were born; firms, taking externalities and comparative advantages from the local environment where they operate; visitors, in the sense of reporting outstanding experiences of their stage.

That's why place attractiveness entails, by nature, an **integrated approach**. A concept relevant to drive a sort of communication-led local strategic planning. *Recomeçar em Idanha* —Idanha-a-Nova's good practice— is a brilliant strategy on place attractiveness, targeting talent, new residents, investment and the existing local population alike.

Ours is an approach wider than in France, where *attractivité* is a well-extended policy concept intersecting between city branding & marketing and economic development —e.g. *stratégie d'attractivité internationale de la Métropole de Lyon*, *stratégie d'attractivité et de rayonnement international Toulouse Métropole*, *Bordeaux Métropole stratégie d'attractivité et de développement économique*. But, if the French approach aims to capitalize the potential—given by size—of the major cities worldwide, when applied to small and medium-sized cities, attractiveness entails the aim to counterbalance the current **economic and demographic polarisation** around major cities.

Place attractiveness can be, or is proving to be, instrumental to face stagnation or decline—economic, demographic or both, as normally people follow job opportunities—¹ but also to provide greater direction to cities in transition or even growing.

¹ In this respect, Michael Storper's three dynamics for urban economies combining economy and demography are still current, namely: growth, economically dynamic cities which experience strong population increases through the inflow of both highly skilled and less qualified migrants attracted by the cities' sustained economic power and wealth; stagnation, cities with a strong economic background but mostly settled down on mature industries, and stagnating or gradually shrinking populations; decline, cities within areas of complex shrinkage, where both demographic and economic decline can be experienced.

The table below shows such a diversity of local **policy challenges** in the RE:START partner cities that can be tackled through a place attractiveness perspective—that is, by adapting and re-using Idanha’s good practice. And it’s worth noting that not all are strictly related to depopulation and shrinkage.

Table 1. RE:START partner’s choices on their policy challenges to address from an attractiveness approach.

	Portugal	Italy	Greece	Spain	Denmark	Ukraine
Policy challenges	Idanha	Jonadi	Loutraki	Marina Alta	Nyborg	Khotyn
Depopulation						
Ageing						
Left behind territories						
Economic stagnation or decline						
Talent development trap [brain drain]						
Lack of urban vibe						
Unclear positioning and direction						
Uneven development						
Destination management in the era of massive tourism						

Population of RE:START partner cities [municipality level]: Idanha 8,541 inhabitants, Jonadi 4,674, Loutraki 22,016, Marina Alta 199,100 [Marina Alta is an association of 35 municipalities], Nyborg 32,329, Khotyn 17,742 inhabitants before the full-scale invasion.

Demography in context

In this context, how does demography work and how should it be addressed? It's for sure that demographic decline is impacting the **rural areas** heavily, where the cost of no-action is certainly very high in terms of loss of cultural heritage, cultural landscapes and environmental risks. Nonetheless, shrinkage, as well as the demographic and economic polarisation trend, go beyond the rural world and affect **intermediate areas** too. In fact, RE:START partner cities belong to a variety of different spatial contexts [table 2], and four of the NUTS 3 subregions hosting a RE:START city are undergoing shrinkage in different degree.²

Table 2. RE:START EU partner cities in their spatial contexts.

Population dynamics by type of region [NUTS 3]	Beira Baixa	Vibo Valentia	Korinthia	Alicante	Fyn
Shrinking predominantly rural regions	Idanha ¹	Jonadi ²			
Shrinking intermediate regions			Loutraki		
Growing predominantly rural regions					
Growing intermediate regions					Nyborg
Predominantly urban				Marina Alta ³	

Source: Testori, G., Franklin, R., Saraceno, P., Pertoldi, M., Perea Milla Fernandez, D. et al., Territories and demographic change - Regional patterns and policy approaches, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025. NUTS 3 categorisation taken from the ESPON SPACE project.

[1] We have used the period 2013-2023 to compare demographic trends in the RE:START cities. However, in the case of Idanha-a-Nova, the average figures for that period do not reflect well the change of cycle this rural municipality is undergoing from 2022 onwards, due to a robust net migration growth [second

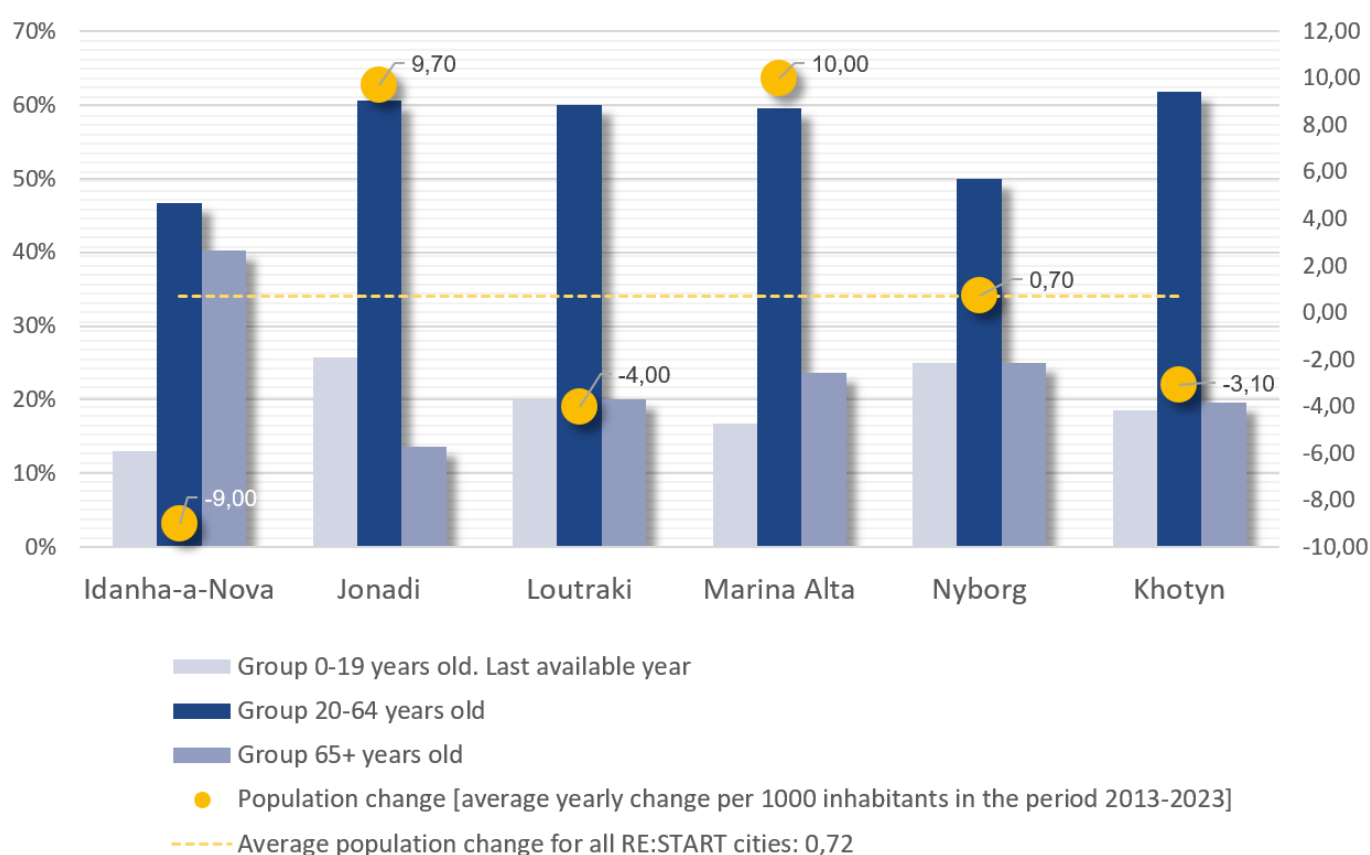
² This includes Khotyn [Ukraine]. Data on population changes in the period 2013-2023 are not available, yet the municipality reports -3,10% decrease in 2024, even despite the newly arrived residents. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, a large number of men have been mobilized, and some residents have left abroad. However, it is worth noting that Khotyn, which is located close to the EU border, has become a shelter place for people fleeing the war. Since 2022, about 10,000 internally displaced persons [IDPs] have arrived in Khotyn for temporary or permanent residence.

highest out of the RE:START network] as a result of *Recomeçar em Idanha*. This successful attractiveness strategy led to a positive overall population growth in 2022, for the first time in 50 years.

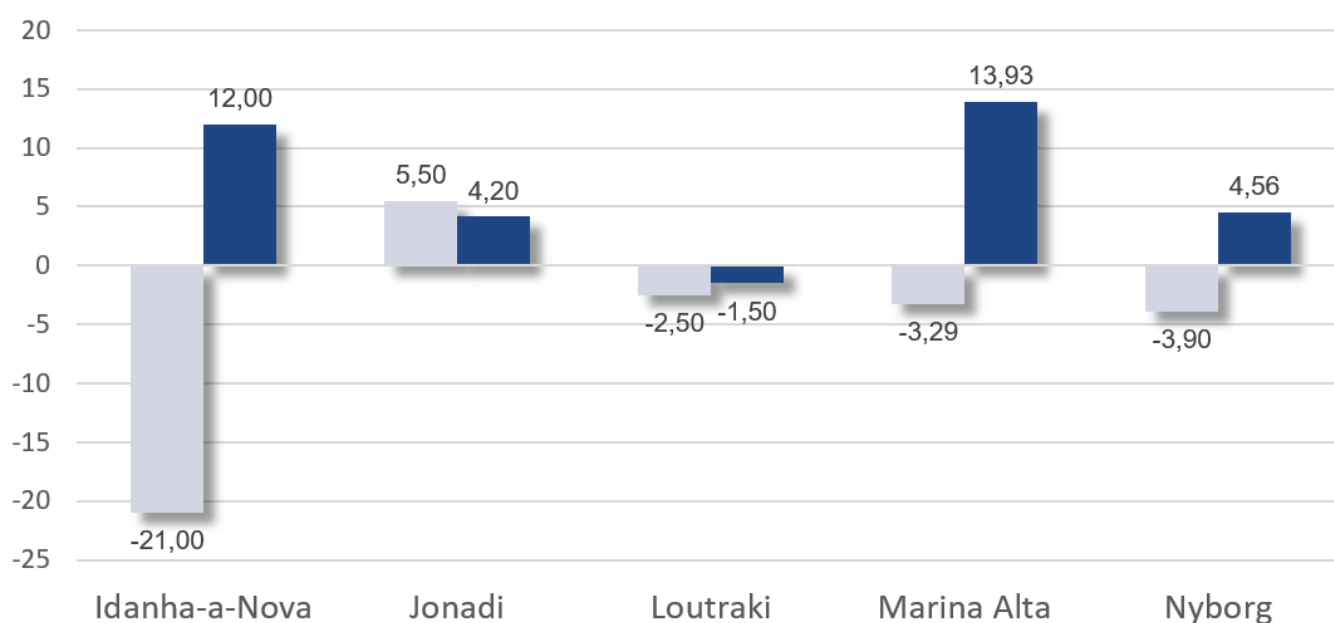
[2] Yet within a shrinking NUTS 3 area, Jonadi exhibits a sustained population growth over the past 25 years, which has much to do with nearby Vibo Valentia capital province's suburbanisation. That is, young couples who work in VV but have found in Jonadi affordable housing and lifestyle closer to countryside.

[3] Although categorized within a predominantly urban area, Marina Alta is a 35-municipality county hosting itself three different spatial settings —tourism-driven coastal area, with a high degree of urbanisation; intermediate area, with some mid-sized cities above 10,000 inhabitants; and inland rural area. As a whole, it could fit the intermediate region category rather than predominantly urban.

Population by age groups and population change



Natural population change vs. net migration



■ Natural population change (births minus deaths) [average yearly change per 1000 inhabitants in the period 2013-2023]. Average for all cities -5,04

■ Net migration (people entering or immigrants minus people leaving or emigrants) [average yearly change per 1000 inhabitants in the period 2013-2023]. Average for all cities +6,64

At this point, it's worth focusing on two aspects in order to address local demography and its challenges in the right direction. And it applies to growing contexts likewise.

