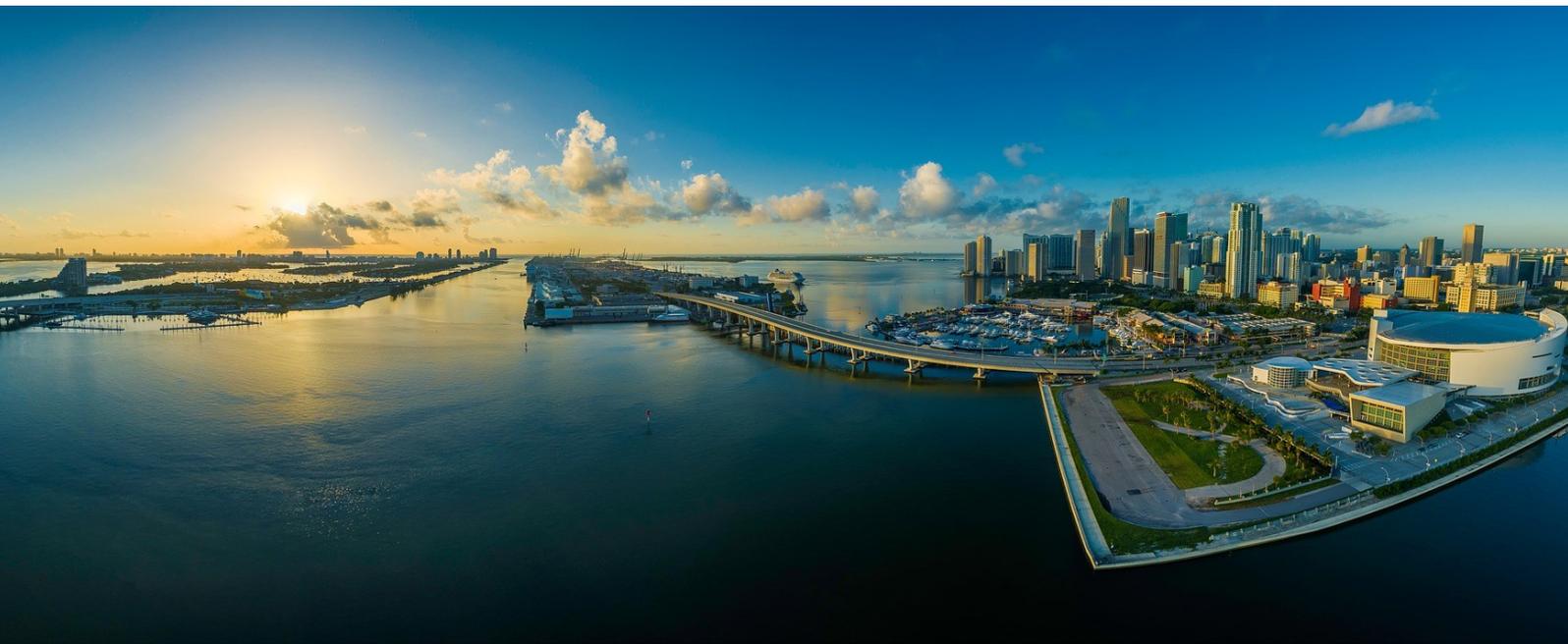




Next2Met
Interreg Europe



European Union
European Regional
Development Fund



Newsletter #1 - July 2020

*“Increasing the attractiveness of Next2Met regions
with soft digitalisation measures”*



Dear Readers,

Next2Met has now been up and running for a year, and a lot has happened. The more we have dug into the topics of the project with our excellent partners and stakeholders, the more we have realised how broad and current our themes are. The unfortunate coronavirus outbreak has further underlined the significance of next-to-metropolitan areas in terms of safe, functional, and meaningful places for living and working. We expect the emerging 'new normal' to include, for example, new solutions for remote working, digital services, citizen participation, and smart transport.

The idea of “**soft digitalisation**” as a means of increasing regional attraction is in the core of our approach – we may not reach a waterproof definition for it, but I think here the process with its side effects is more valuable than the outcomes as such. And I promise the journey will be interesting!

Please enjoy reading this newsletter and stay tuned for more developments of Next2Met.

Yours,



Harri Kuusela, Project Leader
Regional Council of Päijät-Häme, Finland

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The project

Compared to capital regions, 'next to met' areas are confronted with a lack of tools and critical mass of research, development and innovation, and therefore struggle with keeping experienced small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as highly-qualified people in the region.

Next2Met is an innovative interregional exchange project which aims at increasing attractiveness - for knowledge, opportunities, and capital - of territories located close to metropolitan areas. Next2Met focuses on these territories surrounding metropolitan areas because they not only offer benefits, but are also bottlenecks to attracting and retaining knowledge, people and capital.

