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# Centring older people in regional transformations

A toolkit for just transition regions

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# Centring older people in regional transformations – A toolkit for just transition regions

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## 1. Aims and scope

The share of older people in Europe is expected to increase rapidly in the coming decades, necessitating adequate planning measures at every level of government. To ensure that older people can participate in the transformation of regions and benefit equally, planning for an ageing population should be an integral part of implementing the just transition locally.

This toolkit provides a general outline of why older people should be central to planning for the just transition and introduces key action areas relevant to older people in Just Transition Fund (JTF) regions. It encourages local governments to identify and address the challenges relevant to their local context. Ultimately, the aim of this toolkit is to provide local actors with guidance on managing the just transition as the population ages.

In general, the toolkit defines older people as individuals over the age of 65, as per Eurostat documentation. The term ‘older people’ covers multiple generations – where relevant, reference is made to ‘very old people’, defined by Eurostat as individuals over the age of 85.

## 2. Who is this toolkit for?

The toolkit addresses local governments in JTF regions. It can also be a valuable resource for local actors interested in understanding and responding to the challenges of vulnerable groups, such as older people, in a just transition setting.

## 3. Older people in the EU

Eurostat estimates that 20.3% of the EU population – or 90.5 million people – was 65 years of age or older at the start of 2019. That number is bound to increase in the next decades, and by 2050 older people will make up almost one third (29.4%) of the EU population.<sup>1</sup> The growing share of older people will influence the economy of Member States, impacting government finances and potentially leading to an increase in retirement age as well as changes to pension provisions.<sup>2</sup> Analysts also assert that a growing segment of older people face fewer risks of poverty and social exclusion than younger generations, and that the development of a range of innovative social care services can provide a boost to the economy.<sup>3</sup>



The European Commission prioritises active ageing to “help people stay in charge of their own lives for as long as possible as they age and, where possible, to contribute to the economy and society.”<sup>4</sup> Being an active community member is often easier when living in an urban area – however, Eurostat data demonstrates that older people are more likely to live in rural areas. Rural areas often suffer from a lower provision of

services, depopulation, and ‘brain drain’, which occurs when young, educated people leave their local community and do not contribute to the community and economy that invested in them. As a result, these regions can suffer from public disinvestment in services, the impact of which will become more visible as populations age and the need for care services increases.<sup>5</sup>

## 4. Considering older people in the just transition

The term ‘older people’ covers a broad spectrum of individuals – from active workers nearing retirement age to adults over the age of 85, whom Eurostat refers to as ‘very old people’. By the middle of the century, the number of very old people in the EU is projected to more than double. As very old people require more health and social services, policymakers need to plan for an increasing demand on services in the coming decades.

At the same time, policymakers also need to plan for climate neutrality by 2050. This is harder for regions that rely on carbon-intensive industries. In response, the European Commission’s **Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)** addresses the social and economic consequences of the transition to climate neutrality, focusing on the regions, industry sectors, and workers who are most impacted to ensure that no one is left behind.<sup>6</sup> Just Transition Fund regions should closely involve older people in their planning efforts – while the term ‘older people’ refers to a diverse group, every older person has decades of knowledge and expertise to share. Adults around retirement age might be willing to stay active and employ their expertise to support the region’s transformation. Very old people are often guardians of knowledge, having experienced previous transitions. They are also more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and need to be considered in infrastructure planning as the region transforms.





Territorial Just Transition Plans (TJTPs) help JTF regions access funding from the **Just Transition Fund**. The TJTPs describe the particular challenges in each territory and set out the development needs and objectives to be met by 2030. Several Member States, such as Germany and the Netherlands, refer to older people in their TJTPs, often in the context of the declining labour force in the region and the need to guide older people in finding alternative employment as the transformation of the region takes hold. Other Member States, such as Greece and Poland, point to the need to build out care infrastructure so that the younger generation can participate more in the labour market. Romania aims to increase the energy resilience of communities – and thus older generations – by investing in small-scale renewable energy production, transport, and storage capacity for public buildings, including care homes. Spain is also using funding from the JTF to invest in care infrastructure, including a care home adapted to the needs of former coal workers. While the above mentions are encouraging, local governments should strive for a comprehensive set of measures to make older people an active partner in the transformation of their regions. Not doing so would mean missing out on an abundance of knowledge that can help steer the just transition. Having to always react to the complex needs of an increasingly older population puts more strain on budgets than systematically making care and infrastructure investments that benefit older adults.