● Ageing

With persistent low fertility rates and life expectancy in the EU averaging around 81 years, should ageing be approached simply as a problem? ³. In this respect, some recent policy papers claim that “the true demographic challenge is to ensure a high

³ Furthermore, projections in RE:START's NUTS 3 areas reveal that population will get ageing in the period 2025–2035: a) moderated shrinkage of the 0–19 age group: from light [Beira Baixa, Alicante] to significant shrinkage [Vibo Valentia, Korinthia], being Kyn [Nyborg] the exception, expecting growth; b) moderate shrinkage of the 20–64 age group: ranging from light shrinkage [Kyn, Alicante] to moderate [Korinthia] and significant [Beira Baixa, Vibo Valentia]; c) Growth of the 65+ group: significant growth in Alicante and Vibo, moderate in Kyn and Korinthia, being Beira Baixa [Idanha] the exception, expecting a decrease of this group. Source: Testori, G., et al, 2025.

quality of life for all residents” [Testori, G. et al, 2025.]. Demographically speaking, this means more room to adaptative strategies and solutions—healthy ageing, a well-developed silver economy—rather than futile, reactive type of policies aimed at promoting natural population growth.

Nonetheless, in economic development terms, the challenge posed by ageing can be summarised by the old age dependency ratio [OADR], which relates the group above 65 years old to the working-age population [20-64 years old].

● Population mobility

In fact, the key to address the demography challenge is being able to attract new residents, in particular talent, in terms of skilled workforce and entrepreneurial capacity, which directly relates to economic and social development, and in turn to local prosperity.

Indeed, as the figures above show, natural population change [births minus deaths] was negative in all RE:START cities during the period 2013-2023, with the only exception of Jonadi. And it is positive net migration what explains the overall population growth in Nyborg and Marina Alta County, as well as the remarkable Idanha-a-Nova’s change of cycle over the past few years.

EU policy concepts and policy frameworks

There’re some trends, as opportunity windows, for small and mid-sized cities to boost their capacity to attract and retain population—e.g. workforce mobility and flexible work, lifestyles closer to nature, housing crisis in bigger cities. And there are a number of **policy concepts**, consolidated and emerging ones, as well as some related **policy frameworks** at EU level, which both can be supportive somehow on the objective to boost place attractiveness and face some of the policy challenges reported in table 1.

Policy concepts can act as main drivers for taking action, while policy frameworks provide guidance and funding. Table 3 shows the RE:START partners’ choice on those policy concepts that can be most helpful in addressing their respective local challenges. These concepts can work alongside attractiveness as overarching and integrated approach.

Table 3. RE:START partner's choice on policy concepts that can be helpful to their local challenges.

Policy concepts	Idanha	Jonadi	Loutraki	Marina Alta	Nyborg	Khotyn
Rural innovation [and rural futures]						
Urban-rural linkage						
Place-based transformation						
Placemaking						
Cities and places in transition						
Talent attraction & retention						
The “right to stay”						
Smart specialisation						

Rural innovation

There is a growing conversation, originally promoted by the OECD, about how rural innovation is distinct from that of the urban areas in being driven by people, networks, technology and place-based creativity, rather than formal R&D alone. Even a set of policy recommendations has already been unfolded accordingly.⁴ Somehow this could apply beyond rural areas, to small and medium-sized cities as well.

⁴ OECD (2025) Rural Innovation Pathways: Connecting People, Places and Ideas, OECD Rural Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris. Actually the rural innovation concept comes out from the idea of rural proofing —the process of reviewing public policies through a rural lens to ensure they will work for the rural communities— which was mainstreamed by the OECD likewise.

A 2026 Joint Research Centre report confirms, as expected, the high concentration of innovation performance in the urban regions, but also gives evidence of “pockets of strong innovation capacity in some rural territories”. What’s more, about 20% of the rural regions perform above the overall EU R&D intensity average —see Sasso, S., Perpiña Castillo, C. and Napolitano, L., Innovation in the EU: technological and creative performances in numbers across urban and rural regions, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2026, JRC14538.

Recomeçar em Idanha is not only a good practice on place attractiveness, but also on how to make the most of the idea of rural innovation as a driver to reverse depopulation and promote sustainable growth. The very Idanha municipal team, within RE:START, has shared their vision on how to source rural innovation:

- Find opportunities linked to a local resource-based diversification —bioeconomy, circular economy, wellness cluster, regenerative tourism, heritage valorisation.
- Foster innovative solutions for the specific problems of sparsely populated areas, such as mobility and quality population services.
- Explore the opportunities behind a raising silver economy and active ageing.
- Support local entrepreneurship, retain young talent and create the conditions for remote and hybrid working.
- As a rural community, join international networks and fora and link with nearby universities and knowledge centres.

The EU Rural Pact is currently the policy framework that can best fine tune with the idea of rural innovation. It stems from the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas that was set in 2021. Rather than funding, by now it actually works as a gathering of different peer-learning and guidance initiatives, of which the Startup Village Forum is particularly noteworthy. It's a high-level event and community of practice, coordinated by the Joint Research Centre [JRC], dedicated to exploring the dynamics of innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas.

Place-based transformation

RE:START is about action-led transformational city narratives, drawing inspiration from Idanha-a-Nova's good practice. It's on mid-sized cities shaping forward-looking local strategies, by breaking path dependencies and looking into what make them unique.

The concept of Transformation has powerfully emerged in the EU, initially associated to innovation policies. Then, it has jumped into innovation-led territorial policies by the hand of the Joint Research Centre. Interestingly, "Transforming Territories" is the name of the JRC's newsletter on place-based development. While resilience entails adaptation, transformation aims to drive structural change, break inertia and actively build the future.

Talent attraction & retention

It's a consolidated policy concept to drive innovation-led territorial development and demographic sustainability, targeting both entrepreneurial talent and skilled workforce. It works as a set of measures, mostly focused on enhancing local framework conditions to live,

work, startup, innovate... What it comes to the attraction side, place branding and communication actions matters. Two trends for small and mid-sized cities to consider:

- European Commission’s eight cohesion report drew the fact that people aged 20–39 are more likely to move from rural to urban regions, while among those aged 40–64 and 65+ the opposite may be expected.⁵
- There is a need for redirecting the digital nomad phenomenon from big touristified cities to those places where they are most welcome and needed —unique small and mid-sized towns, many affected by depopulation and not far from an international airport.⁶

Driven by DG REGIO, the Harnessing Talent Platform and the Talent Booster Mechanism offer a relevant framework for peer learning and technical support. The former serves as a comprehensive repository of good practices and a set of thematic working groups. The latter, while strictly targeting regions, provides call-based financial support for talent attraction strategies in demographically declining areas.⁷

The “right to stay”

This concept was raised at the Enrico Letta’s report on the future of the EU single market [2024]. It’s about the right for people to live decent lives in their home regions without having to leave for job opportunities or services, and calling for integrated policies that make staying in rural and less-favoured areas a free choice. It’s a bit more than a manifesto, since it is driving specific research, integrated approach and evidence-based recommendations on the matter.⁸

The concept closely links to talent retention, and therefore to a way of understanding place attractiveness as the capability to retain, and consequently as a form of “territorial justice”, as framed by MACMA.

⁵ European Commission, 2022. Cohesion in Europe towards 2050 – Eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁶ This opportunity window should be a good reason to involve national governments in backing attractiveness strategies from medium-sized towns and rural areas.

⁷ “Choose Europe to Start and Scale” is another EC’s ongoing strategy, this time aimed at attracting foreign talent. It comprises 26 actions, including the Blue Carpet Initiative [focused on highly qualified entrepreneurs], the Fair Labour Mobility Package [for workforce mobility] and the EU Visa Strategy.

⁸ For instance, the JRC has released in 2025 the Demographic Outlook on “Right to Stay”, revealing how migration patterns within the EU are driven by complex, life-stage-specific motivations that vary by region.

The city and the good practice at a glance

Idanha-a-Nova [8,541 inhabitants in 2024] is a municipality located in the Beira Baixa subregion [Portugal], close to the Spanish border. Within an area of 1,416 km² [second largest municipality in Portugal], it hosts 13 small towns and villages that are organized in parishes [*freguesias*], out of which Idanha-a-Nova is the most populated with 2,200 inhabitants.

In many aspects, Idanha can be seen as the quintessential inland rural area of Portugal, and as such, its mayor challenges had to do with agriculture-oriented economy, remoteness, depopulation, ageing [it still has one of the highest old age dependency ratios in Portugal] and seasonality —this latter a problem in the sense that puts pressure over local infrastructures and services while it hides structural problems temporarily]. Furthermore, the area has to live with stereotypes that associate rurality to isolation, past relic and, at its best, a weekend place outside the contemporary life.

Idanha's depopulation over the past decades has been serious, from 16,009 inhabitants in 1981 to 9,525 in 2011 and 8,404 in 2021. However, from 2022 onwards the municipality is managing population recovery for the first time in 50 years, due to a fairly positive net migration. And *Recomeçar em Idanha* [Restart in Idanha], labelled URBACT Good Practice in 2024, has much to do with this **turning point**.

Restart in Idanha is an integrated local strategy on attractiveness that was launched in 2015 to reverse depopulation and create pathways for sustainable growth. It's a place branding-driven strategy built upon the idea of **rural innovation**, aimed at changing perceptions, reenergizing the local community and spreading the message that Idanha has a future-oriented plan.

The strategy was distilled into four action-oriented work programmes, as pipelines for projects and a variety of initiatives.

- **Idanha Green Valley.** Type of cluster development & branding programme aimed at positioning Idanha distinctively in the Bioeconomy sector, targeting investment, research & knowledge, startups and talent to spark green jobs.
- **Idanha Live.** Aimed at caring and improving conditions for those who live or want to live in Idanha, since attractiveness also entails the capacity to retain. So, focusing on quality population services —healthcare, education, housing, mobility — and live & work balance.

- **Idanha Try.** Under the motto “try before you move”, this programme was literally an invitation to come and see —e.g. the area, the schools, the services, the local authorities, the neighbours. So, it mostly targeted new residents, talent, Idanha's diaspora... those looking for a lifestyle change, closer to nature.⁹
- **Idanha Made In.** Targeting and supporting local firms and high-quality local products, particularly in the organic food sector, and promoting them nationally and internationally.



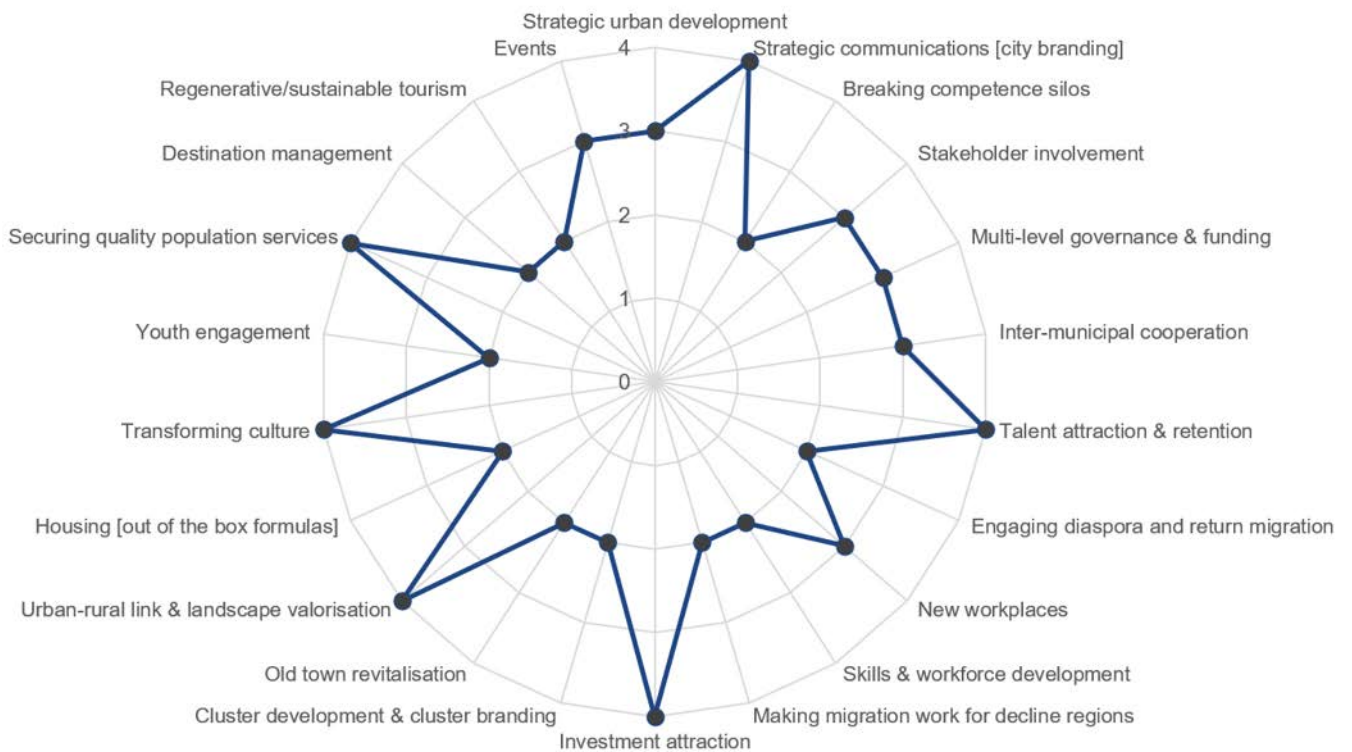
⁹ At a second stage, this programme evolved to target visitors and promoting the area as a unique, rural experience.