In this context, Next2Met aims at improving policy instruments (ERDF Operational Programme and 2 local instruments) through interregional learning processes in 6 different regions. To achieve this, Next2Met partners will focus on soft digitalisation measures, making sure that public policy supports an increased attractiveness of its territories. Each of those regions will see projects financed which will promote innovation chain involvement and mobilise structural and local funds.

Digitalisation, cooperation and specialisation are the cornerstones that form the basis of regional growth and this project aims to support the regions involved to fully exploit the potential in order to become more attractive "next to met" areas.

The partnership

Coming from different European regions sharing similar challenges, the project brings together 6 regional and local actors and 1 Advisory Partner working together to implement policy solutions in peripheral areas:

- **Regional Council of Päijät-Häme**, Finland
- **Office of the Regional Government of Lower Austria**, Austria
- **Barcelona Provincial Council**, Spain
- **Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly**, Ireland
- **Podlaskie Voivodship**, Poland
- **Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Regional Authority**, Germany
- **Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR)**, France



€ 1,358,584.00



from 1 Aug 2019
to 31 Jan 2023

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On 9 September 2019, Next2Met partners met for [a kickoff meeting in Brussels](#), Belgium.



PÄIJÄT-HÄMEEN LIITTO
The Regional Council of Päijät-Häme



**Diputació
Barcelona**



Tionól Reigiúnach Oirthir agus Lár-Tíre
Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly



Podlaskie

**Mecklenburg
Vorpommern**
MV hat gut.



**CPMR
CRPM**

Policy Learning Events

Next2Met Interregional Policy Learning Events, held once per semester, aim at fostering exchanges between partners and stakeholders in order to improve the attractiveness of the regions through soft digitalisation measures. These events are essential opportunities to bring together partners and local stakeholders and to enable all participants to get inspiration, to discuss the transferability of the projects, exchange recommendations, and to pave the way to potential collaborations. During this first year of the project, partners from the Regional Council of Päijät-Häme and from the Office of Lower Austria Federal Government hosted the two first Policy Learning Events. Have a read!

Policy Learning Event #1 Lahti, Finland

On January 14-15 2020, Next2Met partners and stakeholders came together for their first Policy Learning Event in Lahti, Finland. With an internal meeting on the first day and an open event on the second, the event brought together more than 40 participants and led to active discussions.

The internal workshop enabled the partners to present their territorial analyses and to point out many similarities between their regions' needs. Next2Met partners also got to see a concrete demonstration of the use of soft digitalisation tools in Päijät-Häme during a visit of the Radio and TV Museum of Lahti.

On the second day, the event was an opportunity for the partners to present to a wider audience their territorial analyses and examples of potential good practices that are already put into place in their regions. This day encouraged participants to get inspiration from other territories' initiatives and to possibly transfer them to their own. They also got to discover good practices from three local stakeholders on sustainable mobility, remote care solutions, and the analysis of digital emotional intelligence.



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Policy Learning Event #2 Online, Lower Austria

On 14 May 2020, Next2Met partners and stakeholders met during an online meeting hosted by the Office of Lower Austria Federal Government. Due to COVID-19 restriction measures, Next2Met partners and stakeholders were not able to meet in Lower Austria. Nevertheless, the day opened with a digital alternative to discover the hosting region of this second Policy Learning Event. Thanks to Virtual Reality glasses, participants could take part in an immersive flight over Lower Austria just at the click of their mouse.

Three local stakeholders presented their regional initiatives to improve the implementation of soft digitalisation measures in Lower Austria. Participants were introduced to the House of Digitalisation, an active network promoting digitalisation tools, a Glass Fibre project, and mobility services from the Office of the Lower Austrian Federal Government.

In the context of COVID-19, the attractiveness of these regions is more than ever re-thought. The participants reflected on a new society model, where digitalisation of the peripheral regions would be the key to tap their full potential of attractiveness.



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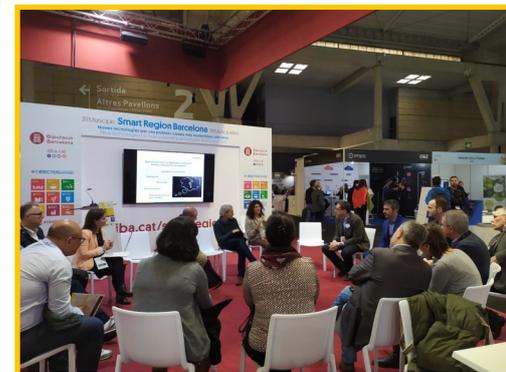
Stakeholder meetings

Regional cooperation and policy improvement are the pillars of Next2Met project. The organisation of stakeholder meetings is essential for partners to bond with local actors and present Next2Met. Through these meetings, participants are focusing on their regional area's challenges and meeting various actors working on the digitalisation of these peripheral areas on different themes. During the first year of Next2Met, **7 stakeholder meetings** were organised. Have a look!