## 5. Key action areas

The following section offers an outline of common challenges and describes strategies to involve older people and account for their needs when implementing the just transition. Key action areas have been identified based on the existing literature. Table 1 provides an overview of the identified action areas and the related challenges and strategies.



Table 1: Overview of identified action areas and related challenges and strategies for JTF regions.

Key action area	 Engagement	 Health and care	 Infrastructure	 Labour
Challenges	Climate change impacts the human rights of older people	The old-age dependency ratio is increasing rapidly	Homes and care facilities are not adapted to climate change	Share of older workers in carbon-intensive industry
		Labour shortage in the care sector		Participation in adult learning
		Climate change impacts older people more		Working-age people are not in employment due to informal care
	Involving older people in climate change conversations	Older coal workers will need more care	Energy and transport poverty	Early retirement is the default option
Strategies	Involve older people as custodians of knowledge	Empower older people and their caregivers	Invest in climate-friendly infrastructure	Invest in a career-counselling platform for older workers
	Invest in social and physical infrastructure	Elevate care work	Adapt care homes to endure climate impacts	Promote upskilling and reskilling
	Consider the 'how' and 'where' when involving older people	Create local adaptation and resilience plans		



## 5.1 Engagement

### Challenges

- The UN acknowledges that **climate change has an impact on the human rights of older people**, and in particular older women and disabled older people. Age discrimination and prevailing stereotypes about older people aggravate the human rights impact of climate change. Prejudices often paint older people as frail, dependent, and passive about climate action, which can lead to them being neglected, ignored, and marginalised in laws and policies.<sup>7</sup> To ensure that older people’s needs are reflected in a region’s planning for the just transition, local governments should aim to actively involve older generations.
- The older generation is often forgotten about in conversations on climate change and the just transition.** While many studies have been written about reaching different groups to stimulate climate action, very little information about involving older people exists. However, as the share of older people in the population increases rapidly, more action needs to be taken to frame climate change as an issue that will also affect older people and their loved ones. And there is ample opportunity: a UN survey spanning 50 countries found that only 58% of people over the age of 60 think climate change is an emergency, as opposed to almost 70% of people under 18.<sup>8</sup>

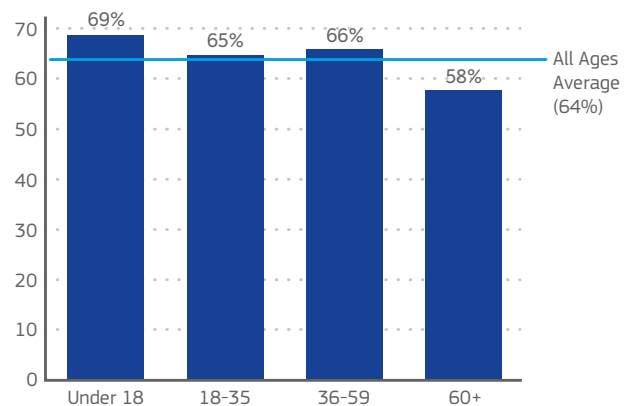


Figure 1: Public belief in the climate emergency, by age group. Source: UNDP (2021). *The Peoples' Climate Vote*.

### Strategies

- The **active involvement of older generations** helps local governments tackle two major challenges at once: enabling a climate transformation while simultaneously anticipating shifts in population structure. Involving older people in planning the transformation of their region not only benefits them – it also provides younger generations with a source of inspiration and insight as they work to refocus a region’s economy. Older people are sometimes custodians of local knowledge and have the time to share decades of experience and expertise. Very old people have often faced profound transformations earlier in their lives, and sharing their experiences can help

communities anticipate how to better build resilience.<sup>9</sup> They can, for example, share their knowledge on what sectors of the economy flourished in the region before the carbon-intensive industry became prominent.

