

Villages – now and in the future

17 recommendations to support
and strengthen viable villages



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Proximity to landscapes and nature is just one of the potentials of villages.

Preface by the chairman

Viable villages throughout Denmark creating a framework for people of all age groups to lead an active and fulfilling life. This is the committee's vision for Danish villages in 2030.

In its work leading to recommendations for how to realise this vision, the committee has visited villages around Denmark. We have met people who live their daily lives in villages - with all the joys and challenges this brings. People for whom the village, with its community and unity, creates a framework for a fulfilling life, close to landscapes and nature.

We have experienced energy and enthusiasm, dedication and inventiveness; confirming that villages have a lot to offer, today and in the future.

But villages are also under pressure! Due to recent developments, we are facing a markedly different reality today than we did just a few decades ago. The big cities, offering jobs and educational opportunities, attract the young in particular. Furthermore, recent years have seen a centralisation of public services, and private businesses have moved away from the villages.

For many villages and rural areas, this trend is a serious challenge. Populations have been steadily declining for several years; schools, businesses and shops

have closed down; and rural areas are characterised by empty houses falling into decay. This downward spiral can only be reversed by society as a whole. We need action now!

Some villages face a future of fewer, more scattered houses, but these houses will have more attractive locations, and residents will be able to share facilities with neighbouring villages. It may be slightly further to neighbours, but light will shine through people's windows in the evening.

Other villages have the potential for a growing population and a higher number of local workplaces, as well as better opportunities to make use of the surrounding nature and landscape values.

Common to these two trends is that, irrespective of whether they will have more or fewer residents in the future, villages can provide a basis for a good life, with a strong local community. Many villages are already considering how to address future developments, and more will follow suit.

In the following pages, the committee presents a total of 17 recommendations to promote and strengthen viable villages. The committee is convinced that rural development and promotion of viable villages call for collaboration between central government, municipalities, residents and the local business community.

My hope is that the committee's recommendations will be implemented to ensure growth in Denmark and safeguard viable villages throughout the country for many years to come. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the committee's work.



Jens Kr. A. Møller

April 2018

Jens Kr. A. Møller

Introduction

More than a million Danes live in villages with up to 1,000 inhabitants. Active and viable villages can be found in all parts of Denmark. The villages present challenges as well potentials, and the best way to understand these is to see them with your own eyes and meet the residents, who make the villages so attractive.

There is growth in Denmark. However, this growth is unevenly distributed in different parts of the country. Several villages and rural areas are experiencing positive developments, but these have occurred later and are not as rapid as in the larger cities. Furthermore, many villages are facing challenges in significant areas.

As part of the agreement between the Danish government, the Social Democratic Party and the Danish People's Party concerning modernisation of the Planning Act, it was decided to set up a committee to bring renewed focus on the future of Danish villages.

The parties to the agreement agreed to bring renewed focus on the future of Danish villages, and how to ensure their viability. Consequently, following a discussion with the parties to the agreement, the Minister for Industry, Business and Financial Affairs set up a committee to address the issue.

The committee was set up by Brian Mikkelsen, Minister for Industry, Business and Financial Affairs, in July 2017, and the committee's work resulted in 17 specific recommendations to support and strengthen viable villages.

The work of the committee

The committee for viable villages considered it essential to experience first hand the great diversity in villages across Denmark. Furthermore, a priority was to start a debate about the future of villages and to allow stakeholder organisations, private individuals etc. to provide input to the committee. The committee has therefore held meetings in around Denmark, met with mayors and stakeholder organisations, participated in public events in Jutland and on Zealand and involved citizens through Facebook etc.

These meetings around Denmark have helped the committee to identify challenges and opportunities, and to describe the characteristics of villages that have proven viable, including the characteristics of residents, newcomers, social and recreational activities, businesses, etc.

The committee visited six villages, each with different characteristics. However, common to all of them is that the residents have made a huge effort to make their village more attractive, and not least to tell the world all about it. For example, Vallekilde in Odsherred Municipality is a keen user of digital media, while Knebel in Syddjurs Municipality has attracted funds from Realdania, DGI (Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations) and the Danish Foundation for Culture and Sport Facilities to step up development through a village cluster project.

The villages visited by the committee have been portrayed by journalist Lars Winther and photographer Lars Aarø. The articles about the six villages are narratives describing life in the villages. The articles consist of photos and words that portray some of the people living in Denmark's viable villages.

Enjoy.



Members of the committee

The purpose of the committee's work is to make specific recommendations for the transition and renewal of villages to become more viable, and thereby contribute to the government's ambition of growth and development throughout Denmark.

Chairman

Jens Kr. A. Møller
CEO, DLR Kredit A/S

Other members

Steffen Damsgaard
Chairman, the Danish Council of Rural Districts

Susanne Hovmand-Simonsen
Former estate owner, Knuthenlund Estate

Ellen Højgaard Jensen
Director, Danish Town Planning Institute

Bent Jensen
CEO & Owner, LINAK

Laila Kildesgaard
Director, Local Government Denmark

Søren Møller
National chairman, DGI – Danish Gymnastics
and Sports Associations

John Wagner
Managing Director, De Samvirkende Købmænd
(Association of Danish Grocers)

Dorthe Winther
Chairman, Association of Danish Small Islands

Thorkild Ærø
Director, Vice Dean, Danish Building Research
Institute, Aalborg University

Development and challenges for villages

The transition from an agricultural society to an industrial, service and knowledge society has influenced current megatrends such as globalisation and urbanisation.