Remarkable milestones and achievements

2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vision to work on a strategy on attractiveness. Analysis and planning works began.
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Recomeçar em Idanha</i> publicly presented in Lisbon at the Higher Institute of Agronomy. ▪ UNESCO Creative City of Music [first in Portugal].
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ First edition of the i-Danha Food Lab annual event. ▪ Tejo International Natural Park declared UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. ▪ Naturtejo, first UNESCO Geopark in Portugal. Prime destination for nature tourism.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Officially recognised as Bio-Region, first in Portugal. ▪ Rural-based business incubator. Today 55 firms, 90% in the organic food sector. ▪ Place Brand of the Year Highly Commended. City Nation Place awards.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Idanha Food Lab [F4S CoLAB], acceleration programme in bioecocomy. ▪ Positive net migration.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Positive overall population growth for the first time in 50 years. ▪ 25^º anniversary of the Boom Festival [psychedelic trance music].
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Best Organic Bio-District at the European Organic Production Awards.
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Recomeçar em Idanha</i> labelled URBACT Good Practice.

Besides reversing demographic decline, Restart in Idanha has empowered the small, rural community in two ways. Firstly, making its local stakeholders and population feel more confident about their own future. Secondly, creating distinctive pathways for growth, related to sustainability, innovation and culture [education has been another remarkable achievement over the past years] able to selectively attract investment and firms, talent and workforce, visitors and events. Furthermore, the experience shows a path on what new **contemporary ruralities** can mean.

Contribution capacities and learning needs



Over the past years, Idanha has got a distinctive position in sustainability, culture, rural innovation, valorisation of local resources and talent attraction. It's now recognised as a true living lab for solutions in low-density areas. As shown in the spider chart, the municipality outstands in the following areas:

- Talent & investment attraction, as a direct outcome of Restart in Idanha attractiveness strategy.
- Cluster development and landscape valorisation. Being Portugal's first Bio-Region has positioned the area in the bioeconomy sector distinctively. Idanha is merging nature conservation with green economy, organic farming and tourism.
- Quality population services. Continuous investments in education, healthcare, digital connectivity and public infrastructure are securing relatively high living standards for a rural area.
- Transforming culture. From Idanha philharmonic band to being home to the world-renowned Boom Festival. The Municipality is also promoting heritage-driven urban development models in their historic villages —e.g. Monsanto, Idanha-a-Velha, Penha Garcia.

Innovative place branding as a change booster

Prototyping. For what?

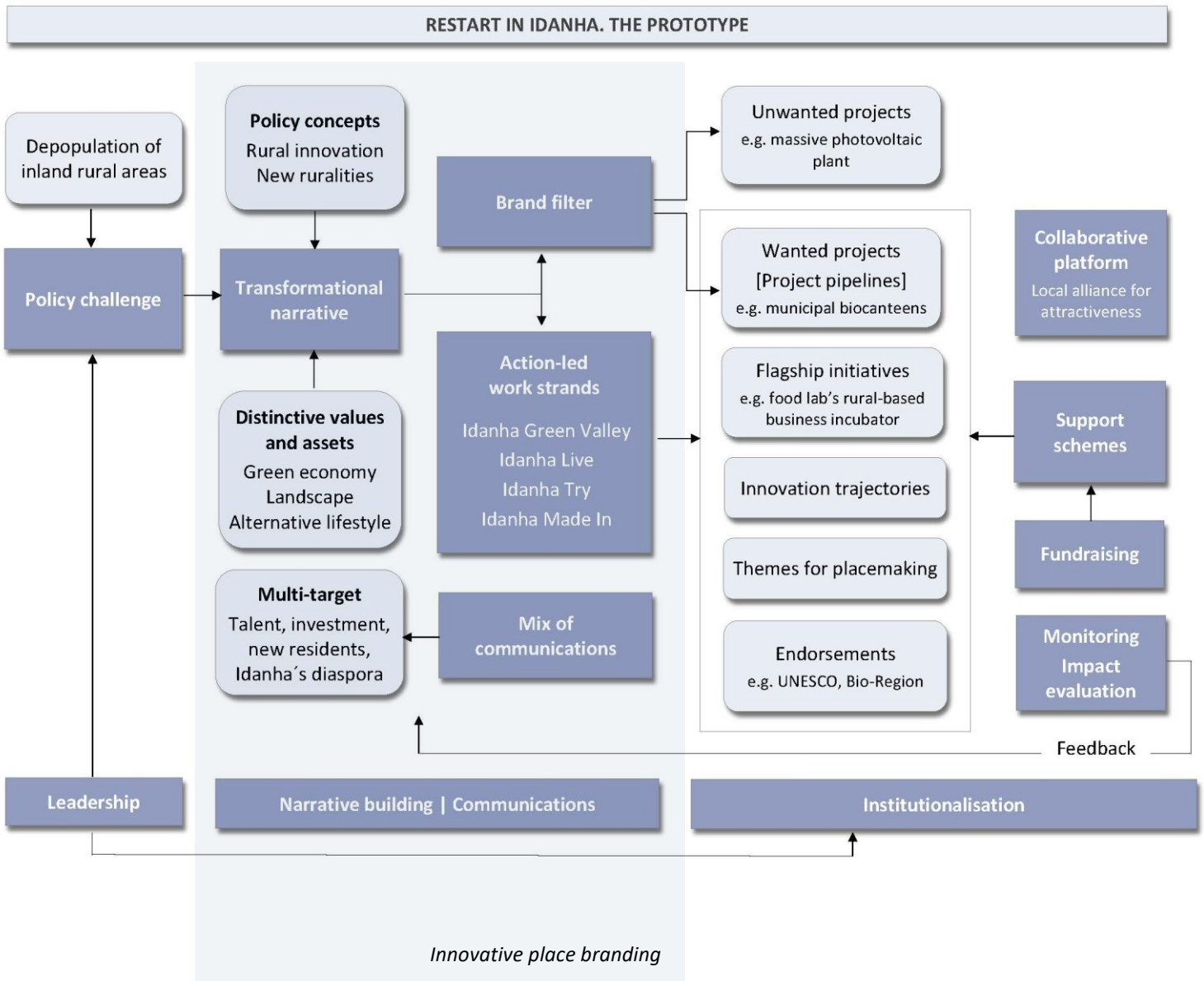
The idea of **deconstructing and prototyping** the Idanha strategy will enable transfer cities to understand, adapt and re-use it more easily. It will also help Idanha-a-Nova to improve or revamp its own strategy for the next ten years.

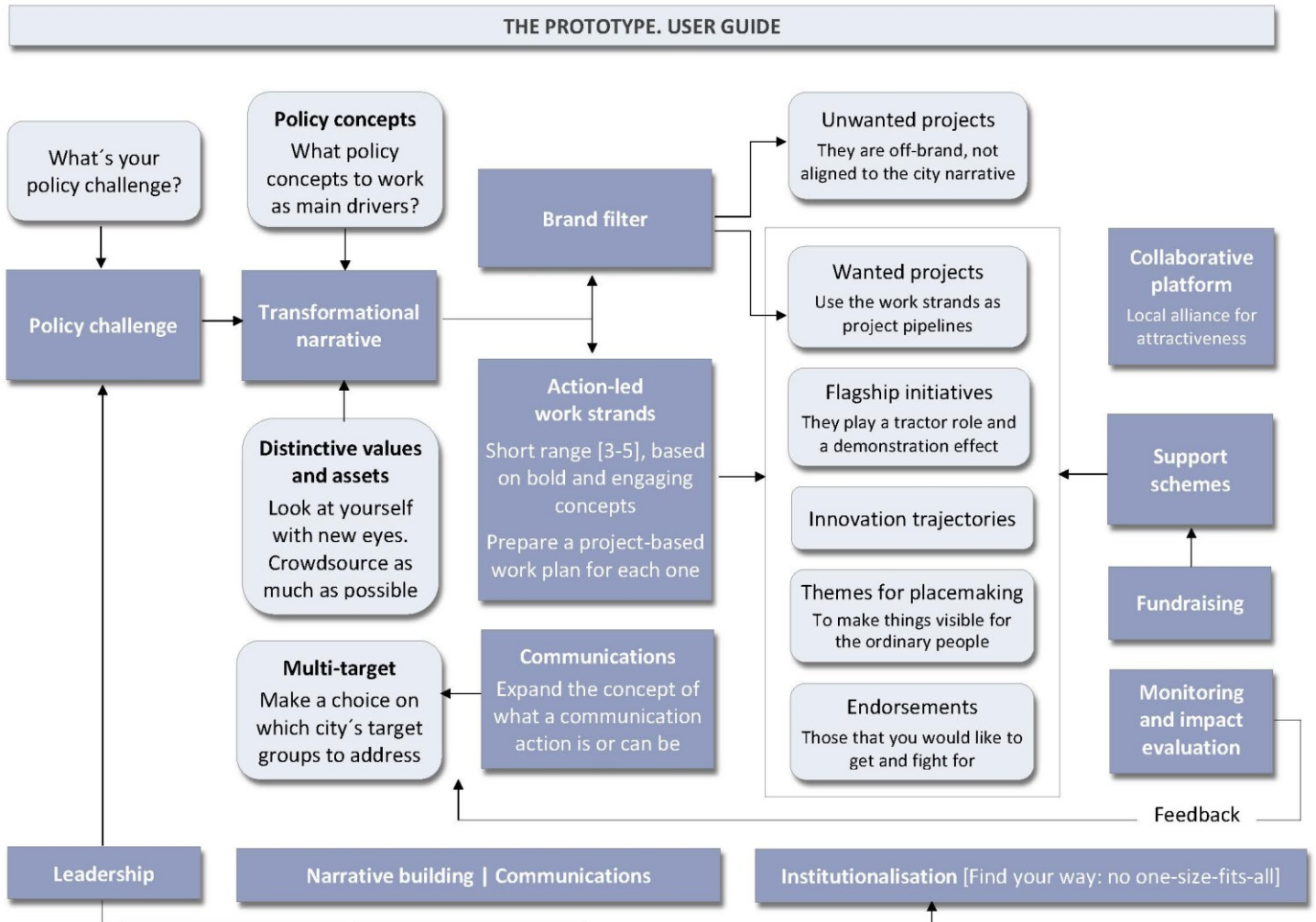
To this end, the good practice has been prototyped as an experience in boosting the attractiveness of mid-sized cities, in a way that it can equally serve cities facing decline, as well as those in transition or even growing that need greater and more consistent strategic direction.

The prototype actually draws **place attractiveness' value chain**. Place branding is at the core, as a catalyst for change, yet other components are needed likewise for making the wheel turn and getting an impact in terms of local development.