- Investing in community engagement enables local governments in JTF regions to build on older people’s lived experience, and helps older residents maintain community and social ties, in turn improving social cohesion. Older people are more likely to be socially isolated. **Investing in the social and physical infrastructure for older people to start and maintain meaningful relationships** not only contributes to well-being, but also lowers costs for society as loneliness is associated with poor health. The mortality risk of loneliness is comparable to that of obesity or smoking, and loneliness can result in mental problems and poor cognitive performance.<sup>10</sup> Section 5.2 and Section 5.3 provide examples of ways to reinforce the social and physical infrastructure of a community.
- Local governments should **consider the ‘how’ and ‘where’ when involving older people** in planning for the future of the region. Ensuring that consultation meetings are accessible to older people is a first step. Local governments can hold meetings close to older people – in municipalities or in city districts – to give them the chance to participate in a safe and accessible environment. Policymakers can also consider holding separate meetings for older generations. For example, focus groups in care home communities can complement wider consultation meetings.<sup>11</sup> As very old people are often less digitally skilled, communication around consultation initiatives should be adapted to their needs. Advertising meetings through print media and local community facilities, such as libraries, can increase engagement. Finding effective ways to frame the conversation is a next step. Coal mines and

large carbon-intensive plants are often the defining industry in the region, and many older people can have affinities for jobs that sustain or have sustained them and their families for many years. A Frontiers in Communication study found that framing the conversation around emphasising the need for climate action and transforming the economy as well as narratives focused on altruism, having a sense of community, and international solidarity resonated the most with older generations.<sup>12</sup>



## 5.2 Health and care

### Challenges

- The dependency ratio is increasing rapidly. The old-age dependency ratio is an indicator for the ability of the working-age population to support older people. The formula depicts the relative size of the older part of the population compared to the working-age population, expressed as a percentage. Figure 1 illustrates that the ratio will be over 50% in every EU Member State by the end of the century, meaning that there will be fewer than two persons of working age for every older person. Eurostat estimates that Poland will have the highest old-age dependency ratio (63%) in 2100, while Cyprus is set to have the lowest ratio (52%). JTF regions might experience an even more pronounced dependency ratio if young people continue to move away from their region. Many of them also start from a different baseline: the old-age dependency ratio is already above 50% in some rural areas of the EU.<sup>13</sup>

### Projected old-age dependency ratio, 2100



Figure 2: Projected old-age dependency ratio in the 27 EU Member States by 2100. The old-age dependency ratio represents the number of individuals aged 65 and over per 100 people of working age. Source: Eurostat (2020). Old-age dependency ratio increasing in the EU.



- As society grows older, decent and affordable long-term care helps older people maintain their autonomy and live with dignity. Today, almost 31 million EU citizens need long-term care – a number that is projected to increase to over 38 million by the middle of the century.<sup>14</sup> However, **the care sector is experiencing a labour shortage**, which will intensify in the next decades if no action is taken. In many Member States, more than one in six job advertisements are already related to long-term care.<sup>15</sup> The labour shortage in the care sector is related to difficult working conditions and inadequate wages. As a result, 52 million EU citizens are involved in informal long-term care work for family members or friends, representing almost 80% of long-term care providers.<sup>16</sup>
- **Older people are suffering disproportionately at the hands of climate change.** As people age, the body's ability to formulate a response to heat decreases, which can be aggravated by some medications. Existing illnesses can make them more vulnerable to climate change and air pollution, which can in turn worsen their condition. Older people with limited mobility are also more at risk before, during, and after extreme weather events.<sup>17</sup> The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change states that heat-related mortality for people older than 65 years increased by approximately 68% in the past twenty years.<sup>18</sup> Very old people are most at risk: a Nature study investigating heat-related mortality over the course of the summer of 2022 – the hottest summer on record in Europe – found that almost 10,000 people in Europe aged 65–79 years died due to excessive heat that summer, a number that increased to almost 37,000 for people aged 80 years and over.<sup>19</sup>
- **JTF regions with an active coal industry will have to plan for an older population that might need more care than average.** Coal miners are more at risk of chronic respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, and cancer than the rest of the population. There is also consistent evidence of the link between coal mining and a spectrum of diseases in the local community around a coal mine.<sup>20</sup>