Villages originally emerged as small communities linked to agriculture. Over time, villages and their living conditions have changed along with societal developments. The agricultural sector, as well as the business structure in general, have changed, and so have villages. Villages have changed from being able cope on their own, with agriculture and small businesses as their economic locomotive, to the current situation in which they have lost much of their infrastructure and services such as schools and grocers.



While at national level, the Danish population has grown since 2000, the number of people living in villages and rural areas has declined. In particular, the open countryside is less densely populated.

There are many reasons for this. The trend in the agricultural sector has been towards larger and more efficient farms with considerably fewer employees, and this development has spread into other sectors as well. As a result, still more cottage businesses as well as industrial, service and trading enterprises, have moved away from the small villages and into the principal towns and cities in the municipality.

Furthermore, various national and international events in the period after 2000 have affected developments. The economic boom in the early 2000s was followed by a financial crisis that had a particularly profound effect on the labour and housing market in rural areas.

Furthermore, comprehensive political reforms have been implemented, e.g. a structural reform, a police reform and a hospital reform. In order to increase productivity, these reforms have led to the establishment of fewer and larger units located in cities. In the period following these reforms, many municipalities made similar decisions to merge and centralise municipal institutions such as schools, nursing homes and daycare centres, and this has weakened the villages even further.

What can influence village population figures?

2000

2017

Change in the number of people living in villages and built-up areas with up to 1,000 inhabitants in the period 2000-2017 and projection for the period 2017-2030. Source: Statistics Denmark and own calculations.

The geographical boundaries of the villages are dynamic and change over time. 21 villages had between 900 and 1,000 inhabitants in 2000, and more than 1,000 inhabitants in 2017. At the same time, six villages had between between 1,000 and 1,100 inhabitants in 2000 and less than 1,000 inhabitants in 2017. Thus, more villages are included in the figure for 2000 than for 2017. From 2006 and onwards, a new calculation method was introduced.

It is not possible to predict whether the trend of a steadily declining population in villages will reverse. However, it is likely that the gap between populations in villages compared with the rest of Denmark will widen up to 2030.

The committee has looked at two different projections or possible scenarios for the future in order to draw a picture of population developments in villages in the years to come. One of the projections assumes that the population trend in villages will follow the expected trend at national level up to 2030. The other projection assumes that the population trend seen since 2000 will continue unchanged up to 2030.

The projections should not be considered as estimates or forecasts for the actual development, but rather they have been made in order to illustrate possible developments up to 2030.

Note that significant differences may occur in developments within individual municipalities. There are numerous examples of viable villages with population growth, for example due to their proximity to a major city, strong local commitment, investment in infrastructure, realisation of local potentials, changes in business and employment conditions, or improvements in public or private services, etc.

That said, the current overall societal trends combined with changes in the composition of the population in villages are likely to cause the population gap between villages and Denmark as a whole to increase up to 2030.

2030

If the population trend in villages and rural areas follows the expected national trend.

If the population trend since 2000 continues unchanged.

Two scenarios for villages in 2030

Today, many villages are attractive places to live in. Factors such as good neighbourliness, proximity to nature and a strong local commitment are characteristic features of villages.

The diversity of villages we see today will continue in the future. However, the committee envisages two possible scenarios for the individual village. The scenarios have been simplified, but give a general idea of the different directions in which villages may develop.

The committee is of the opinion that, given the diversity of villages that we can see today, a large number of villages may fit the positive description of a village in 2030. Work to adapt and prepare villages for the future will very much depend on the individual village communities, whose commitment, local knowledge and capacity for development play a crucial role in securing a viable local community.

However, the committee's experience and population projections also show that commitment, local knowledge and capacity for development are not enough. The projections and the two scenarios call for a joint national and municipal effort to ensure a better demographic development and balance in villages going forward. This involves attracting new residents to the villages, while at the same time managing the declining population in many villages and the resulting need for transition.



The negative scenario

If nothing is done to address the consequences of continuing population decline in the village, challenges associated with a building stock of vacant, outdated or poorly maintained houses, closing down schools and shops, long commutes to work, etc. will reduce people's desire and possibility to live in the village. Continuing population decreases are thus very likely to result in "more of the same", i.e. a deteriorating building stock, a reduced range of local cultural and recreational activities, and longer distances to public and private services.

As the sum of social challenges, daily inconvenience and physical deterioration increases, more residents will probably reach a "tipping point", and consequently, a possible future scenario is that the challenges in the village will become even more serious up to 2030.

The positive scenario

The village has an attractive local environment with modern homes, an active housing market, an appropriate building stock with attractive locations, proximity to public and private services, greater mobility, employment opportunities, as well as possibilities to establish a business and strong social and cultural cohesion. The village and the surrounding area are attractive places to live and work, and the area attracts newcomers who reflect the community around the village and who often contribute to population growth in the area.

The village is an attractive place to stop as a visitor or a tourist, and any vacant and outdated houses do not disfigure the overall impression, the landscape values and nature. Living in the village is an active positive choice for existing as well as new residents, and residents have a good degree of certainty about their future and possible influence on development of the local area. The infrastructure, labour market, and public and private services may differ from the city, but not to an extent that, in itself, this causes people to opt out of living in the countryside.

A national trend calling for different solutions

Denmark has more than 1,000 village communities, and many of them are attractive today. Although the villages share some common features, they have their own unique potentials and challenges, and each individual village should be developed with this in mind.

The municipalities are important players in a locally oriented approach to developing the villages. In collaboration with residents and the local business community, the municipality must take a realistic approach to the prospects of the villages, based on their current situation and their location-based potential.