The key components assembled in the prototype can work as **modules** for the good practice's transfer or improvement. On the one hand, they pose the kind of questions any transfer city should wonder during the adaptation process, according to their own local circumstances. On the other hand, the whole assemblage offers a complete picture on how place attractiveness, as inspired by the Idanha case, should be deployed.

The way and scope this model can be used by the transfer cities will rely on their real willingness to change, their capabilities and local framework conditions. And that's something the Transfer Plans will tell.





Making place branding work strategically

Place branding was at the heart of Idanha's good practice in order to reverse a long-standing process of depopulation by unlocking its untapped potential related to rural innovation. Thus, first move of the Idanha-a-Nova mayor at the time, was involving Bloom Consulting — a Lisbon-based place branding team — as technical assistance.

Bloom's way to address the assignment had nothing to do with logotypes and campaigning, but rethinking Idanha's identity as rural community to make it more updated, competitive and engaging. That is, getting a true, clear, understandable city narrative is a primary goal. In this perspective, [innovative] place branding actually worked as a sort of **communication-led agile strategic planning**, useful to drive transformation or provide greater direction.

Narrative building

In this framework, narrative is the first and most fundamental, and this is not only about the “who we are” but also the “who we want to be”. And that narrative should be transformational, distinctive, multi-target and, as far as possible, crowdsourced. This is a main lesson from Idanha.¹⁰

- **Transformational**

In the sense of breaking away from path dependencies. This is why place branding can be so valuable for places in transition — a game changer. In doing so, some policy concepts can be quite helpful to drive change, as it was in Idanha-a-Nova with the ideas of rural innovation and new ruralities. In this context, some gaps and disadvantages, such as remoteness, were strategically reinterpreted.

- **Distinctive**

Place narrative should be authentic [enrooted in the best of our own local identity and values] and emphasize where the city is unique and able to outstand. Duly assembled, this can be a gathering of local assets, [major and minor] achievements, flagship initiatives, emerging processes, untapped potentials, and innovation-oriented bold concepts to work on — in line to the captivating “Idanha Green Valley”.

¹⁰ Moreover, the resulting narrative laid the foundations for a stronger visual communication strategy for Idanha, an increasingly important asset in the highly visual world we live in.

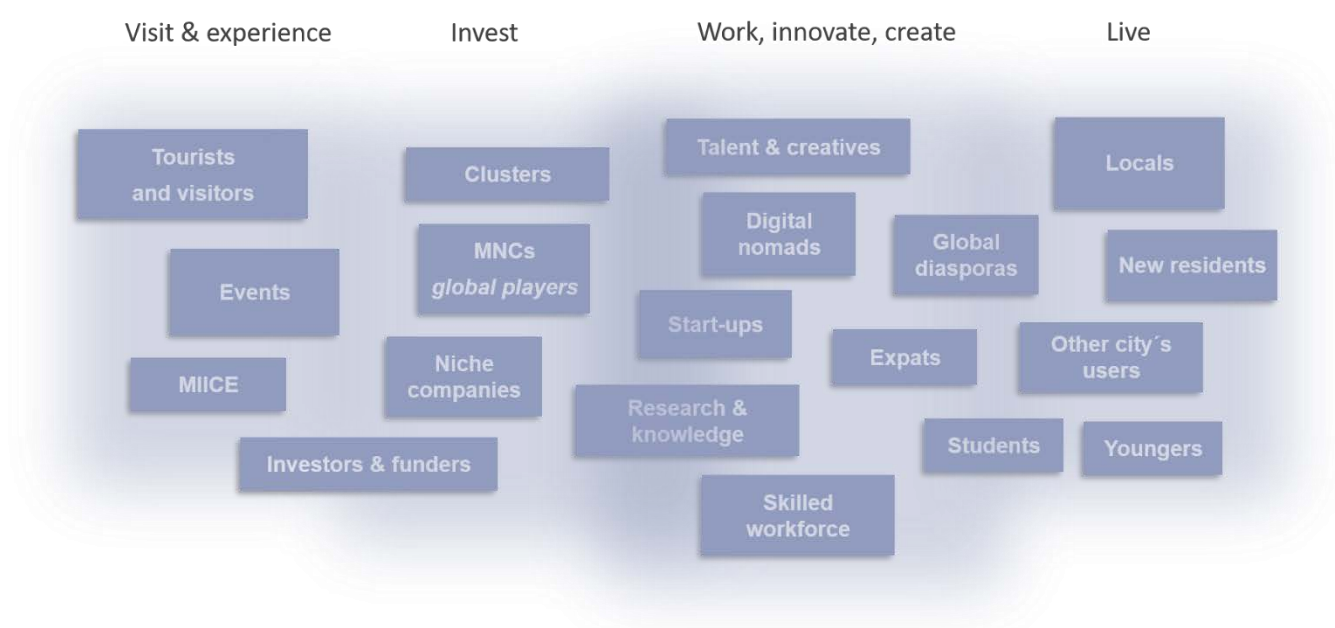
Table 4. Feeding transformational, distinctive and multi-target city narratives.

	Distinctive local assets	Achievements flagship initiatives	Untapped potential	Bold concepts to work on *	Distinctive Values	Unique Selling Points
Talent & workforce						
Investment						
Residents						
Visitors						

[*] In line to "Idanha Green Valley".

● Multi-target

By nature, innovative place branding is integrated, embracing most or at least a number of a city's target groups. The aim of *Recomeçar em Idanha* was primarily to build an engaging, forward-looking narrative, which was then distilled into specific arguments [value propositions] capable of connecting with different target groups — talent, investors, local businesses, new residents and ultimately the local population. Transfer cities should make their own choices about which specific target groups they want to address and consider in their attractiveness strategies.



- **Crowdsourced**

The time spent rethinking the city — the narrative building — is a precious opportunity to engage stakeholders and active citizens. Indeed, crowdsourcing and curating the city's story — the “let the city speak for itself” — is the new frontier in place branding. As the technical assistance team, Bloom Consulting invested significant time and effort in engaging as many stakeholders and citizens as possible in shaping a transformational narrative for Idanha.

Narrative as a brand filter: in-brand / off-brand

This works implicitly in the Idanha case, yet in other place branding practices it can be more explicit — for instance, in Oslo. In Idanha, for example, it helped to exhibit a strong consensus— spearheaded by the City Council — in opposition to plans to install massive photovoltaic plants in the municipality. The project is clearly “off-brand”, as it is neither consistent nor aligned with the local community's commitment to the bioeconomy and to landscape preservation and valorisation, both key elements of Idanha's new narrative.

Communications

Idanha's mix of communications included content creation and stories, website, short videos, brochures, social media, fam trips and press trips, events and an ambassador programme.

The message here is that building a [transformational] narrative is not enough if it is not communicated and disseminated. And in this respect, cities need to expand the concept of what a communication action is or can be, setting aside a [usually costly] campaign-based logic. There are also a number of unconventional ways —maybe subtler— to communicate the city. Significantly, *Recomeçar em Idanha* was publicly launched in 2015 in Lisbon, at the Higher Institute of Agronomy.

Other key components

Leadership

Political momentum is key to understanding why the Idanha experience succeeded. It marks the shift from simply being willing to face stagnation or decline to a firm determination to take action. This is what happened in Idanha-a-Nova in 2013, under the leadership of its then mayor, Armindo Jacinto. Therefore, local **political leadership** is a main component in the Idanha-based prototype, serving several main purposes:

- To ignite the change.
- To keep the implementation effort over a long-term period.
- To embed the attractiveness integrated approach into city government.
- To help move relevant stakeholders into the “engagement zone” and keep them actively involved in a shared agenda for attractiveness.

Action-led work strands

Idanha-a-Nova's core narrative was distilled into four structuring programmes, providing better greater focus and direction and serving as pathways for sustainable growth.¹¹ This allowed for more meaningful, target-specific conversations, but most importantly, it turned place branding into a form of **agile local development strategy**.¹²

Hence, this component is pivotal to understand the success of *Recomeçar em Idanha*. The action-led specific programmes work as **project pipelines** and, in a way, as local-based **innovation trajectories**. So, the Municipality of Idanha-a-Nova started rapidly gathering a number of potential projects and target-endorsements around those work programmes, to turn aspirations into tangible realities.

¹¹ What it comes to priority domains' identification to work on, the smart specialisation framework applied to cities [actually a framework to promote smart diversification] could be instrumental. In particular the idea of “entrepreneurial discovery process” [EDP]. That is, in the case of Idanha, setting a short range of sector-focused work programmes was addressed within the seminal place branding initiative. But other frameworks or techniques could be tried specifically for that task likewise.

¹² On the place branding-local development linkage, this short paper on a small municipality worth reading: Mel Garibaldi, *Beyond the logo: how place branding became kimba's economic development engine. A case study in transforming community identity into strategic competitive advantage*. Economic Development Journal, Vol 19, NO 1.

Just some examples regarding Idanha Green Valley: Sementes Vivas [free-pollinated, high-quality biological seeds for the international market], Azeite Egitânia and other firms started up in Idanha; Idanha officially recognised as Bio-Region in 2018; Food4Sustainability CoLAB created in 2019, in partnership with business accelerator Building Global Innovators and other stakeholders; Europe's Best Organic Bio-District in 2023... All this turned Idanha Green Valley **from an aspirational concept into a tangible reality**.

Support schemes

Financial and non-financial support schemes can make a significant difference to an attractiveness agenda. They determine the scope and pace of the change it seeks to promote. Idanha-a-Nova initially deployed permitting facilities and local tax incentives, particularly during the first years of implementation, and, above all, “Idanha Try”, a soft-landing initiative in its own right — a type of support scheme commonly used in attractiveness and invest-in strategies.

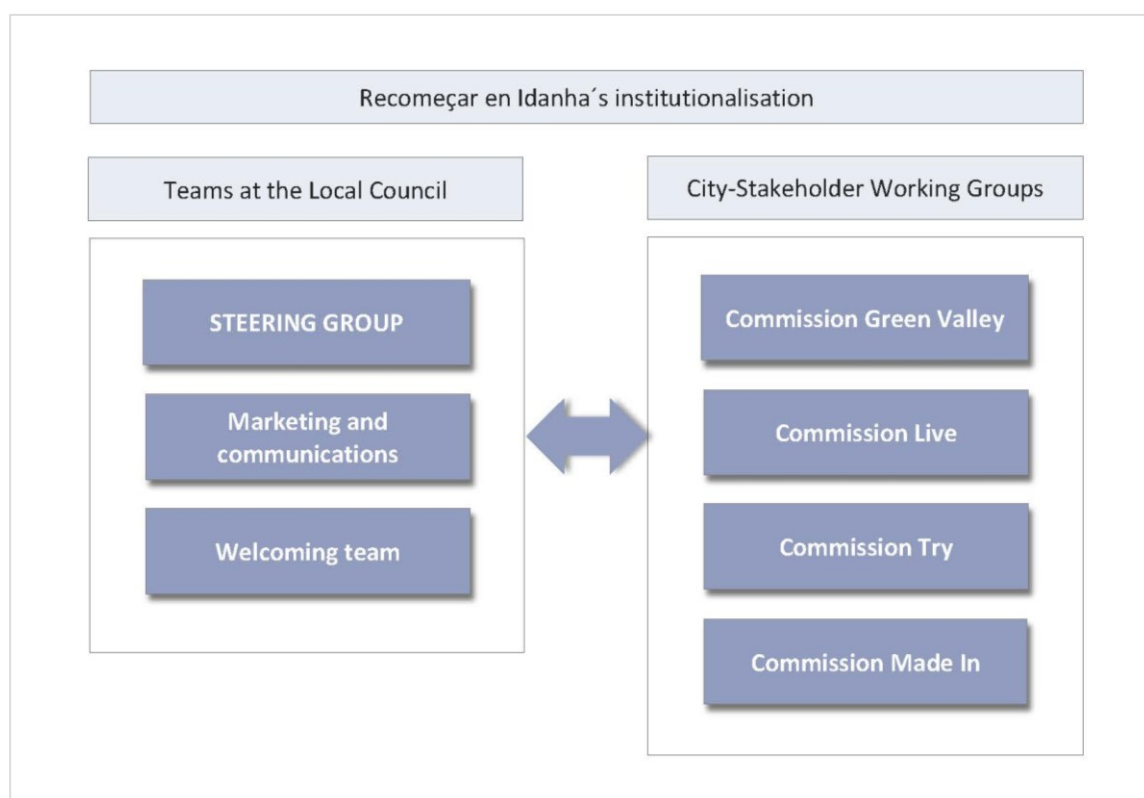
Funding is a major issue for small and mid-sized cities. This is why **fundraising** is explicitly considered in the RE:START prototype, to fuel both support schemes and communication actions. In this respect, vertical multi-level governance has much to contribute, as a way to orchestrate different funding sources and opportunities. This should include initiatives and programmes at national and EU level, which can also provide enabling frameworks by offering guidance, learning opportunities and, ultimately, funding.