## Strategies

Europe is warming twice as fast as the global average.<sup>21</sup> JTF regions will feel the impact of the increasing old-age dependency ratio and the labour shortage in the care sector faster, highlighting the importance of formulating strategies to improve care, planning for the impacts of climate change, and boosting care sector resources.

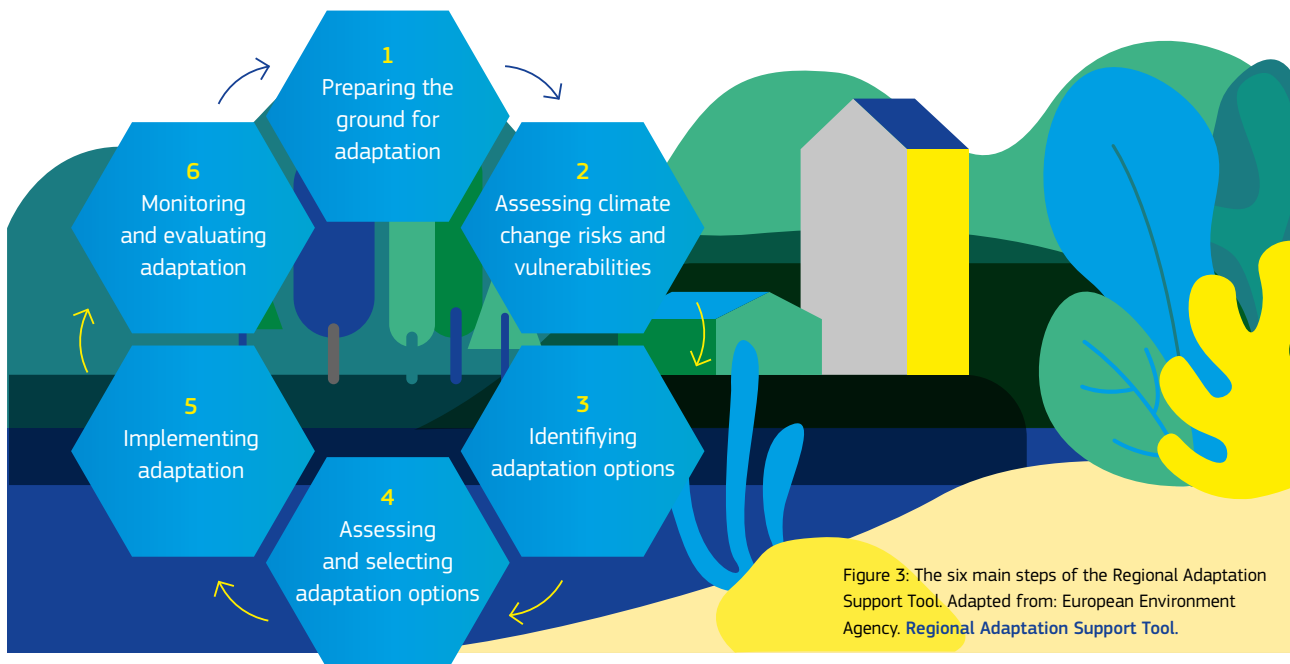
- There are wide disparities across the EU in the degree to which local governments are responsible for financing, organising, and providing health and social services. However, every local government has the power to play an important role in empowering older people in need of assistance and their caregivers.<sup>22</sup> Local governments in JTF regions can contribute to better coordination and integration of health and social care services for older people. The gap between health and social care is an important area for action as it can lead to delays, inconsistent service delivery, lack of

information, and reactive instead of preventive care. One-stop shops for information, the development of local quality standards for every service provider operating in the area, and initiatives to improve health literacy can empower older people and their caregivers.<sup>23</sup>