Focus should also be on treating the villages as part of a larger network; a cluster, which shares facilities such as sports centres, schools, etc., and which combines forces to develop the area in a common direction. The Danish government is another important player in securing several of the conditions for viable villages. The government should work to ensure a well-functioning regional labour market and regional educational opportunities.

Furthermore, the government should focus on business development, infrastructure and similar measures that take account of villages and rural areas with special challenges.

It is the committee's assessment that some areas are faced with challenges that are, or are becoming, so serious that tools are required to completely rethink the area, or to reconstruct it with regard to residents and business development. Such reconstruction will only be possible if the government and the relevant municipality work together. If no action is taken, the result will be a loss of human, cultural and material values.

More quality in villages

There are strong indications that the demographic shift from rural to urban areas is bound to continue. That said, the committee stresses that settling and living in a village must continue to be an attractive alternative.

A declining population, as seen in many areas today, is not necessarily a problem in itself. However, a massive depopulation or a rapidly changing population development calls for special attention, and this will increase the need to adapt and transition to a new economic, physical, social and demographic reality.

The committee is convinced that focus should be on safeguarding and developing the quality of villages. This can be achieved by focussing on the local potentials: nature, landscapes, peace and quiet, trust, local communities, gathering points such as the local grocer or sports centre, as well as other unique qualities typically associated with life in a village. Developing these potentials is crucial, because current residents demand them, and so too do potential newcomers.

Criteria and recommendations to support and strengthen viable villages

Rural development and promotion of viable villages call for collaboration between central government, municipalities, civil society and the local business community.

Maintaining the population size is not necessarily a goal in itself in all parts of Denmark. However, to prevent a loss of human, cultural and material values, we need to address the challenges of transition. Furthermore, we must not miss opportunities to create growth and quality of life in all parts of the country.

The committee has formulated a total of 17 recommendations to support and strengthen viable villages. According to the terms of reference for the committee, "follow-up on the recommendations must be carried out within the existing financial framework and budgets". In its work, the committee has identified a number of focus areas that the committee considers essential to ensure a better structural balance between rural and urban areas, and to promote work on viable villages. As a result, three of the recommendations involve considerable financial costs that exceed the committee's terms of reference. These recommendations concern enhanced efforts to demolish and renovate the housing stock, better digital infrastructure, and better access to the labour market.

The committee considers a village viable if, on its own or by interacting with other villages or larger cities, the village can provide its residents with various forms of modern housing, access to employment, possibilities to establish a business, social cohesion, proximity to public and private services, sports and leisure activities as well as transport and digital infrastructure so that the village is an attractive place to live with the potential to attract and retain new residents.

In this connection, the long-term population development, whether positive or negative, is not a decisive factor, as long as the village is assessed to be an attractive place to live and to have the potential to attract and retain new residents on an ongoing basis. Thus, the village does not have to attract new residents to an extent that causes the population to grow or to be maintained.

The committee's considerations about viability criteria have led to the conclusion that it is not possible to set up either a positive or a negative list of what makes a village viable or not viable. This depends on the aggregate of a number of circumstances, each of which affects the extent to which a village is an attractive place to live. If, overall, based on a sufficient number of criteria, a village is an attractive place to live, either in its own right or by interacting with other villages, then the village will be considered viable.

A village which experiences a decline in the population over a short period of time is not considered viable. In such villages, it may be appropriate to consider whether a special effort or transition is needed.

Four criteria for viable villages

The committee has identified four criteria that characterise viable villages.

- 1 An attractive local environment with modern housing, an appropriate building stock, and access to landscapes and nature**
- 2 Proximity to public and private services**
- 3 Access to employment and good possibilities to establish a business**
- 4 Social and cultural cohesion**

All four criteria do not have to be equally met in order for a village to be viable. A viable village may be so strong on one or several of the criteria that this makes up for the village being less strong on another or several other criteria. The assessment should not only relate to the individual village, but also to its interaction with nearby local communities, regional labour markets and principal towns and cities.

The committee is also of the opinion that it is crucial to take a strategic approach in order to succeed in developing an area. This has been clear in the villages visited by the committee. Small isolated initiatives with no overall strategic goal rarely have the impact needed to bring a sustainable boost to an area.

Based on the challenges experienced by many municipalities in villages and in the countryside, the committee considers it vital that municipalities take a strategic approach when prioritising and planning in relation to villages and their development.

In addition to the four criteria, the committee has formulated 17 recommendations for work on supporting and strengthening viable villages. Apart from the following three strategic recommendations, the remaining recommendations are distributed across the four criteria.

1. Strategic planning for the municipality's rural areas and villages

The committee recommends that the Planning Act should include an obligation for municipalities to make strategic planning for their villages and rural areas in overall municipal planning.

2. Assessment of individual villages and rural areas with a view to ensuring differentiated and targeted development

The committee recommends that the municipalities, in collaboration with the local communities, assess the state of individual rural areas or villages, their challenges and their opportunities, in order to ensure differentiated and targeted development of individual villages and rural areas.

3. Special efforts in designated reconstruction areas

The committee recommends that when a reconstruction plan with targets for the development of an area exists, areas facing considerable challenges (designated by the municipality as reconstruction areas) should have access to a catalogue of special efforts to support the ongoing transition to an area with qualities other than residents and businesses.

Assessment of the viability of villages and rural areas

The committee has designed a model for assessing the viability of villages. The model is based on the criteria considered by the committee as characteristic of a viable village.

It is recommended that the model be used in connection with assessing the state of villages, see recommendation 2. The texts under the individual steps describe the different phases in a negative development from being a viable and self-sustainable village to becoming an area in need of extensive reconstruction. In practice, the transition will be gradual, and local needs will vary considerably.