Institutionalisation

By nature, innovative place branding is cross-cutting and multistakeholder. It therefore entails an organisational challenge, and that's why the adaptation of Idanha's good practice will demand working in two directions.

- **Embedding attractiveness [approach and function] into city government.** This will likely demand some organisation adjustments. In this regard, prior self-audit and subsequent proposals could cover items such as staff's profiles and capabilities [including those related to strategic communications], dedicated teams [duly mandated] and workflows [able to cross silos of competences].
- **Setting a dedicated collaborative platform.** A strategic partnership, which can adopt different forms. It can be entrusted for different purposes —from consultation and co-production to co-delivery and monitoring. In this vein, the URBACT Local Groups could be addressed as a seed for then well-established local alliance for attractiveness.

To operationalise *Recomeçar em Idanha*, a small team was created inside the Municipal Council [also to ensure the alignment to other local sectoral policies and decisions], together with a stakeholder group to each of the four action-oriented programmes, to foster and monitor projects and concrete actions.



Monitoring and impact evaluation

Attractiveness needs for monitoring and continuous feedback. The Idanha dashboard included indicators on, *inter alia*, job creation, new firms and investment, net migration and population growth, information requirements about Idanha and media coverage.

Bloom Consulting was not only involved in supporting the elaboration of Restart in Idanha, but also in monitoring its progress and impact. To this end, two comparable surveys were conducted: the first in 2014, prior to the implementation of the strategy, and the second in 2025, ten years after. They showed that Idanha's value proposition had gained significantly greater recognition over this period. When asked, "Would you ever consider living in Idanha-a-Nova?", 22% of respondents gave an affirmative answer in 2014, compared with 70% in 2025.

Room for improvement

As said above, the prototype should serve transfer cities to shape their attractiveness agendas, by getting inspiration from the Idanha case. But likewise, it is a valid framework for Idanha to improve —or even revamp if the case— its own practice for the next 10 years. The new political cycle in the Local Council that is led by Idanha-a-Nova mayor Elza Gonçalves is a great opportunity for it.

Table 5. Potential avenues for good practice's improvement

Type of improvement	Where to look at	What to do
Gaps	What is missing or insufficiently developed.	Improvement by filling existing gaps.
Hindering factors	Framework conditions that may be constraining the full impact or effectiveness of the programme.	Improvement by creating more enabling local framework conditions.
Underperformance	Elements that have not delivered as expected or have lost momentum over time.	Improvement by reinvigorating or redesigning selected components.
Untapped potential	Assets, new emerging processes, new opportunities... that could be better leveraged to enhance and update the city's narrative.	Improvement by revisiting the city's narrative and subsequent value propositions.
New conceptual opportunities	New policy concepts and approaches that may have emerged in recent years and could help strengthen the strategy's foundations and even get funding.	Improvement by refining the good practice's conceptual foundations.

Based on the model above, URBACT lead expert's preliminary assessment has identified a number of possible opportunities for improvement that may be considered:

- **From strong leadership to well-established institutionalisation.**

Political leadership was key to ignite the change and keep the implementation over a long-term period. But strong leadership without proper governance may lead to weakness and one-person dependency.

In this context, by governance we mean well-established institutionalisation. This certainly happened during the first years of *Recomeçar em Idanha*, in two directions: i) embedding the strategy into the Municipal Council, through a dedicated, small team; ii) creating a multi-stakeholder working group for each of the four programmes, to follow-up projects and initiatives. However, at some point, both key elements in any attractiveness agenda lost momentum or were simply deactivated. Today, proper governance and institutionalisation is a clear gap to fill.

- **Placing the local population at the first row, as main target group.**

The people of Idanha perceived the initiative as misaligned with their interests and felt excluded. In reality, it was more a communication failure rather than a conscious gap.

Place branding should not be something disconnected to the local population. On the contrary, it has proved to be a useful framework to enhance social cohesion and raise sense of place. This time, the local population —the *Idanheses*— should be targeted more explicitly.

- **Mix of communications**

It's another key component of the original model that needs to be reinvigorated, through a conscious communication plan, including a renovated website at the core. The communication effort, aimed at promoting conversations with the city's target groups, should be sustained over time.

- **Clear and well-publicised support schemes**

The attractiveness agenda can be supported in a variety of ways, ranging from soft incentives and framework conditions [access to new workplaces, workforce upskilling & reskilling, housing rehabilitation, reinforcement of local value chains, etc.] to ad-hoc financial or tax incentives. In any case, an offering of this kind must be made visible and properly publicised. Idanha could reinvigorate a welcome incentive package for the relocation of firms and new residents, applicable if aligned with the city's narrative.

- **Prospecting linkages to other related programmes at national level**

To seek alignment, foster learning, access funding opportunities, or simply enhance Idanha's buzz capacity. For instance, one of these programmes might be *Emprego Interior MAIS* (financial incentives for workers relocating to less populated inland regions), deepening work relations with StartUP Portugal, or securing wider visibility for innovative rural areas within the AICEP strategy (Portuguese Trade & Investment Agency).

- **Refining *Recomeçar em Idanha* under the spotlight of new emerging policy concepts and frameworks.**

Beyond rural innovation, which nonetheless remains relevant and current. For example, the Idanha-a-Nova model is very close to the New European Bauhaus spirit, and such relatedness could be turned into more funding opportunities.

There is also room for introducing other complementary frameworks and tools, while keeping *Recomeçar* under the innovative place branding umbrella. Cluster development & cluster branding could work in this way, in order to provide sound management and perspective to the Idanha Green Valley and the Bio-Region work programme.

- **Need for Idanha to organize its mentoring capacity according to its condition as a world-class benchmark**

Idanha-a-Nova has enough background to contribute actively to current global conversations on rural innovation, rural proofing, or new resident attraction. By organising its mentoring capacity, we mean combining Municipal Council's in-house staff, relevant stakeholders and external expertise—creating a task force aimed at spreading the "Idanha way" of place attractiveness.

This would enable the Idanha case to gain greater visibility within learning frameworks and communities of practice related to rural attractiveness, such as the Harnessing Talent Platform or the Startup Village Forum.

Jonadi [Italy]

The city

Jonadi is a small municipality of 4,674 inhabitants in the province of Vibo Valentia, Calabria. Despite the wider demographic decline affecting the region, Jonadi has almost doubled its population over the past 25 years, largely due to nearby Vibo Valentia's suburbanisation — young couples attracted by more affordable housing and the opportunity to live in a countryside setting. As a result, Jonadi is now among Italy's youngest municipalities.

The area has a distinctive geographical position, overlooking the Apennines to one side and the Tyrrhenian coast, the Sicilian Sea and the Strait of Messina to the other. Jonadi sees itself as an “urban-rural village”, and strengthening the linkage between both dimensions, urban and rural, is at the core of its local development approach. This is reflected, for example, in how the municipality is experimenting with shared mobility formulas, or the Eco-Park of the Vibonese, a sustainable-food initiative involving 29 municipalities and led by Jonadi.

Policy challenges

Jonadi's central challenge is to turn demographic growth into a sustainable long-term capacity to attract, retain and regenerate talent. As a small Calabrian municipality, it remains exposed to the wider brain-drain dynamics affecting young people who leave for education or employment. Its attractiveness approach goes therefore beyond conventional talent attraction and is organised around three simple propositions:

- STAY – creating better opportunities and conditions for residents who already live in Jonadi.
- RETURN – reconnecting with the people who have left to study or work and creating opportunities for their return.
- ARRIVE – attracting visitors and new residents, including people seeking opportunities to work, create a business and settle in the municipality.

This long-term approach combines strategic communication, social infrastructure, accessible technology and community networks to create a more supportive environment for people at different stages of their relationship with the municipality. Other key challenges include:

- Reactivating the depopulated historic village of Nao for cultural, social and residential activities. To understand the challenge, almost half of Nao's building stock is either severely dilapidated or abandoned.¹³
- Strengthening the municipality's green and cultural attractiveness through better urban-rural linkage and infrastructure. This includes innovative welfare models and assessing the local impacts of climate change.

Local framework conditions and ongoing initiatives

Jonadi is pursuing this agenda with a very small local administration of only 15 staff and limited support from the provincial level. Against these constraints, the municipality has developed a strongly locally driven approach under the leadership of Mayor Fabio Signoretta, with a particular focus on young people, European cooperation and community engagement.

Two visionary initiatives are worth noting with regard to the place attractiveness approach:

- Torno Giù – “The Agora of Those Who Return”, focused on young Calabrian talent, particularly people who have left for study or work but retain strong ties to their homeland. Through debates, proposals, workshops, music and social activities, this annual event provides a space for those who left, returned or stayed to share experiences and ideas for the future. Over the past four years, this initiative has become a visible local response to depopulation and the loss of sense of place.
- Borgo Erasmus / WILLage – “The Village That Will Be”, It's a large-scale initiative which seeks to reactivate Nao through youth participation, European mobility and the involvement of local associations. The approach combines the regeneration of disused public spaces with social innovation, international exchange and accessible technology. The Erasmus+ project brings young people from across Europe into the historic village, while the “Let's Bring Art” project uses community-designed creative interventions to improve public spaces. Erasmus STAY further connects young people with international study and volunteering experience to local training, storytelling, mentoring and exchanges.

WILLage also provides the basis for Jonadi's ambition to transform Nao into a “Smart digital hub” and the first “Erasmus Village”. An AI-totem capable of communicating in all EU languages is intended to facilitate access to information and services, share community stories and memories. The project has received national recognition through the City Vision award.

¹³ This situation also affects many other historic villages and small municipalities across Calabria, which have been severely impacted by massive migration and population ageing.

Contribution capacities and learning needs ¹⁴



Jonadi's distinctive contribution lies in its community-led, youth-centred approach to place attractiveness and how it is embedding the urban-rural linkage into local development. The municipality is particularly relevant in the following areas:

- Talent attraction & retention: the STAY–RETURN–ARRIVE framework, combined with European mobility, youth housing and old town regeneration offers a model for small municipalities seeking to reconnect with young people and attract new residents.
- Community-led development. The city has set the Council of Associations and Volunteering bringing together 17 non-profit organisations. This platform is evolving towards a living lab approach, based on a quintuple helix model of its own —public sphere (rights driven), private sphere (profit driven), cognitive (knowledge driven), organised and non-organised civil society spheres (values driven).
- Youth engagement. For instance, Jonadi's "Young people today, citizens tomorrow" approach, to place youngsters at the core of the local green change.

¹⁴ The spider charts of this report map the self-diagnosis carried out by the RE:START cities regarding their background and experience: no experience [value 1], beginner [value 2], experienced performer [3] and innovator [4]. See table 6 as well.

Loutraki [Greece]

The city

Loutraki–Perachora–Agioi Theodoroi [22,016 inhabitants, of which 12,213 live in the city of Loutraki] is located at the entrance gate of Peloponnese, 80 km from Athens and 8 km from Corinth. Thanks to this strategic position, it functions as a key interface between the Attica metropolitan area and the wider Peloponnese region.

The municipality features a blend of coastal, peri-urban, and mountainous areas, alongside settlements with distinct identities — Loutraki, Perachora, Isthmia and Agioi Theodoroi. This spatial diversity presents both opportunities and challenges regarding territorial cohesion, balanced development and service provision.