### Example:

→ The city of **Kuopio** – located in the JTF region of Northern Savonia in Finland – set up a project to improve the collaboration between primary care workers and other care providers, aiming to assist older people in staying at home longer. Ageing at home has many benefits, such as maintaining social networks and fostering independence. Kuopio implemented proactive measures and early interventions to promote independent living. The collaboration of primary care workers, specialists, NGOs, and older people led to a care model that provides tools for early risk identification, assessment of service needs, and follow-up planning.<sup>24</sup>

- While the provision of care services is not always a local responsibility, local governments in JTF regions can take action to **elevate care work**. Care jobs can be a source of employment in regional transformations, and care work will become ever more important as the population ages and the planet warms. In addition, care jobs have a limited impact on the environment and require little extraction of natural resources, especially if they are carried out in private spheres. To make care jobs more attractive, local governments can introduce measures to improve conditions in the sector. Today, the care sector is characterised by poor wages and precarious work conditions – which mainly impacts women, as they make up 76% of formal care workers. Measures can range from promoting social dialogue to evaluating wages, focusing on continuous education for care workers, and tackling gender stereotypes about care work.<sup>25</sup>
  - Please refer to “A toolkit for a gender-just transition” for more information on accounting for gender impacts when building up the care sector.
- Local governments have an important role to play in adapting to climate change. While most Member States have adaptation plans, local governments should work towards creating and implementing local adaptation and resilience plans to ensure their municipality is prepared for the worst effects of climate change. The **Regional Adaptation Support Tool (RAST)** – introduced as part of the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change – provides regional and local governments with guidance on how to develop, implement, and evaluate their plan for adapting to climate change. Figure 3 gives an outline of the steps put forward by the RAST. As very old people are more likely to suffer from climate change impacts, they should be invited to participate in resiliency planning, and emergency plans should be responsive to their needs.



### Example:

- A study project from the Antioch University New England in the **United States** engaged older people from the community of Bridgeport to collaboratively examine their vulnerability to climate change and develop strategies to enhance their resilience. Participants identified chronic illnesses, lower incomes, and living alone as key contributors to older adults' vulnerability.<sup>26</sup> They also highlighted transportation, effective public warning systems, safe shelter, and resources to aid in coping and recovery as factors that can enhance or limit the ability of older people to adapt to climate change.
- In **Slovakia**, many towns and municipalities are developing local adaptation plans. For example, the city of **Trenčín** – located in a JTF region – proposes to create a dispatching service for social services as part of its adaptation plan. The service aims to increase the capacity of care providers during heat waves and is specifically aimed at older people and people in long-term care.<sup>27</sup>



## 5.3 Infrastructure

### Challenges

- **Homes and care facilities are not adapted to climate change.** Older people often live in types of buildings which can increase their exposure to heatwaves and floods. For example, older people that live independently tend to favour living on the ground floor of a building, which makes them more likely to suffer from material damage during floods.<sup>28</sup> Older people in hospitals and care homes are more likely to suffer disproportionately from heatwaves as they are reliant on others to help them endure extreme temperatures. The frailest residents are kept in mind in the design of care

homes and hospitals, sometimes negatively affecting other residents' heating and cooling needs.<sup>29</sup> Care homes also often lack critical infrastructure to sustain care in case of heatwaves and floods.<sup>30</sup>

- **Older people are more likely to suffer from energy and transport poverty.** The European Commission predicts that 85–95% of today's buildings will still be standing in 2050. However, the majority of the building stock is not energy efficient, and renovations rarely address the energy performance of buildings.<sup>31</sup> Last year, 34 million Europeans were unable to afford to keep their homes adequately warm in winter.<sup>32</sup> Given that older people spend more time at home, they are especially vulnerable to the risks of energy poverty. Local governments in JTF regions should also be mindful of transport poverty. Transport poverty can result from the lack of transport options, the inability to afford transport costs, the time commitment to reach a destination, and the inaccessibility of transport – such as for disabled people.<sup>33</sup> Transport poverty can contribute to social exclusion, as societal groups – such as older people – are limited in who they can engage with based on the transport system available. Economies in JTF regions are often not diversified due to the dominance of a carbon-intensive industry, and brain drain sometimes makes it hard for a region to reorient its economy, causing service providers to move away from the region. As such, older people and their caregivers need access to transport that allows them to function independently and reach care and other services. A well-functioning public transit service increases the options for non-drivers and avoids having to provide alternative options which are more expensive and time-consuming to set up, such as a common taxi dispatching centre.