Self-sustainable area

The area has a continuous influx and outflow of residents, and houses are traded regularly. There is good access to the local and regional job markets, and poor access to public and private services is not a barrier for residents in the area. Furthermore, there are good leisure and cultural activities.

Physical and digital infrastructure is at a satisfactory level, and mobility is not seen as a limitation for residents.

Challenged area

The population is gradually declining, and the average age is increasing at a moderate rate. Only few jobs are being created, and maintaining existing jobs is a challenge. The housing market is characterised by prolonged rate of housing turnover and scattered vacant houses, but so far not by major physical decay.

There is uncertainty about the future supply of public and private services in the area, and this has an adverse effect on the number of residents; however, leisure and cultural activities are still relatively well functioning.

The residents have a reasonable degree of mobility, and the physical and digital infrastructure can be improved.

The committee believes that it will be necessary and appropriate for municipalities to classify villages and rural areas in order to carry out strategic work to develop villages and rural areas.

Severely challenged area

The average age is increasing and there is a continuous outflow of residents from the area. Apart from jobs in the agriculture sector, the range of local employment opportunities is modest, and access to the labour market is low. The rate of housing turnover is very low, and some properties are effectively regarded as unsaleable.

The area is characterised by vacant houses and a good deal of physical deterioration. Leisure and cultural activities are essentially non-existent, and there is no local grocery shop or supermarket.

The physical infrastructure is a hindrance to residents' mobility and to their access to the regional job market etc.

Reconstruction area

The challenge scenario of depopulation and deterioration indicates that the area has no immediate financial, physical or societal potentials that make it possible to preserve the area in its present form.

The structure of the area needs to be reconsidered, and the building stock demands considerable development. The reconstruction will focus on the potentials of the area, which may form the basis of developing the area in a new direction.

An attractive local environment with modern housing, an appropriate building stock, and access to landscapes and nature

4. Enhanced effort to demolish and renovate the housing stock

The committee recommends that the Pulje til landsbyfornyelse (Fund for Village Regeneration) be extended and increased from 2019 to a minimum of DKK 330 million annually for a ten-year period, and that, during the first half of this period, a new needs assessment be carried out to assess any additional financing requirements and adjustments to the use of the funds.

5. Extension of the BoligJobordningen (tax relief for cleaning and household improvements) to include demolition in rural zones

The committee recommends that the government extends the BoligJobordningen (tax relief for cleaning and household improvements) to also include wage costs for demolition of houses located in rural zones..

6. New methods of financing to develop the building stock

The committee recommends that an expert committee be established whose members possess knowledge about financing and villages' special needs for modernising their building stock. The aim is to design a model for combining private financing with public and/or philanthropic funding for renovation, rehabilitation and restructuring work, and possibly also demolition in villages and rural areas.

7. Possibility to relocate homes in the countryside

The committee recommends that a cross-ministerial working group be set up whose aim is to design a model for relocating homes in the countryside, e.g. with the possibility to establish demolition funds at municipal level. The objective of this scheme is that in the long term there will be fewer, but better homes in the countryside.

8. Adjustment and greater variation in the housing supply

The committee recommends that, in collaboration with the local community, the municipalities assess the housing needs in the municipality's villages and seek to reach a balance between the housing supply and the current demand. This includes support to establish a varied supply of rental and cooperative housing, for example for families and the elderly.

9. Better access to landscapes and nature

The committee recommends that, in their physical planning, the municipalities, in collaboration with landowners, make an effort to maintain and possibly improve accessibility to landscapes and nature as a special attraction and motivation for living in the village.

Proximity to public and private services

10. Longer-term planning of local public services

The committee recommends that municipalities take a longer-term perspective in planning the development of local public services so as to create predictability and certainty about the future level of service among residents and newcomers.

11. New public transport solutions

The committee recommends that the government and the municipalities collaborate on public transport planning that ensures satisfactory connections to and from villages, and that they focus future efforts on involving both private-sector and public-sector players in transport solutions.

12. Combining and sharing facilities and activities

The committee recommends that individual local communities focus more on exploiting the advantages of combining and sharing common facilities, recreational and leisure activities, public and private services, utilities, etc.

Access to employment and good opportunities to establish a business

13. Better digital infrastructure

The committee recommends that the Danish government continue its work to ensure mobile-phone coverage and roll out broadband in order to prepare rural areas for the future in relation to businesses as well as residents.

14. Business development focussing on location-based potentials

The committee recommends that municipalities' business promotion and business development initiatives focus particularly on existing facilities and location-based potentials in villages.

15. Increased labour market access

The committee recommends that the increased tax deduction for transport in remote municipalities (yderkommuner) should be continued after 2019, but that a working group be set up to submit a proposal for a more targeted scheme.

Social and cultural cohesion

16. Closer dialogue and collaboration between municipalities and local communities

The committee recommends that the development of villages be based on consultations between the municipality and local residents in order to ensure a broadly based development with a common direction, both with regard to physical planning and welfare solutions.

17. Stronger focus on facilities and activities that unite village communities

The committee recommends that, through funds from Landdistriktspuljen (rural district pool), the Rural Development Programme and the municipalities, the Danish government support existing and new common facilities for recreational and leisure activities, common meeting points and events, as well as possibilities for solutions based on the sharing economy.



The villages originally emerged as small communities linked to agriculture.

Horslunde keeps its vitality





In a small corner on the western fringe of the island of Lolland, the village of Horslunde has managed to create a upwards spiral, where its pretty buildings form a framework that attracts builders and entrepreneurs to the village.