The local economy combines services, tourism-related activities, manufacturing and energy-related activities in Agioi Theodoroi. While tourism remains central, the municipality faces high seasonality. During peak summer months, the actual population exceeds 100,000, creating significant pressure on infrastructure, services and local resources.

In this context, a key strategic priority for the Municipality is shifting from a model based on short-term visitation towards a more balanced and sustainable model that supports permanent residency, quality of life and year-round economic activity. To this end, the Municipality is working to improve living conditions, promote new economic opportunities, and boosting attractiveness for young people, families, and remote workers.

Additionally, the Municipality is gradually strengthening its profile in areas related to sustainability and innovation, including participation in European initiatives such as the TRIĒRĒS (TRIERES-h2) project, which promotes a local green hydrogen ecosystem, clean energy transition and sustainable mobility. Loutraki stands as a clear case of a mature tourist destination seeking to redefine its identity and evolve into a more balanced and liveable urban model.

Policy challenges

The core challenge the Municipality is facing lies in the gap between its strong brand as a tourism destination and its limited capacity to function as a place of permanent residence. This affects its ability to attract and retain population, while creating structural imbalances across demographic, economic and spatial dynamics.

In other words, while Loutraki is widely recognised as a destination, this success also creates pressure related to seasonality, infrastructure demand and the limited development of year-round economic activity. The Municipality needs for a change of perspective, to transition towards a more balanced and resident-oriented development approach.

Meanwhile, spatial disparities persist within the Municipality. Economic activity, services and population are mainly concentrated in coastal areas, particularly in Loutraki, while inland settlements experience weaker development dynamics. Strengthening the functional links between these areas is essential for achieving more territorial cohesion.

Local framework conditions and ongoing initiatives

Achieving this transition will require coordinated action across policy areas and active stakeholder engagement. Mayor Georgios Gkionis and his Communication Office are called to play a key role. Although small, this Office brings experienced staff with background in tactical communications, digital media and social media strategy. Furthermore, the Municipality is currently developing a set of strategies, planning tools, and projects that, duly aligned, can be leveraged to repositioning the city through an integrated attractiveness approach:

- Local urban plan: defines land use, development zones, and spatial priorities, providing a key opportunity to embed resident-oriented policies into spatial planning.
- Sustainable urban mobility plan: focuses on accessibility, walkability, and urban connectivity, directly enhancing everyday quality of life.
- Loutraki's waterfront redevelopment: this flagship project is working as a pilot to demonstrate how spatial transformation can support place branding, reinforce local identity, and improve the urban experience for residents and visitors alike.
- Town-centre retail district: aimed at strengthening the local economy and fostering a more vibrant, year-round urban life.
- Green transition and innovation initiatives: promotes a green hydrogen ecosystem in the wider Corinth area, reinforcing its image as an innovation hub capable of attracting skilled professionals and investment.
- Loutraki Thermal Spa: leveraging the city's historical background as a thermal center, this publicly owned enterprise provides a bold narrative connecting health, wellbeing, quality of life and long-term residency. The city also stands out for its medical services and sports facilities.
- Visit Loutraki: a multi-stakeholder body responsible for tourism marketing and destination management, with a growing focus on major events.

Contribution capacities and learning needs



- Loutraki has accumulated extensive experience in tourism, events, and destination management. Hopefully, this specialisation should not hinder the adoption of a more integrated manner to branding and communicating the city.
- In parallel, the Municipality has strengthened its capacity in strategic planning and complex project delivery—evidenced by the sustainable mobility plan and waterfront redevelopment—providing a solid asset for long-term place-based transformation.
- Since 2011, the Municipality operates as a unified administrative structure, combining Loutraki, Perachora and Agioi Theodoroi. Managing distinct local identities and dynamics within this framework offers first-hand experience in inter-municipal cooperation.
- The Municipality also benefits from an environment favourable to investment and business, supported by its strategic position and key industrial and energy-related actors. While investment attraction is still evolving, the area displays growing capacity to foster business development and knowledge-based activities.

Finally, the Municipality demonstrates rising expertise in stakeholder engagement and communications, backed by the active role of the Mayor's communication office in using communication as a strategic lever to shape local identity and drive urban repositioning.

Marina Alta [Spain]

The area

The Mancomunitat Comarcal de la Marina Alta [MACMA] is an association of 35 local councils in the Marina Alta comarca [sub-provincial territorial area], located in the province of Alicante, on Spain's eastern Mediterranean coast. The area combines major territorial assets —around 70 km of coastline, protected natural areas, mountain and valley landscapes, strong cultural heritage and identity, and internationally recognised gastronomy. It's far from homogeneous, comprising three different spatial settings and dynamics:

The coastal area concentrates tourism development, services, highest visibility and a large share of the economic activity. It is a rapidly growing strip, accounting for 63% of the area's overall population and including the largest cities, such as Dénia, Xàbia and Benissa.

An intermediate area, accounting for 29% of the population, with a more mixed profile and less clearly defined positioning. It includes a number of mid-sized cities [Ondara, Pedreguer...] linked to commercial and productive functions but increasingly evolving into a commuter belt.

The inland rural area, accounting for 8% of the population, comprises small villages exposed to ageing and outmigration, as well as vulnerabilities in terms of services, accessibility and local economic opportunities. They represent the most fragile part of the county.

Policy challenges

- Uneven development. The main challenge facing MACMA is the county's complex territorial imbalance. Marina Alta combines areas of strong growth potential with municipalities experiencing demographic fragility and reduced capacity to retain people. Uneven development is therefore the challenge most closely reflecting Marina Alta's reality and the most relevant entry point for RE:START.
- Talent development trap. Young people and working-age residents value Marina Alta highly for its landscape, climate, culture and quality of life. Yet this positive image does not always translate into real opportunities to stay, particularly in the rural area. Over there, young people often leave because of limited employment and housing opportunities, weak mobility connections and lack of good conditions to start up. The challenge is therefore not only attracting people from outside, but primarily to

ensure that local people have a realistic chance to stay, return and develop their life projects in their homeland.

- Positioning beyond tourism destination. Marina Alta is widely recognised as a Mediterranean coastal destination, but this image does not fully reflect the area's complexity or its true aims and aspirations. MACMA is not seeking to reinforce a coastal tourism-driven growth model¹⁵ but how to move from a predominantly visitor-oriented image and narrative towards a broader, multidimensional concept of attractiveness.

In short, for MACMA, place attractiveness is primarily about the capacity to retain population, reconnect opportunities across space and support a more cohesive future for all municipalities in the Marina Alta.

Local framework conditions and ongoing initiatives

MACMA is the supramunicipal public authority, with a Plenary [political council], a Governing Council and a Technical Committee. It is well positioned to boost an agenda on place attractiveness by mobilising its existing technical capacities and collaborative networks in areas such as sustainable development, rural development, tourism governance, culture and local identity, youth, project management and communications, backed by its current president, Pedreguer Mayor Sergi Ferrús.

Several strategies, approaches and planning tools can be leveraged for this purpose:

- Pla Estratègic Comarcal de la Marina Alta. Conceived to clarify and promote shared public policies across the comarca through a collaborative methodology.
- Pla de Dinamització i Governança Turística. Seeking to diversify tourism beyond the coastline by strengthening rural areas, landscape valorisation and sustainable dynamics, positioning Marina Alta as a more balanced destination.
- Pla Jove de la Marina Alta. Addressing a broad set of conditions relevant to talent retention, including mobility, employment, housing, education and participation.
- MACMA is also actively working with the concept of “new rurality” to empower inland areas and create future-oriented pathways.
- Finally, beyond MACMA's action framework, the launch of the “Alianza Viva de la Marina Alta” in 2026 is worth noting: a multi-stakeholder collaborative platform with a mission closely aligned with place attractiveness.

¹⁵ According to MACMA, Marina Alta records one of the lowest average income in the Valencia Region, while also pointing to precarious employment, particularly among women and young people. This suggests that tourism-led growth does not automatically translate into inclusive prosperity and territorial cohesion.

Contribution capacities and learning needs



Marina Alta brings a strong background and experience in horizontal multi-level governance, urban-rural linkages, youth policies and regenerative and sustainable tourism.

- MACMA itself is a public body based on intermunicipal cooperation. Over time, this collaborative structure has evolved from a primarily service-coordination role towards shared territorial planning and common long-term strategies.
- In parallel, the area has developed a strong network of civic associations and purpose-oriented multi-stakeholder platforms. The latest, launched in 2026, is the Alianza Viva de la Marina Alta, with a mission aligned with area attractiveness.
- Within its broader goal of promoting greater territorial cohesion, MACMA is actively engaged in urban-rural linkages and landscape valorisation as a means of promoting environmental values, local identity and new opportunities.
- Youth engagement. Through the county-wide Pla Jove and the thematic multi-stakeholder platform Xarxa Jove Comarcal de la Marina Alta.
- Regenerative and sustainable tourism. Working across ecotourism, rural tourism, environmental education and territorial recovery.

Nyborg [Denmark]

The city

Nyborg is a municipality [kommune] of 32,329 inhabitants on the island of Funen [Fyn], in central Denmark; 17,990 people live in the main city. Its identity combines a distinctive historical role with a strategic location and strong natural assets. Nyborg was Denmark's first royal residence and played an important role in the early development of democracy, with the first Danish parliament established there among the earliest parliaments in Europe. Nyborg Castle [UNESCO World Heritage], the historic Town Hall and the main church remain the city's dominant historic landmarks. The municipality also benefits from excellent beaches, a marina and attractive natural scenery.

The construction of the Great Belt bridge in 1998 transformed Nyborg's main role from a ferry gateway —with a related ferry-based economy— to a permanent East–West transport hub, improving its accessibility to Copenhagen, Zealand and Jutland substantially. Both, centrality and accessibility, are today's major advantages that have supported a strong MICE sector [meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions], with seaside and forest-based hotels combining conference facilities with leisure opportunities.

Policy challenges

- “Live in Nyborg” as a first priority, raising the local population's sense of place and attracting new residents, while targeting investment and visitors alike.
- Promoting greater connectedness between the historic city centre the harbour area, the scenic seafront and the suburban residential areas. This is not an easy challenge, given the physical barrier created by a main highway crossing the city.
- Responding to emerging signs of depopulation and declining purchasing power by developing a more strategic approach to attracting new residents.
- Strengthening the urban vitality of the historic city centre. It is growing but slowly, and the expectation is that the reopening of the Nyborg Castle in 2028 can work as a catalyst for this area and the wider city.
- Clarifying and strengthening Nyborg's attractiveness narrative. The city considers its potential and “value propositions” to the city's different target groups are insufficiently known, and its current storytelling unclear.

In this regard, Nyborg can be seen as a city in transition looking for greater cohesion and direction. In this attempt place attractiveness, as an integrated approach driven by innovative city branding, can be suitable and instrumental to refine Nyborg's current long-term urban development strategy.

Local framework conditions and ongoing initiatives

Nyborg has recently strengthened its strategic approach to urban development, which has been a big step. The Department of Strategic Development and Business, which was fully established in 2025, is leading the Kommune's participation in RE:START. This unit reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer and the political Finance Committee and works closely with tourism, culture & leisure and urban planning departments.

It's worth noting that the current Strategic Urban Development Plan tackles four areas:

- Attracting new residents —cooperation with investors and landowners for more attractive building plots; branding and frameworks for family living; community's identity and development.
- Experience —site-specific events bringing the UNESCO World Heritage to life [e.g. Medieval Market, Democracy Festival, Christmas in the Old Royal City]; more vibrant urban life; and exploring ways for better citizen involvement.
- Identity —building and development of a more compelling city narrative, duly distilled according to different audiences, e.g. city of summertime city, city of culture, shopping spot.
- Connection —stronger physical and functional links between the historic city centre and the harbour area, and between culture-nature-street life.

The municipality is now seeking to move from strategy towards implementation. It's an ongoing process aimed at making the strategy more relatable and easier to communicate, so that it can be owned and lived across municipal departments and in citizens' everyday lives. Nyborg Kommune is also experimenting with placemaking and more consistent citizen participation, while planning a relevant platform for stakeholder involvement.