### Strategies

- Older people that live independently would benefit from **investment in accessible climate shelters, urban green space, and local mobility.** Local governments can set up their climate shelters not only as a place to find shelter from the



heat or cold, but also as a space to nurture community ties. When designing their climate shelters, local governments should ensure that the location is accessible to older people and feels like a safe space to them. In urban locations, increasing tree coverage is a way to provide cool outdoor spaces. And when planning investments in sustainable mobility infrastructure – which can be covered by funding from the JTF – local governments can survey older residents on their mobility needs to ensure they benefit from investments made.

#### Example:

→ The City Council of Barcelona, **Spain** has created a network of more than 200 climate shelters to help vulnerable groups shelter from intensive heatwaves and cold temperatures. The climate shelters are designed to be easily accessible, free, and safe, and provide comfortable seats and free water. The shelters are spread throughout the city, and a map on the [website](#) indicates their location.

- There are many actions that local governments can take to **adapt care infrastructure to help older people in need of assistance endure future climate change impacts**, and funding from the JTF can be used to invest in infrastructure for elderly care. When adapting or building care homes, local governments can first organise a set of community meetings to collect input from older people in need of assistance. To respond to the fact that today, heating and cooling infrastructure is often adapted to only the frailest residents, adjustable heating and cooling systems that enable rooms to be kept at different temperatures can be introduced.<sup>34</sup> To ensure continuity of care during heatwaves or floods, steps should be taken to improve the resilience of water, electricity, and transport systems. For example, a back-up generator on the roof of a care home or a solar energy island can compensate for a power outage during a natural disaster.

#### Example:

→ After having experienced an intense heatwave that was particularly hard on older residents, the municipality of Botkyrka, **Sweden** developed a **comprehensive framework** to reduce the effect of heatwaves on older people. Staff in care homes were made aware of the risks of heatwaves for residents, and the municipality introduced a checklist for heatwave warnings. More air conditioning equipment was installed, and solar panels on the roof compensate for the increased energy use. The municipality also installed cool spots for staff.<sup>35</sup>

→ **Spain** is investing in care services as an integral component of its just transition framework. In Castilla-León, for example, €100.6 million is going towards a range of projects, including funding for **municipal infrastructure**. Funding has been provided for social and health services, including the construction of a care home specialising in the treatment of miners with silicosis, a long-term lung disease.<sup>36</sup>



## Labour

### Challenges

- **Many older people work in the coal and carbon-intensive industry.** Coal mining operations in the EU predominantly employ older people, especially in mines that are scheduled for closure.<sup>37</sup> In **Konin**, located in Eastern Wielkopolska in Poland, for example, employees under 30 years of age constitute only 5% of the workforce, and half of the workers of the mine and power plant will have retired by 2030.<sup>38</sup> The same pattern is seen in the EU steel industry – the European Steel Technology Platform estimates that about 30% of the workforce will leave the industry between 2015 and 2030.<sup>39</sup>
- Data from the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) demonstrates that there is room for improvement regarding **participation in adult learning**. That is especially true for older employees – only 24% of employees between the ages of 55 and 64 participate in training, while many more would like to do so. Older workers currently face several barriers to access reskilling and upskilling programmes, such as cost and age discrimination.<sup>40</sup>
- 52 million Europeans are involved in care responsibilities for family and friends due to the labour shortage in the care sector (see section 5.2). As a result, a **significant share of people of working age are not fully participating in the labour market**, which decreases public revenue and increases labour shortages in other sectors of the economy.<sup>41</sup> As the population in JTF regions ages fast, the older generation will require more care soon. If care continues to be mainly provided informally by family and friends, JTF regions will see spill-over effects in other areas of the economy.
- Older workers in the coal industry and carbon-intensive production often receive few options when they are laid off. Early retirement programmes are seen as the norm, and they can be a valuable option for older workers who have little chance of finding a different position. However, early retirement programmes are also a burden on the pension system, as they don't incentivise older workers to find alternative employment and deprive JTF region labour markets of experienced people.<sup>42</sup>