Horslunde is used to a certain level of attention. The village won the village of the year award for east Denmark in 2009 and for all of Denmark in 2010. Furthermore, the village was selected as an Energi-landsby (energy village), and Realdania and Lolland Municipality together funded a series of energy-savings initiatives.

This positive attention was godsend after the village lost its status as the principal town of the then Ravnsborg Municipality in connection with the municipal reform in 2007. This development led to a loss of almost 200 jobs in and around the former town hall and to a relocation of several service functions. One person whose job was relocated was Ole Bruun; born and raised just outside Horslunde and employed in the municipality.

Awards raised spirits and increased solidarity

Horslunde changed its status from principal town to village in Lolland Municipality when the town hall was closed. The town civic association was on the verge of being closed down, but a public meeting was convened to ensure its continued existence, said Ole Bruun, chairman of the residents' association of Horslunde and its surrounding areas. New forces arrived, and almost by chance the town entered a competition held by the public service station TV2 East to become the best village in the region.

Winning the competition filled the town with pride, spirit and solidarity, all of which was strengthened the following year when the town was voted as the village of the year in all of Denmark. Titles that we've benefited from ever since, said Ole Bruun. Through dialogue with the municipality, the village found new uses for former municipal buildings, and most recently established a village park at the former sports stadium.

The estate agent needs more houses

The positive spirit has helped spark an upwards spiral which is attracting resourceful young people. This is confirmed by Ole Jørgensen, the local estate agent, who could easily sell more houses in Horslunde.

Even though the price per square metre in Horslunde is almost twice that of the surrounding villages, people are very interested in buying their next home here. Some places are suffering a downwards spiral, but Horslunde is going through positive developments, which attract house buyers who look after their property and create a good environment in the town, said Ole Jørgensen with reference to a price per square metre of just over DKK 5,000.

Builders stand united

One of the contractors of the town is Michael Hansen, who runs Horslunde El-service (electricians) with five employees. He has just taken over an abandoned factory building in the town, which is now being rebuilt to accommodate a workshop and office for his business. Of course, he is using the local bricklayer, Jan Romby, for the brickwork.

One of the benefits of running a business in a local community like Horslunde is that everyone knows each other, so we can help each other when new jobs come up. Therefore, we've established a small builders' club in Horslunde, where we meet three-four times a year, said Michael Hansen. Horslunde has a large plumbing and heating shop and a joiner/carpenter business, and these are also part of the electrician's network. Moreover, the town has two grocery shops, a pizzeria, a very popular baker, and a recently opened hair-dressing salon.

Two schools with small classes

Finally, Horslunde can trump in with two schools. The private Realskole and the municipal primary and lower secondary school, both with 8th, 9th and 10th grades (14-16-year-olds).

Susanne Højmark Rasmussen is the headmaster of the municipal school, and she sees many advantages of a small school in a small town.

There's always strong support when we hold events such as our harvest festival or Midsummer Eve festival. Support comes from inhabitants with and without children in the school, said the headmaster. The school also attracts families who prefer small classes, and there is a class for children with special needs.



Local builders in Horslunde have established a club to help each other.



Horslunde

- Around 675 inhabitants
- Situated 10 km northeast of Nakskov in western Lolland (Lolland Municipality)
- Businesses/institutions: Two grocery shops, several builders, two schools, a sports hall and sports ground
- Recreational activities and clubs: A diverse recreational and cultural life, various sports and leisure activities



The ferry between Spodsbjerg and Tårs links the islands of Lolland and Langeland.

Ebberup – a cohesive village





A school, recreational activities, a committed grocer and local enthusiasts serve as a good platform for family life in the village of Ebberup on west Funen.

Ebberup stands firmly on three legs. A good school, an active sports club, and a grocery shop that forms the shopping hub of the town. If one leg is removed, the stool will tip over. This is how Karin Christiansen sees Ebberup. And she knows the recent as well as the older history of the town, because she grew up here.

Odense was the place to be in her adolescent years when she trained as a teacher. However, when she had children, she began to see the qualities of her childhood home. With a job in Assens on west Funen, she once again landed in Ebberup. Here, local commitment brought her into the joint board for the school and daycare for which she has been the chairman for the past eight years.

You become particularly aware of the qualities of a small community when you have children. Ebberup is small enough for everyone to know each other – both children and parents. This means that we care about each other and take action if anyone is in trouble, said Karin Christiansen. The school is very important in her life: as the chairman of the board, as a parent and as a teacher.

The school works very well with committed parents and competent teachers. Furthermore, the sports clubs are right next to the school and are run by extremely dedicated people, so we have a fantastic environment for children, adults and pensioners. This environment helps create social cohesion in Ebberup, said Karin Christiansen, who also sees the pensioners as an important resource for the town.

They typically have the right attitude for a solid community, and many of them have helped build the sports hall by volunteering their labour and making donations. Therefore, they feel very strongly about the activities of the town, said Karin Christiansen, who hopes that Ebberup will be able to build retirement homes, so the pensioners can stay in the town.



Ebberup

- 1,300 inhabitants
- Situated 5 km southeast of Assens on west Funen
- Businesses/institutions:
A grocery shop, several builders, a large manufacturing company (Fipros), a municipal school (300 pupils), a sports hall and sports ground
- Recreational activities: Various sports and leisure activities built around Ebberup Hallerne sports hall

The grocer supplies it all

Another local enthusiast is Marlene Larsen, who plays handball and coaches the local girls' team. She also runs the town's grocery shop SPAR, and in Ebberup she is known as "SPAR-Marlene". Together with her husband, Jan Jørgensen, she has built a hub that has much more to offer than milk and sausages.