In this context, the municipality's current financial situation could be a hindering factor. Substantial resource cuts and staff reductions are taking place at a time of organisational change, potentially slowing the strategic work. The municipality links these pressures partly to demographic change —a growing elderly population increases demand for public services while tax income is affected by a decline of the employment in well-paid jobs.

Contribution capacities and learning needs



On a transnational peer-learning context, Nyborg stands out and can contribute on the following items:

- Strategic urban development, and the ability to connect a decided long-term strategy with a dedicated strategic team.
- Stakeholder involvement and participatory approaches, with experience engaging civil society through multiple methods.
- Heritage-driven urban revitalisation, supported by several renewal projects and a masterplan for cultural heritage.
- Linking urban development with nature and landscape, drawing on experience in outdoor activities and urban planning.
- Transforming culture, through the adaptive reuse of the *Bastionen* [an iconic theatre from the 19th century] and the development of events and cultural activities across organisations and with stakeholders.
- Destination management, sustainable tourism and events, backed by long-term experience and cooperation with local and national organisations. The city is home to a strong MICE sector.

Khotyn [Ukraine]

The city

Khotyn urban territorial community [17,742 people] is located in the Dnistrovskiy district of Chernivtsi region, on the bank of the Dniester River and 80 km from the Romanian border. It includes Khotyn city [about 9,000 inhabitants] and 10 villages.

The city's main asset is the Khotyn Fortress, one of the best-preserved medieval fortifications in Eastern Europe and the region's main cultural magnet. The local economy is dominated by agriculture and food processing. In terms of skilled employment, however, healthcare stands out, with two remarkable facilities: Khotyn Primary Health Care Center and Khotyn Polyclinic Hospital, which is among the five best in the region. The community's educational infrastructure is remarkable likewise.

The full-scale invasion is now conditioning everything. Demographically, on the one hand, it is reducing the resident population through migration and war mobilisation, particularly affecting the economically active population. On the other hand, since February 2022, about 10,000 internally displaced persons [IDPs] have arrived in Khotyn community seeking a relatively safer place. Consequently, this has placed considerable pressure on the community's social and critical infrastructures. The combination of these factors makes demographic stability particularly difficult to achieve. Economically, the activity has declined due to disruptions to logistical chains and a decrease in the country's investment attractiveness as a result of the deteriorating security situation.

Policy challenges

In this context, policy challenges are twofold: responding in the short term to the major disruption imposed by the full-scale invasion, while simultaneously preparing for the post-war period. This is particularly challenging. The reality of war is so far-reaching that a clear differentiation between short- and long-term goals is not an option; the two are interwoven, with blurred boundaries.

Short-term priorities concern social protection for displaced people, medical assistance and the safeguarding of basic infrastructure, particularly energy.

As for the overall long-term goal, the aim is simply "creating a comfortable urban community for living, business and recreation", according to Khotyn Local Council. This vision is

articulated through three main goals: social [improving social infrastructure to provide high-quality services to community residents, from healthcare to education], economic [supporting local businesses and attracting investment] and resilience [reconstructing and building critical infrastructure, including water, sewage and heat supply].

The idea of “cities and places in transition” provides Khotyn with a useful framework for rethinking community development in a context of demographic change and war recovery. Anyway, the Local Council seeks to move from an adaptive model towards a more proactive approach to place-based development.

Within this framework, retaining and attracting talent will be key to responding to youth outflow and ageing. The Council plans to explore approaches to creating a favourable environment for professional development, entrepreneurship, lifelong learning and the integration of young people into the local economy, with particular emphasis on creating opportunities for those who return after studying or working outside the community.

Other challenges relate to balanced and inclusive spatial development, heritage valorisation, community identity and full development of the visitor economy.

Local framework conditions and ongoing initiatives

To build an agenda around the concept of attractiveness, the Economic Development and International Cooperation Department of Khotyn City Council is expected to play a central role, supported by Mayor Andrii Dranchuk and First Deputy Mayor Danylo Biletskyi. A number of milestones and ongoing processes already point in this direction:

- Strategic planning. The main figure is the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Khotyn Territorial Community 2021–2027.
- Investment side. Main asset is the “Khotyn Invest” industrial park [13.7 ha], equipped with a business hub and co-working space.
- Visitor side. Tourism is gradually expanding, driven by new spots and events —the arboretum, Bilivtsi’s lavender field, the largest in Ukraine, etc. Furthermore, in 2025 the Municipality co-founded Ponizzia as Destination Management Organisation (DMO), together with other municipalities of the region.
- Multi-level governance. To strengthen Khotyn’s attractiveness, there are expectations to involve the Chernivtsi Regional State Administration, in particular Chernivts Regional Development Agency.

Contribution capacities and learning needs



Among others, Khotyn stands out in two key capabilities: extraordinary urban resilience, securing population services in times of crisis, and a proactive fundraising strategy, tightly linked to investment attraction.

- **Resilience.** As a Ukrainian municipality, Khotyn demonstrates exceptional urban resilience. Its experience offers invaluable insights for local authorities navigating severe crises, uncertainty, and turbulent times.
- **Fundraising and resource mobilisation.** In a context of acute scarcity of local public funding, Khotyn City Council has established robust capacities in attracting funding, particularly from the EU and donor institutions. Proof of that is the signature of 22 cooperation agreements so far, with municipalities across 12 countries —Germany, Poland, Romania, Albania, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Moldova, and Sweden. These international partnerships foster exchanges in a variety of domains such as education, youth, culture, employment, lifelong learning and environmental sustainability.

Potential for cross-learning

Understanding-Adapting-Reusing Idanha-a-Nova's good practice will certainly be the backbone of the RE:START transfer journey. Nonetheless, the aim is trying to go beyond one-way learning and creating a framework for multi-lateral cross-learning as well. At this point, it is worth recalling that RE:START will confront different spatial contexts — rural areas, intermediate regions and predominantly urban areas — and different local policy challenges, which makes this a double challenge.

The table 6, on the next page, offers an accurate mapping of the Network in terms of **learning needs** and **contribution capacities**. Partner cities were asked to self-diagnose their background and experience across a list of topics drawn from the playbook which might be expected in strategies aimed at boosting the attractiveness of mid-sized cities. For each topic, cities assessed their level of experience according to four categories: no experience, beginner, experienced performer and innovator.

The result offers an inventory of remarkable experiences that can activate 1:1 conversations and exchanges between the partner cities. An overview of this as follows:

Governance

Place attractiveness must work as an overarching, integrated approach for the city. In a way, **Idanha-a-Nova's** good practice came to fill gaps in local strategic planning, providing a forward-looking vision and better direction to the municipality. In the realm of working with a strategic and integrated approach, the network demonstrates a strong collective foundation. **Nyborg** represents an exceptional model through its newly established Department of Strategic Development and Business, which operates directly under the executive level to align urban planning, flagship projects, tourism and business development and citizen involvement.

Next step for all is turning integrated strategic planning into a real capacity to break competence silos and work across different city departments, in particular economic development, tourism and urban planning. To help on this, political momentum is key, in order to embed the attractiveness approach into local government and then keep the implementation effort for a long-term period. In this regard, the great commitment and participation from mayors and elected representatives in the RE:START transfer journey is a good start.

[...]

Table 6. Contribution capacities and learning needs.

Topics	Relevance	Background and experience					
	Average 1 to 5	Idanha	Jonadi	Loutraki	Marina Alta	Nyborg	Khotyn
Cross-cutting / Governance							
Strategic urban development	4.7						
Strategic communication [city branding]	4.5						
Breaking competence silos	4.3						
Stakeholder involvement	4.5						
Multi-level governance & funding	4.7						
Inter-municipal cooperation	4.7						
Talent / Startup, Create, Work							
Talent attraction & retention	4.0						
Engaging diasporas and return migration	3.3						
New workplaces	3.3						
Skills & workforce development	4.0						
Making migration work for decline regions	3.0						
Investment / Invest							
Investment & knowledge attraction	4.5						
Cluster development & cluster branding	3.3						
Residents / Live							
Old town revitalisation	4.0						
Urban-rural linkage. Landscape valorisation	4.3						
Housing [out of the box housing formulas]	4.2						
Transforming culture	4.2						
Youth engagement	4.0						
Securing quality population services	4.5						
Visitors / Experience							
Destination management	4.5						
Regenerative/sustainable tourism	4.5						
Events	4.5						

Relevance: average score of the 6 partner cities on a scale from 1 [initial low interest or relevance of this topic for my city] to 5 [high interest].

Background and experience	
No experience	Our city has no practice in this field.
Beginner	Our city has taken some steps into this field, but cannot exhibit significant results so far. We are on the way.
Experienced performer	After different initiatives and projects, we've reached a position at the mainstream practice in this field. We can exhibit bold results.
Innovator	It's a priority theme, in which we're following our own innovative pathway. Besides bold results, we outstand or are at the forefront in this field.

[...]

Attractiveness is about strategic communication, and in this field the Mayor's Communication Office of **Loutraki** is in good position to share vision and expertise. Attractiveness is also a multi-stakeholder task, and in this point **Jonadi** provides a highly innovative, community-led governance framework, with a focus on the youngers. The Council of Associations and Volunteering is at core of this framework, which is now evolving towards a living lab approach, grounded in a unique quintuple helix model.

Inter-municipal cooperation can be relevant to get critical mass and more powerful arguments to buzz and attract, in particular when you are small. A standout performer in horizontal multi-level governance is **MACMA-Marina Alta**, whose experience in coordinating tourism strategies, youth policies and cultural initiatives across 35 local councils provides a benchmark in this field.

Finally, when it comes to fundraising, **Khotyn** has developed an unparalleled expertise, evidenced by 22 international cooperation agreements across 12 countries

Talent and investment

Talent attraction & retention emerges as a critical priority across the network, with some valuable operational frameworks. First one is the own **Idanha-a-Nova's** good practice, having talent & investment as the absolutely main target. Likewise, **Jonadi** stands out as an innovator in this field, through its structured STAY–RETURN–ARRIVE vision, seeking to counter brain drain. Within this framework, the initiative Torno Giù – The Agora of Those

Who Return is noteworthy, as a pioneering practice in diaspora engagement, creating physical and social spaces to reconnect with young talent living abroad.

On another vein, clusters, as future-oriented productive & knowledge priority domains, can be extremely useful to provide focus for the city's efforts on investment attraction. To some extent, Idanha Green Valley and its Bio-Region work programme can be conceptualized as **cluster development and cluster branding**. This experience can be helpful, for instance to Loutraki to develop cluster-based roadmaps around bold concepts like Wellness [expanding its assets linked to thermalism, sports and nature] or Green Hydrogen.

Residents

Liveability is a precondition to attract and retain, and it is key to consciously target the local population within the attractiveness agenda. The capacities to enhance liveability [adapted here to the context of small and medium-sized cities] are richly distributed across the partner cities.

Historic centres work as hubs for social and economic activity, attracting residents, visitors and entrepreneurs alike.¹⁶ **Nyborg** is quite involved in the heritage-driven revitalisation of the city centre and trying to give a city perspective to its heritage landmarks; **Jonadi**'s visionary plan to regenerate the derelict and almost abandoned small village of Nao is impressive. They are bravely testing a mix of youth-centred approach, out-of-the-box housing formulas, street art, social initiatives and even the international mobility that is fuelled by the Erasmus initiative, all to ultimately shape the "Borgo Erasmus" project.

Together with the built environment, landscape —cultural and natural— has proved to be a precious source of uniqueness in most RE:START municipalities; a key asset to raise sense of place and to those looking for new lifestyles. Thus, it makes sense addressing landscape valorisation as one of the conditions to care for in an attractiveness agenda. **Marina Alta** is a primary reference on this, together with Jonadi, which presents itself under the tagline of "urban-rural village".

Along with housing, securing quality population services, education and healthcare in particular, is a prerequisite for place attractiveness, and here most RE:START cities excel. A special mention to **Idanha-a-Nova** —providing high-quality education to youngers, even a University campus, and innovative solutions specifically adapted to low-density areas— and **Khotyn**. The Ukrainian city has responded brilliantly to the enormous challenge of integrating over 10,000 displaced persons escaping war, providing them not only with basic housing, healthcare, and social services, but also with targeted support for education and entrepreneurship.

