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# Older people in the European Union's rural areas

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Issues and  
challenges

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## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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Members' Research Service

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Examining the demographic profile of older people in the European Union's rural areas, this analysis discusses a range of issues, including the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, and provides examples of initiatives that have been taken to address older people's needs. The issue of generational renewal in the EU's farming population is also examined and the views of relevant stakeholders are highlighted. The concluding 'outlook' section discusses these findings in the context of the ongoing legislative process in connection with the new common agricultural policy, the next multiannual financial framework and Next Generation EU.

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## Executive summary

The EU population has been steadily ageing. Projections indicate that the share of people over 65 could reach 30 % of the EU population by 2030, as opposed to 10 % in 1960. This demographic phenomenon is even more acute in rural areas, in particular in those remote or border regions experiencing both ageing and depopulation. These trends result from a vicious circle of inter-related social and economic factors involving the out-migration of younger people to urban centres. In predominantly rural areas, there are now fewer than two people of working age for every elderly person.

A number of social, economic and territorial issues impact older people living in rural areas. A key challenge is the rising need for medical care and the lack of sufficient health and care services in some rural territories, which fail to attract new generations of health workers. The situation is aggravated by depopulation, resulting in public disinvestment in services. Older people can also suffer from loneliness and isolation, sometimes even leading to social exclusion, especially in areas that lack public transport or are geographically isolated. In some countries, changing family structures and intergenerational relationships have also had a negative impact on older people. New technologies can help to reduce social isolation, but many rural areas are still lagging behind in terms of digital infrastructure, with a lower share of households having internet access, and a lack of digital skills among older people. Yet information and communications technologies offer many opportunities, especially in terms of health care and life-long learning. Another important issue is the vulnerability of older people to the health effects of climate change and to extremes of heat, as shown by the high number of elderly victims of the summer 2003 heatwave in Europe. Today, as the world faces an unprecedented pandemic, older people in the EU and worldwide have been disproportionately hit by the coronavirus. The most fragile living in care homes have been particularly at risk. In rural areas across the EU, this health crisis has prompted a number of initiatives from local networks to support and protect older people.

The demographic challenge affecting the rural population is particularly acute in the EU's farming population. These communities play a vital role in keeping rural areas alive and in providing food for all EU citizens. However, not only has the number of farmers steeply declined over recent decades, but generational renewal is no longer assured, with only one in ten farmers under the age of 40. Through its common agricultural policy, the EU supports young people willing to start a career in farming. However, research on generational renewal suggests policy interventions need to consider the complex nature of the farm succession process, which has both emotional and social dimensions for older farmers.

EU policy responses to the issues affecting the older population in rural areas are, in part, set within the EU's rural development policy, the second pillar of the common agricultural policy. This can provide support in relation to issues such as social inclusion, poverty reduction, accessibility, the uptake and use of ICT, and local basic services. The LEADER approach encourages local initiatives that address the needs of the older population. Other EU funds and programmes, such as the European Social Fund, Interreg Europe, and the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing, can also benefit older people in rural territories. The European Parliament has been working on a wide range of issues concerning health and long-term care, active ageing, solidarity between generations, pensions, retirement policies, etc., passing several resolutions over the years. It will also have a key role to play in securing funding for rural areas and farmers in the context of the current negotiations on the future common agricultural policy and multiannual financial framework.

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# 1. Background

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen set out the priorities for the agricultural and rural development portfolio in her mission letter<sup>1</sup> to Commissioner Wojciechowski, from September 2019. In addition to working closely with Member States on their common agricultural policy (CAP) strategic plans, these priorities included developing a new long-term vision for rural areas. Working closely with the Commission's Vice President for Democracy and Demography, Commissioner Dubravka Suica, the aim is to ensure that the needs of rural areas are specifically catered for in the national strategic plans under the proposals for the new common agricultural policy. In support of these priorities, the Commission published a roadmap<sup>2</sup> to generate a debate on the future of rural areas as part of its work to prepare a long-term vision for the development of rural areas in 2021. It also published a report<sup>3</sup> in July 2020 on the impact of demographic change. One of the key demographic challenges facing rural areas is the ageing population, not only among farmers but also in terms of the rural population in general. In addition to these issues, rural areas are up against the twin challenges of climate change and the coronavirus pandemic.