In addition to its range of 9,000 permanent products, the shop also has a large arts and craft department, a pharmacy and a post office. When visiting the shop, the local affiliation is very evident. Because of Christmas, the childminders of the town have decorated the shop with pictures of their children dressed as gnomes, and Christmas stockings from all the children in the town hang in the middle of the shop.

It's only natural for us that the shop has close ties to the school, the daycare institutions and the sports club. We try to make room for them all in the shop if they need to hand anything out – and we also sponsor them, she said. The town is ready to help the shop in return. Last summer, when SPAR invited the whole town to its 25-year anniversary at the sports hall, with food, bar, music and dancing, the sports club volunteered with 20 people.

It was so lovely – Jan and I hardly had to lift a finger, said Marlene with a smile on her face.

Even though the grocer is modest by nature, she is well aware that her shop plays a significant role in the popularity of the village in its catchment area spreading a radius of 15 km around the village all the way to Helnæs, where the last grocery shops are long gone. Yet she has never felt the competition more than now.

There is no more than 5 km to Assens, where there are several competitors. And nowadays, many people take their car to work, so we definitely have to work hard to hold on to our customers – especially our younger customers, she said.



The grocer in Ebberup is one of the gathering points in the town.

Nature and local projects attract resourceful newcomers to Mols





Mols i Udvikling (Mols in growth) is a network, where local interest groups from the 24 villages on the with others. As many as 24 project groups are active, and this helps create a sense of community and attracts resourceful residents.

With a 45-minute drive to Aarhus city centre, scenic Mols has for some years been able to attract new residents, many of whom are resourceful families with young children. Despite this, key figures from the 24 villages in the area showed that the number of inhabitants has decreased to about 3,800, and this means that there are also fewer children.

Therefore, in 2014, the municipality was about to implement a drastic savings plan. The plan proposed merging three daycare centres located near the school and closing down classes for the older children. Apparently, this threat was the spark that ignited a large group of creative souls in the area.

We held a public meeting to discuss what we could do to make our area more attractive to ourselves and to potential newcomers. Before the evening was over, the first six project groups had been established, and residents interested in a given project teamed up, said Jørgen Ørgaard, who is the Chairman of the Borgerforeningen og Distriktsrådet for Mols (civic association and district council of Mols).

Mols in growth

- Situated on the Djursland peninsula in west Denmark and includes Mols Bjerge National Park and Helgenæs peninsula on the south side of Djursland
- Part of Syddjurs Municipality
- The project involves about 3,800 people from 24 small villages
- The principal village, Knebel, has 600 inhabitants, a school, a sports hall, grocery shops, a pharmacy, a bank, etc.



The countryside in Syddjurs Municipality is well known for Mols Bjerge hills.

Mols in growth joins people together

Together with the school board, Molshallen sports hall and sports clubs, an umbrella organisation, Projekt Mols i Udvikling (Mols in growth project) was set up. This project is the umbrella organisation for the project groups, and these have subsequently mushroomed. The project was financed by the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations (DGI), Realdania and Syddjurs Municipality, and a process consultant has helped further speed up development in the area.

The aim of the national philanthropic association Realdania is to help improve life in the Danish countryside. Therefore, in 2015 Realdania launched five pilot projects with DGI. One of these pilot projects is Mols i Udvikling.

The individual project groups only have one coordinator who refers to the umbrella organisation. So there are no articles of association, boards of directors or other formalities that can smother small initiatives. This makes it very easy to set up a project, and the umbrella organisation can then help communicate the project on its website and on social media, said Jørgen Ørgaard. There are currently 24 active project groups spread all over Mols, and the more hobbyist of these include knitting clubs, shared gardens and hiking clubs.

Active communication group

Many of the project groups work with more overall targets in order to make the area attractive to newcomers. This applies for the communication group, and Sofie Saxtoft is one of the active members of the group. Together with her husband and three children, she moved from Frederiksberg in Copenhagen to Mols in summer 2017. On Mols, she is setting up a courses and culture business, although her voluntary work takes up much of her time.

Moving to Mols makes you realise that it's common and almost expected that you contribute to the community. And when so many people offer their efforts, it actually becomes a big thing, said Sofie Saxtoft. She has a degree in communication, and therefore it was only natural for her to help in the communication

group, which publicises many local activities via social media and websites.

I think that voluntary work is meaningful, while at the same time it has helped me to become part of the strong communities characterising this area, she said.

Chair of the blue square

Another local enthusiast is Louise Juul. Like many other of the families in this area, she and her family are newcomers from Aarhus – although this was ten years ago. Since then Louise, who works as an organisational psychologist, has been involved in a lot of voluntary association and club activities. Among other things, as chairman of the school board for four years.

Then I became a little fed up with all the political work relating to the school board. I needed a more hands-on project. When a small group of people had various ideas on how to develop our harbour in Knebelbro, I ended up chairing the project group, explained Louise Juul. The project started out as a modest dream of a small harbour bath, but has now developed into several ideas on how to develop the harbour, including a surfing area, a beach area, swimming lessons and other facilities that can be used as learning environments for the local school, Molsskolen.

All these ideas have to be coordinated with the existing association of boat owners and the marina, winter swimmers' club, sea scouts, kayak club, Syddjurs Municipality and the potential new users of the harbour, who together form Det blå torv (the blue square).