### Strategies

- Local governments in JTF regions can set up a **career counselling platform specifically for older workers** to determine the best way forward for them after redundancy. In some cases, that might be early retirement, but many older workers feel like they have valuable experience to contribute to the local economy. Career counselling platforms can help older workers think about how to use their skills in a different way. For example, technically skilled workers could train the younger generation in vocational schools. When introducing career counselling, local governments can also think about covering travel expenses for interviews, reimbursing work equipment, and helping older people cover the costs of working in a different region.

**Example:**

→ The Just Transition Fund helps workers find alternative employment. In **Trenčín/Upper Nitra** – the only coal mining region in **Slovakia** – funding from the JTF will be used to support coal workers in finding their next position.<sup>43</sup> The region will be able to build on existing expertise, such as the specialised “contact centres”, currently available in three cities.<sup>44</sup> The contact centres provide coal workers with personal career counselling, retraining courses, and free social and psychological consultations. The contact centres have helped more than 240 participants thus far, the majority between the ages of 50 and 59.

- Many older workers are open to **reskilling and upskilling as a way to transition to a different position in their company or to increase their chances of finding alternative employment**. In Konin, for example, a World Bank survey found that the majority of coal plant workers (61%) would be willing to learn new skills.<sup>45</sup> Local governments in JTF regions can promote reskilling and upskilling in several ways. They can assist local coal and carbon-intensive companies in setting up a reskilling programme for older workers where possible. Local governments can also introduce reskilling courses in public technical and vocational education programmes to help workers train for alternative employment, such as in the production of renewable energy. In addition, entrepreneurship measures can promote skills that will be valuable in the transformation of their region.

**Example:**

→ **Voestalpine**, a steel company employing around 8,000 workers in Austria, had an older workforce as a result of downsizing, a halt on recruitment, and early retirement. A comprehensive programme designed “to achieve best personal output by best personal development in every generation, men and women, from joining the company to official retirement” helped them keep their older workers on board. One of the measures of the programme was a plan to reform shift work, as night work is especially tiring for older workers. Voestalpine also placed age discrimination on the agenda, introduced ergonomic initiatives, and granted every employee at least 33 hours a year for projects and training. As a result of the programme, the company saw a significant increase in workers’ satisfaction.<sup>46</sup>



## 6. Conclusion – Key messages

- The share of older people in the population is growing. Their needs, knowledge, and expertise should be central to planning for the just transition if the transition is to be just.
- The old-age dependency ratio is increasing rapidly in JTF regions, underlining the need to enable a climate transformation while simultaneously anticipating shifts in population structure.
- Older workers are often open to adult learning and have experience to contribute. Early retirement should not be the default option for workers in the carbon-intensive industry.
- Very old people have decades of lived experience and can be custodians of local knowledge. Involving them in adaptation planning can help communities anticipate how to better build resilience.
- Climate change impacts older people disproportionately – adapting home and care facilities can alleviate some of the impacts.
- Inadequate infrastructure can lead to energy and transport poverty and makes older people more vulnerable to climate change. JTF funding can be used to invest in the area of social inclusion, including infrastructure for care homes.

This document was prepared by researchers at Guidehouse having conducted desk research, interviews and surveys. Any information and views contained in the present document do not reflect the official opinion of the European Commission. Reuse is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

This document is part of a series presenting information and lessons learned on policy approaches at national, regional or local level supporting a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The Just Transition Platform (JTP) assists EU Member States and regions to unlock the support in this transition. Visit the [JTP website](#).

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