In the case of the pandemic, experience to date has highlighted the vulnerability of older people to the virus. Evidence from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control<sup>4</sup> as well as from the World Health Organization<sup>5</sup> demonstrates this vulnerability, and the scale of the impact of Covid-19. Older people are not only at a higher risk of complications if they catch the disease, they are also impacted by the social distancing and lockdown measures taken in response to the pandemic.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, this analysis examines the demographic profile of older people in rural areas, and draws on a range of research studies and sources using a research framework to explore the situation. Identifying a number of initiatives and examples to illustrate how different areas and regions have responded to older peoples' needs, the analysis also looks at the issue of generational renewal in relation to the farming sector.

## 2. Demographic context / features of rural ageing

It is well established that the European Union's population is ageing. An in-depth analysis compiled by EPRS entitled 'Demographic Outlook for the EU 2020' explains that, on average across the EU Member States, the share of the population aged over 65 years increased from less than 10 % in 1960 to nearly 20 % in 2015 and is projected to increase further to nearly 30 % by 2060.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, [Mission letter](#) to Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner-designate for Agriculture, Brussels, 10 September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The Commission's [Roadmap](#) on a long-term vision for rural areas provided for a seven-week feedback period from 22 July 2020 to 9 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission [Report on the impact of demographic change](#), Brussels, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, [Coronavirus disease-2019 \(COVID-19\) in the EU/EEA and the UK-eleventh update: resurgence of cases](#), Rapid Risk Assessment, 10 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The [World Health Organization](#) has indicated that in countries with community transmission of Covid-19, over 40 % of total confirmed Covid-19 deaths have been linked to long-term care facilities, with figures being as high as 80% in some high-income countries. In Sweden, by the end of April 2020, 25 % of long-term care facilities had experienced Covid-19 outbreaks, with 67 % of long-term care facilities in Stockholm affected. In France, the Ministry of Health stated in a press release dated 4 August 2020 that of the 30 296 people who had died of Covid-19, 10 506 (so more than a third) had died in care homes.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kiss et al., [Demographic outlook for the European Union](#), EPRS, European Parliament, 2020.

A key point noted in the EPRS report is that demographic trends affect EU regions in different ways. A number of trends are noted:

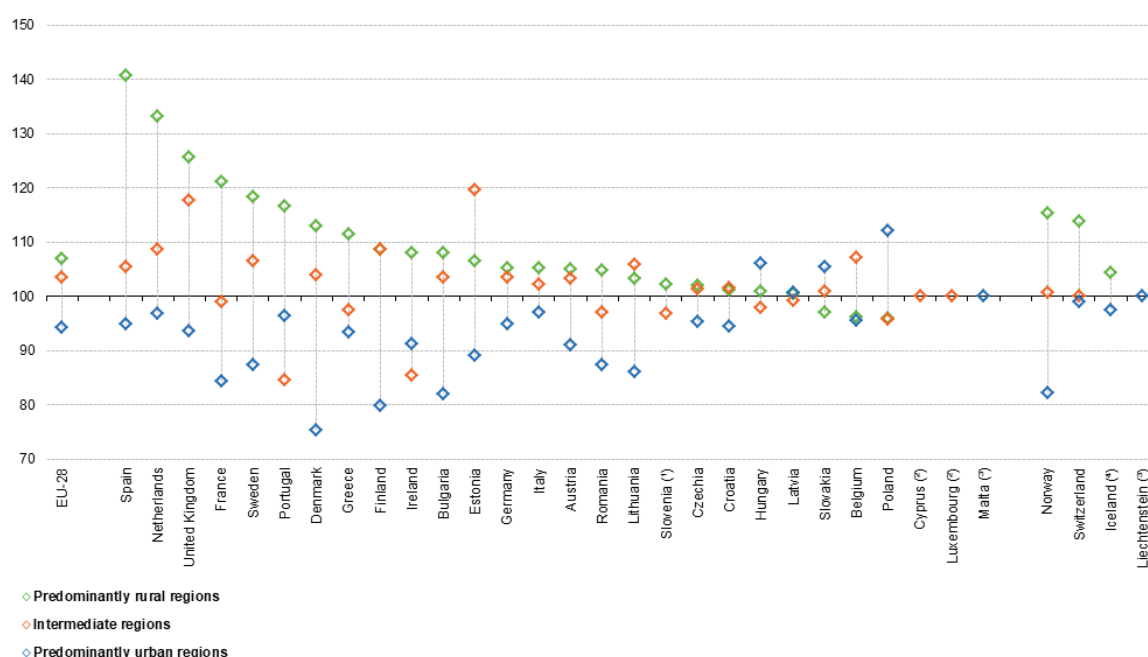
*Within the EU, the population of predominantly rural regions is projected to fall by 7.9 million by 2050.<sup>7</sup> This will have a negative effect on the number of farmers in these territories, resulting in an ageing farming population and a lack of young farmers.*