We've been lucky enough to get some money from the municipality and the local bank so we could hire a firm of architects, which will collate all the ideas and proposals in a preliminary project. And we're very curious to see what they come up with, she said. While they're waiting for the preliminary project, they can celebrate that the municipality has guaranteed that the older children in 8th, 9th and 10th grades will remain at Molsskolen.

Vallekilde strives for a strong community





Årets Landsby (village of the year) 2017 uses digital media to create meeting rooms and make arrangements between the residents of Vallekilde. This makes it easier for the residents to arrange meetings in the real world for a Friday afternoon beer, at the "repair café", at the Christmas fair and so on.

Over the years, Odsherred Municipality in northwest Zealand has faced a number of challenges. Outward migration and poor economy meant that in 2008 the municipality went into administration by the central government.

After trimming the municipal services, the municipality managed to escape administration in 2011, and since then it has managed to prosper on a number of important parameters. Therefore, in January 2018, Mayor Thomas Adelskov, was hopeful when he told the committee for viable villages about the municipality's experiences in creating attractive village communities.

Small initiatives with enormous impact

One initiative was several rounds of funding for urban renewal projects, where the municipality funded various projects for residents, such as community centres, playgrounds and demolition of abandoned properties. The point of departure for the municipality was commitment from local residents – both in establishing and in running the new initiatives. In several contexts, the funding was relatively low, even as little as DKK 25,000.

We've seen that the small villages can mobilise powerful forces, once they join a project. Large urban communities, such as Nykøbing Sjælland, may be more used to receiving services and funding automatically, said Thomas Adelskov.

Vallekilde rebuilds itself

Vallekilde is a good example of a village community that knows how to get a lot out of a little. Vallekilde is well known for its folk high school, which is still going strong, but otherwise the town has experienced the classic village downturn with the school, shops and other facilities closing down long ago.

Despite this, Vallekilde was awarded the Danish village of the year in 2017. This was very much thanks to the village's ability and desire to create social meeting points with new squares and beautification of small areas of the village. For example, Tingsted, was once a small, impassable thicket but it was transformed into a meeting point with cast tables, a shelter, a barbecue area and a play area. One of the residents involved in the project is Jacob Antvorskov.



Jacob Antvorskov moved to Vallekilde in 2007 and is very active in the town's social and recreational activities.

It was crazy how many volunteers we could get to turn up on our workdays. People contributed in many different ways – everything from cake for the workers to tractors and bobcats that could clear the vegetation, said Jacob Antvorskov enthusiastically.

However, this did not surprise the newcomer who moved to Vallekilde with his family from Frederiksberg in 2007. Since then, using digital media, he has added to the town's existing communities based in the church and folk high school. Digital media was one of the reasons that Vallekilde was named Årets Landsby (village of the year) in 2017, and that year the theme was digitisation.

Friday afternoon beer

We haven't invented any smart apps or new programmes. All we do is use simple digital solutions, such as texting and Facebook, to publicise activities and to communicate with each other, explained Jacob Antvorskov. The point of departure was a Facebook group, in which inhabitants took turns to host a Friday afternoon beer event, where people could meet for beer and crisps between 4pm and 6pm.

These events formed the basis for a tools and equipment bank, where you can advertise for things you need and people can borrow things from one another. You can also book our film projector for open-air film events – because every town with respect for itself has cinema, he said with a smile. He continued to list activities communicated on Facebook. A repair cafe, where everything can be fixed, notices from information boards around the village, which have been photographed and posted on Facebook, and chain text messages with offers from the Johnny Fisk fishmonger when he sells fresh fish on Sundays. In addition, there is information about private Christmas fairs in the homes of some of the inhabitants, for example.

These are only simple tools that allow us to meet in real life, because this is what a rural community is all about, concluded Jacob Antvorskov.



Neighbourliness, proximity to nature and strong local commitment are characteristic features of many viable villages.

Vallekilde

- Situated in Odsherred Municipality in northwest Zealand
- Around 130 households
- Around 2 km to the neighbouring town of Hørve with 2,500 inhabitants, shops, schools, daycare institutions, etc.

Living on the edge of the sea

The island of Fanø attracts new residents with good daycare institutions as well as culture, history and many recreational activities with resourceful residents.

Fanø wants to be more than just a beach and holiday homes. The 3,400 inhabitants of the second smallest municipality in Denmark believe that living on Fanø has qualities that ought to be attractive to many people. This is how Mayor Sofie Valbjørn views the island in early 2018. And it seems that many people agree with the newly appointed mayor, as in 2017 the municipality experienced the proportionately second highest number of newcomers in all of Denmark.

We've made a determined effort to attract families, for example by lowering the prices of daycare, and today we can offer childcare at rates that are less than half of many other municipalities, said Sofie Valbjørn, who is very pleased with this development. Tranquility, nature and a small village community seem to be a perfect cocktail for many families, especially when combined with a 12-minute ferry journey to the city of Esbjerg on the mainland. This allows inhabitants to pursue a career in the city – and to take part in more specialist leisure activities for children and adults.

This cocktail attracts many resourceful inhabitants to the island, and they come with a huge drive and appetite to launch new projects, said the mayor, who is proud of the island's 120 clubs and associations and 25 festivals with music, kites and knitting.



Mayor of Fanø Sofie Valbjørn in Nordby where the town hall is located. Photo: Fanø Municipality

Music with Fanø's DNA

One of Fanø's active inhabitants is Jesper Møller, 38, who has lived on Fanø for the past ten years. The former schoolteacher and musician used to live in Copenhagen, but a lovely girl from Fanø lured him back to west Jutland. He originally came from the Ribe area in southwest Jutland, where he was born and raised.