On November 20, 2019, the Office of the **Regional Government of Lower Austria** held its first meeting with stakeholders in order to discuss the current status of digitalisation in Lower Austria. The event brought together local stakeholders from various sectors such as the Chamber of Commerce of Lower Austria, research institutions or industrial partners from the region. Together with the Chamber of Commerce of Lower Austria, the Regional Government set up a survey on the use of digitalisation of companies located in the region. This survey will be an essential tool to support an analysis of the region and to implement further actions.

On November 21, 2019, **Barcelona Provincial Council** held its first stakeholder meeting during the Smart City Expo World Congress 2019. This event brought together different municipalities from the area along with representatives from local research institutions representatives. The Next2Met team presented Next2Met and Interreg Europe, which paved the way to potential collaborations. Barcelona Provincial Council held its second stakeholder meeting virtually on June 30th 2020, which brought together representatives from different municipalities from the province of Barcelona along with representatives from local research institutions and Barcelona Provincial Council representatives from different departments. Local stakeholders presented different good practices in a wide variety of areas. The event ended with discussions on potential collaborations.



On December 12, 2019, the **Regional Council of Päijät-Häme** organised a kick-off meeting with local stakeholders representing a wide range of sectors such as local universities, chamber of commerce, business development agency, the city of Lahti, local start-ups, regional social and health care authority, regional travel development, and cultural operators. All interested in the digitalisation of their activities, they welcomed the benefits of Next2Met for the region.

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Stakeholder meetings



On January 23, 2020, **Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Regional Authority** organised its very first stakeholder meeting in Rostock, bringing together participants from the University Rostock, University of applied science Wismar, Ministry of Digitalisation Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. In addition to a presentation of Next2Met, they were introduced to various examples of local good practices such as digital innovation rooms and technology centres. This event triggered many exchanges on regional initiatives.

During this first year, **the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA)** held two stakeholder meetings. On December 2, 2019, the event brought together various local actors who worked together on the digital connectivity of the country and EU fundings, with a particular focus on the potential of digitalisation in the tourism sector.

On April 1, 2020, due to confinement measures, the EMRA organised a virtual meeting which enabled stakeholders to meet and participate via interactive tools. This event aimed at discussing digital solutions to increase the attractiveness of the Midland Region as a place to live, work and visit. Different stakeholders presented their digital good practices for the region. This online meeting was warmly welcomed by the participants and deepened the cooperation with the stakeholders. The success of this virtual event got Brid Greenan, EMRA's project manager for Next2Met, to be invited to an Interreg Europe webinar in order to share some tips for a good online meeting. [Watch the replay!](#)



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Soft digitalisation?

Throughout this first year of Next2Met, partners got to be familiar with the concept of “soft digitalisation”. But what does it really mean? More than trying to fit in a box with one definition only, some of our partners’ coordinators tried to **explain their own perception of the concept**. Have a look and share with us your own vision!

“ At the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, we based our thoughts on the following definition:

“Digitalisation is the application of digital technologies and infrastructures in business, economy, and society”. (Tilson, Lyytinen, & Sørensen, 2010:749). We believe that what makes the difference with the “soft” aspect of digitalisation is that these solutions have a digital component, **but digitalisation is not front and centre.**”

Brid Greenan, Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly



“ My personal view is that digitalisation refers to the process related to both the development of new technologies and to the adoption of these technologies by society, businesses and governments. Therefore, “soft digitalisation”, as I have understood it from the Next2Met project, refers to **the “soft factors”** of digitalisation (i.e., mindset, skills, etc.) and to **the “soft” digital infrastructures** (e.g., provision of digital services, development and fostering innovation ecosystems, to name some.) ”

Ana Duch, Barcelona Provincial Council

“**Use the digital transformation. For country and people.** This is our mission in Lower Austria when it comes to digitalisation. Soft digitalisation is a mix of different aspects and it is important to focus on the people, who ought to reap the greatest possible benefits from the new technologies.”

Bernhard Gerhardt, Office of the Regional Government of Lower Austria

“If conceptualising the term “digitalisation” seemed quite easy at first, this first year of the project helped me to develop my thoughts on its “soft” side. We often tend to think about digitalisation as a way to dematerialise traditional procedures and interactions in order to improve their performance.

However, the Next2Met project made me realise that digitalisation can be a way to improve the everyday life of the people, to help them to connect better through various initiatives. And I think this is what soft digitalisation is about; it aims at **facilitating people’s lives without changing drastically their habits and environment**, all thanks to technology.”

Delphine Kaczorowski, CPMR

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Follow us on our social media! We regularly post articles, events, photos, and do live tweeting sessions. We would be happy to have a chat with you!



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www.interregeurope.eu/next2met/



To join the Next2Met stakeholders extranet, please write to this address: harri.kuusela@paijat-hame.fi



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Upcoming events:

- **Policy Learning Event #3**,
hosted by Barcelona Provincial
Council, Autumn 2020.