¹⁶ This is a main lesson RE:START cities got from Cork, Ireland, during the 2026 URBACT Summer University.

Visitors

Most partner cities demonstrate extensive experience in tourism and events, while actively seeking to transition from short-term seasonal visitation to more sustainable and resident-oriented models. **Loutraki** brings robust management structures [Visit Loutraki] and could show a path to **Khotyn**, which is starting with its own DMO, called Ponizzia, based on inter-municipal cooperation. Loutraki, which brings a distinctive position as a thermal city, is now boosting an agenda of major national and international events, on culture and sports, well suited to the concept of wellness the city is working on.

Leveraging its significant background in the MICE sector and a number of key heritage-driven events, **Nyborg** is now building up a wider and more consistent experience-oriented destination management strategy, also as a way to feed urban vibe.

Finally, along with Idanha, which stands out in nature tourism, **MACMA-Marina Alta** is a leading practitioner in regenerative and sustainable tourism, with concrete strategies and initiatives aimed at diversifying tourism away from the overstretched coastal strip toward inland natural and cultural assets.

Stakeholder mobilisation

Stakeholder groups

All RE:START cities are eager to involve relevant stakeholders to boost city attractiveness through the adapted transfer of Idanha-a-Nova's good practice, while making the most of the state-of-the-art approaches in this field. Half of the partners will set up their URBACT Local Groups [ULG] from scratch [Idanha-a-Nova, Loutraki, Khotyn], while the other half will leverage, to a large extent, existing collaborative platforms or dynamics [Jonadi, Marina Alta, Nyborg]. To some of them, this process can be addressed as an opportunity to refine their own participatory approaches, or in any case, to set the basis for a robust City Alliance for Attractiveness, beyond the RE:START project.

To help on this, a matrix for **stakeholder mapping** has been delivered, crossing quintuple helix categories¹⁷ with RE:START's own thematic strands —those commonly associated to

¹⁷ Being the natural environment the fifth helix, a vital dimension in today's place-based development, regardless of the theme.

place attractiveness [table 7]. At the time of this report, all cities have already identified quite a few number of potential stakeholders.

There are still some gaps to fill, in terms of underrepresented categories, which involve engaging creative talent where possible [Idanha, Khotyn], local media [Idanha], nearby universities and knowledge centres —not necessarily from the own local context [Jonadi, Nyborg, Khotyn], some regional or provincial authority to secure broader support [Nyborg] or achieving a more diversified business sector representation across different economic activities [Marina Alta].

Table 7. Grid for stakeholder mapping crossing the quintuple helix model with RE:START thematic strands.

	Public sector	Private sector	Academia and research	Civil society	Environment and place
Economic development and Invest-in units			N/A	N/A	N/A
Destination/tourism management organisations			N/A	N/A	N/A
Major cultural entities and events			N/A	N/A	
DirComs from key facilities [logistics hubs, tech parks...]			N/A	N/A	
Main and niche firms. Business associations	N/A		N/A	N/A	
Civic platforms	N/A	N/A	N/A		
Creative agencies and freelancers	N/A		N/A	N/A	
Media and local marketers			N/A	N/A	N/A
Province or regional authorities		N/A	N/A	N/A	
Higher education institutions	N/A	N/A		N/A	

N/A: Not Applicable.

Next step will be moving the shortlisted stakeholders to the **active engagement zone**, in particular those relevant —some call them “robust actors” — but, for some reason, reluctant or hesitant to take a stake in the process.

To that aim, being able to build up a truly compelling **shared purpose**, tailored to every stakeholder or group of them, will be key to engage actively. Moreover, stakeholders should clearly perceive the RE:START policy challenge is strategic and top priority, strongly backed by the mayor and his/her team.

ULG formats

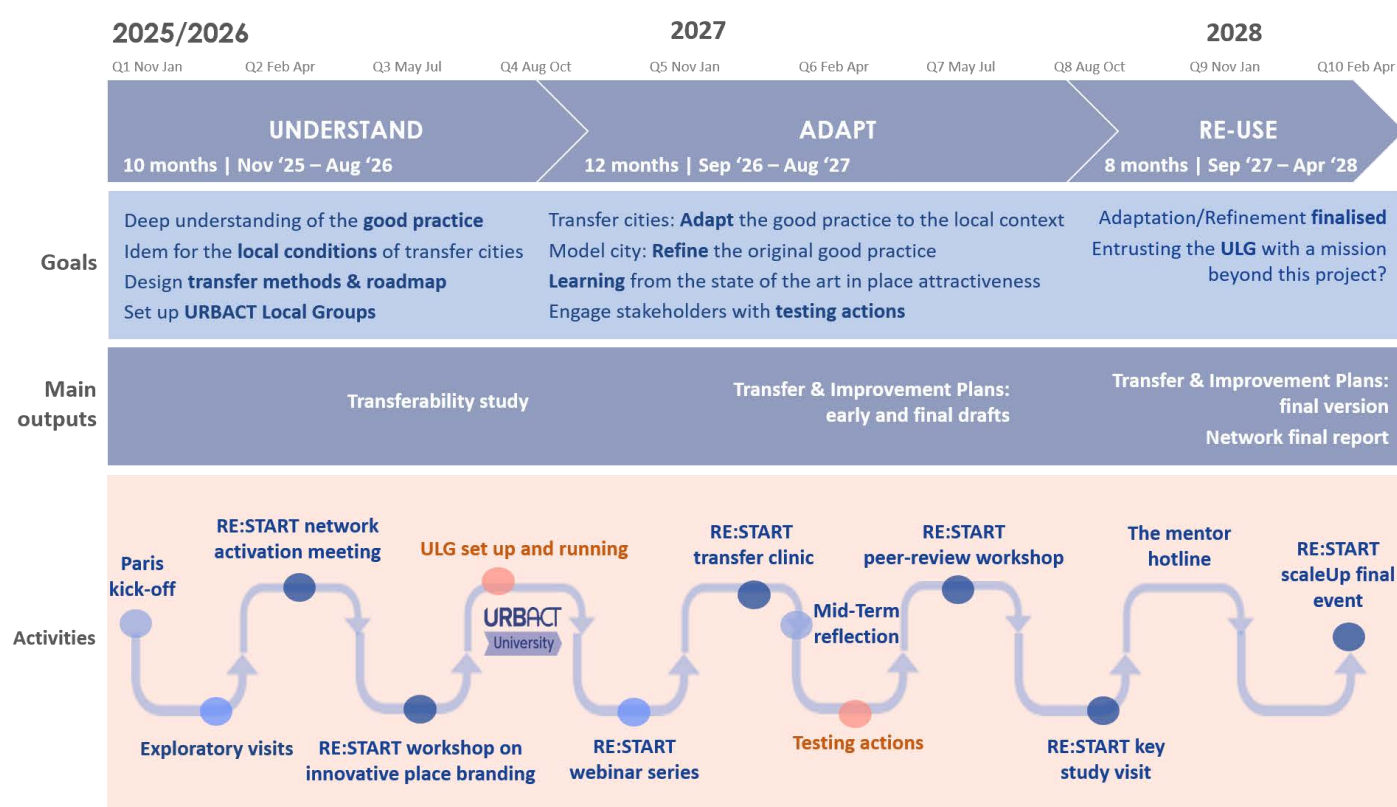
There have been talks and discussions on the formats best adapted to the strategic nature of place attractiveness and local capabilities, with some partners drafting preliminary designs.

For instance, **Marina Alta** is envisaging a multi-layered ULG structure adapted to the supramunicipal scale of the comarca and the three distinct spatial settings of the area — coastal, intermediate, and inland rural. So, rather than a single discussion group, the ULG is expected to operate as an articulated system, comprising operational coordination [driven by MACMA technical staff alongside external expert support], political-strategic validation [a kind of extended steering group combining political representation from MACMA’s governance structure with key stakeholders], and area-based discussion [three multi-stakeholder working groups —coastal, intermediate, and inland rural— channelling their proposals to the steering group].

Idanha-a-Nova would follow a similar structure. On the ground, five thematic city-stakeholder Working Groups will organize discussion and co-creation. The themes will be: i) community, governance, and territorial cohesion; ii) economy, employment, education, and innovation; iii) agriculture, food, and locally-based resources; iv) tourism, heritage, nature, and thermalism; v) rural landscapes and villages. Above this level, a Local Council Committee will work on integrating and cross-referencing the working groups’ contributions, ensuring the overall strategy is sound and consistent. On top, a Strategic Forum —conceived as a broad-based participatory event— will bring together public authorities [local, regional, and national] and the wider community. This forum will provide further discussion, build consensus, and pave the way for multi-level governance. The RE:START local team will provide overall facilitation and operational coordination.

Transfer roadmap

Duly framed into the Understand-Adapt-ReUse URBACT sequence for Transfer Networks, the 30-month RE:START journey has been well traced. Eight transnational meetings and activities to provide the involved cities with hands-on learning and food for thought for the work on drafting their Plans on place attractiveness.¹⁸



- **Network Activation Meeting.** Idanha-a-Nova [PT], March 24-25 2026. First in person gathering shaped as an immersive learning [presentations, exchanges with local stakeholders, visits to landmarks] on Idanha's good practice, along with sessions on partners' state of play and expectations.
- **Workshop on Innovative Place Branding.** Nyborg [DK], June 17-18 2026. As this practice is at the heart of *Recomeçar em Idanha*, understanding its real meaning and scope is pivotal, since many still see this practice simply as a matter of logos and

¹⁸ Improvement plan for Idanha-a-Nova and Transfer plans for the other participating cities.

campaigns. The workshop will provide hands-on content on transformational narratives, city imagery, city's target groups and mix of communications.

- **Webinar Series.** From October 2026 to January 2027. Four webinars on hot topics related to place attractiveness selected by the partner cities, e.g. next gen workplaces in small and mid-sized cities, out of the box housing formulas, talent attraction. For every selected topic, each 2-hour webinar will bring emerging concepts and trends, enabling factors, funding opportunities and case studies. This activity will be open to anyone interested.
- **Transfer Clinic.** Marina Alta [ES]. February 23-24 2027. Focused on the organisational aspects that are needed to embed attractiveness into city government —skills, breaking competence silos, multilevel governance as funding orchestration, leadership, monitoring. It will be the occasion for a discussion on potential testing actions.
- **Peer-Review Workshop.** Jonadi [IT]. May 2027. An unquestionable exercise in peer-learning frameworks. Ours will focus on reviewing the early drafts of Transfer and Improvement Plans, in two stages, in-workshop and off-workshop tasks and activities. Some sessions will be devoted to the network's mid-term reflection.
- **Key Study Visit.** October 2027. As a window to other successful experience, other than Idanha, to enrich the transfer process and enhance the RE:START prototype on place attractiveness. Dundee would be a preliminary choice. The Scottish city has undergone a huge transformation from old industrialism, and in that transition place branding were extensively used as a main facilitator, even as a change accelerator.
- **RE:START Mentor Hotline.** From Oct 2027 onwards. First conceived for Idanha to organize its mentoring capacities as model city, then extended to embrace all network partner's most outstanding capacities. Thus, shaping a kind of transnational mentoring service on place attractiveness for mid-sized cities, as part of the RE:START legacy. The idea is to organize a protocol for rapid response to any query about Idanha's enhanced good practice [the prototype] and its possible adaptations. Whoever receives a consultation, a coordinated response and further follow up would be delivered by this mentor hotline.
- **ScaleUp Final Event.** Loutraki [EL], March 2028. Partners and other invited cities will showcase their experience on boosting attractiveness and adapting & reusing Idanha's good practice. It's the time to take stock of the new knowledge and insights accumulated over the RE:START transfer journey, and hopefully a moment to celebrate the end of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine together with the Khotyn team.



Idanha-a-Nova – village of Monsanto.



Jonadi - new resident telling the mayor his relocation story



City of Loutraki



La Marina Alta



Nyborg – Town Hall and RE:START transnational group



City of Khotyn

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