I suddenly became aware of the magnificent countryside in west Jutland. Being able to walk to the isolation of the dunes or moor in only ten minutes from your house is amazing, said Jesper Møller. First, he opened the Realen music venue in Nordby, and based on this, he tentatively started a music festival in 2012.



Jesper Møller in the countryside that lured him to Fanø.
Photo: Fanø Municipality

Fanø

- 3,400 permanent inhabitants
- The principal towns are Nordby (2,700 inhabitants) and Sønderho (300 inhabitants)
- The municipal school in Nordby has 450 children
- The business community on Fanø has many builders, who maintain the many holiday homes, and a number of service trades linked to tourism
- A 12-minute ferry service to Esbjerg every 20 minutes for most of the day

Since then, it has grown steadily, and today the festival runs over two days with more than 3,000 guests and 270 volunteers.

We tried to create a festival reflecting the culture of Fanø wherever possible; i.e. local produce like salmon and meat as well as local history. This makes this festival different from other festivals, and both guests and locals enjoy that, said Jesper Møller.

Knitting festival with 15,000 guests

Another well-known inhabitant of Fanø is Christel Seyfarth who runs her own knitting business with a shop in Nordby, book publications and knitting patterns. She also runs the knitting festival, which is well known far outside the borders of Denmark. Last year, the festival attracted 15,000 knitting enthusiasts (including their partners) to Fanø. This generated a DKK 30-40 million turnover for the shops, restaurants, holiday homes and hotels on the island.

We run the festival as a business, but we also benefit greatly from 30-40 local volunteers who sign up for the festival when we advertise for volunteers in the local newspaper, said Christel Seyfarth.

The many guests are part of the large influx of tourists that we experience every summer. We love the tourists and many of us make their living from them. But it's also nice to have the island to ourselves for the rest of the year, said Christel Seyfarth.

As a native, Christel Seyfarth grew up with the original culture of Fanø with folk dance, traditional costumes and sailors. And even though the native islanders are now in the minority as more newcomers come to Fanø, she is not afraid that the island will lose its identity.

We see that newcomers are very keen to be part of our traditions and culture to such a degree that it's almost too much. But we only laugh about it, said Christel Seyfarth.

Green centre and more nature will bring change to highway villages in north Jutland



Photo: Hjørring Municipality



A plan for greener villages will reverse the downward spiral in a number of small villages on the main road between Løkken and Hjørring.

A string of small villages have emerged along Løkkensvej; the main road between Løkken and Hjørring. Over the years, roads, bike paths and pavements have become wider so that nearly all the green areas in front of buildings along them have been squeezed out of town high streets.

As traffic has also increased, the attraction of the buildings along the street has slowly dropped, and many buildings are now empty and run-down. This sad first-hand impression rubs off on residential areas located further away from the high street.

Løkkensvej must live well

Hjørring Municipality is now trying to stop this trend with a pilot project Løkkensvej – lev godt, lad det gro (Løkkensvej – live well, let it grow). The project includes new perspectives on spatial planning in villages. Part of the project's DKK 7.5 million will be spent on creating an environment that removes run-down buildings, creates a green core around the main road, and provides accessible nature with paths in the parts of the town facing away from the main road.

We believe that it's possible to create an environment that people want to live in, even though the town is shrinking, said Mayor Arne Boelt. The project emphasises that towns without schools and shops require additional attention from the municipality.



Sdr. Rubjerg is a typical
"roadside town"

Focus areas Løkkensvej

– lev godt, lad det gro

(Løkkensvej

– live well, let it grow)

- Involvement of residents and stakeholders in planning
- Purchase of strategically selected properties and buildings for demolition
- Establishment of nature spots in villages and link to "next-door nature"
- Improvement of landscape and nature – and interconnected nature trails to neighbouring towns
- Physical beautification of the profile of Løkkensvej
- Increased safety and mobility on Løkkensvej
- The municipality has earmarked DKK 7,5 million for the project; 60% of which will be covered by central government

A 400-metre-long green town centre

The aim of the the town development is to narrow the main road through the town and make it more green with a new 400-metre-long town centre. The main road will be narrower and have winding bike paths and green vegetation.

It has to look pretty, and driving through Sdr. Rubjerg should be a positive experience. But first and foremost, residents should see this as a nice place to live, explained Bente Mouritzen from Hjørring Municipality. Like many other villages, the town is adjacent to fields. The first parts of the fields are relatively soft meadow soil, and therefore it is difficult for farmers to cultivate these areas profitably.

This edge will be included in a system of paths which, in the long term, will be expanded and it will be possible to connect the villages through an alternative and scenic system of paths, said Helle Lyngbak who works at Hjørring Municipality. This part of the plan has been challenging because of the conflict between planning legislation, agriculture legislation and nature conservation legislation, but in Hjørring, they believe that this can resolved.

Municipal commitment spreads

It is clear that Bente Mouritzen and her colleague, Helle Lyngbak, are committed and enthusiastic about the project on Løkkensvej. This goes for themselves and for the contacts they have established in Sdr. Rubjerg.

It's crucial that residents also invest resources in the project, so that they contribute to the upward spiral. Fortunately, people show great interest and willingness to help, said Bente Mouritzen with reference to the group in which seven local residents have regular contact to the municipality.



Sdr. Rubjerg

- 200 inhabitants
- Situated between Løkken (7 km) and Hjørring (13 km)
- The village has an inn, a couple of builders, a combined heat and power (CHP) plant and a civic association



Inhabitants of Sdr. Rubjerg want to remove run-down houses and create a green centre around the main road.
Photo: Hjørring Municipality

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– now and in the future

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