*In areas that are predominantly of a rural nature, the old age dependency ratio was higher than 50 % in January 2017. This means there were fewer than two people of working age for every elderly person.<sup>8</sup> It is suggested that this will lead to adverse impacts such as declining business activity. As the farming population ages, the younger population will be less attracted to a career in farming.*

An analysis of where older people live within the EU indicates that, in 2018, there were 101 million older people (aged 65 years or more) living in the EU. In terms of the urban-rural typology, 42 % of this number were living in predominantly urban regions, 38 % in intermediate regions and 20 % in predominantly rural regions. As urban regions will generally be more populated such a distribution is to be expected. However, when the share of older people is examined by different types of region (i.e. predominantly urban, intermediate and predominantly rural) divided by the same share for the total population expressed as a percentage, analysis by Eurostat shows that older people in the EU '...are generally more inclined than their compatriots to live in predominantly rural regions'.<sup>9</sup> This is shown by indexed values greater than 100 % in Figure 1 for the vast majority of Member States with the only exceptions being Slovakia, Belgium and Poland. The share of older people living in predominantly rural regions was high for Spain, the Netherlands and France.

Figure 1 – People aged 65 years or over by urban-rural typology (2018)

(% share of total population living in each type of region = 100).



Source: [Eurostat](#).

<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed in the ESPON policy brief '[Shrinking rural regions in Europe](#)', published in 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See [Eurostat Regional Yearbook 2018](#).

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat, [Ageing Europe: Looking at the lives of older people in the EU](#), September 2019 edition.



Eurostat provides a breakdown of similar statistics on the shares of older people (aged 65 or over) for NUTS 2 administrative regions,<sup>10</sup> and more detailed figures for NUTS 3 regions. Its analysis of these figures for NUTS 2 administrative regions, summarised in Figure 2, reveals the following for 2018:

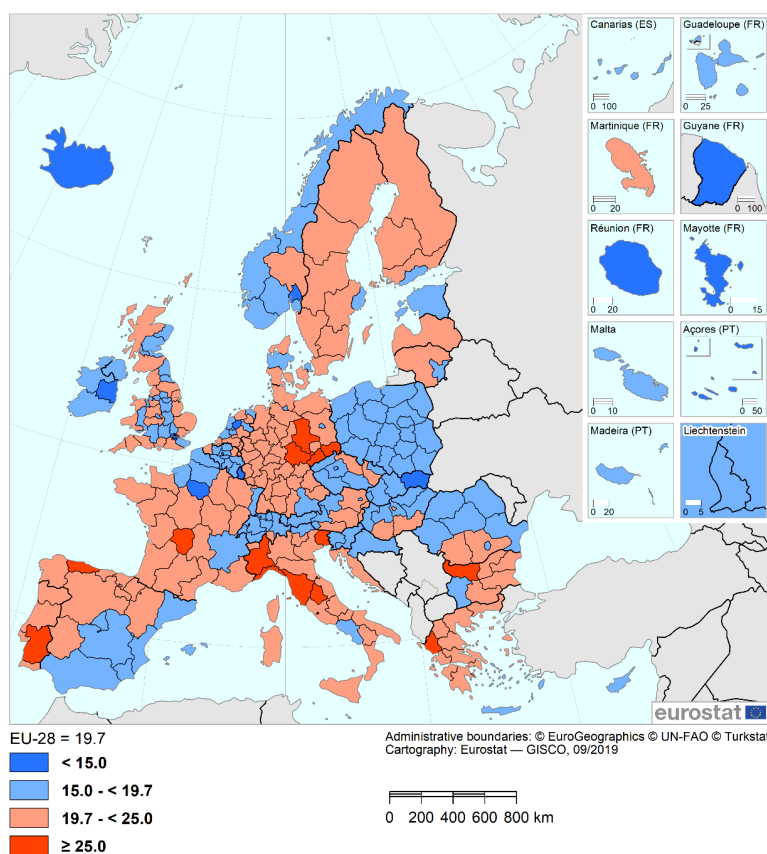
- There were 14 regions across the EU where older people made up more than one quarter of the total population. These regions were largely located in Eastern Germany and Northern/central Italy.
- With respect to NUTS 3 regions, older people accounted for more than one third of the total population in central Greece (which comprises the mountainous, sparsely populated region of Evrytania).
- Other relatively sparsely populated regions where older people accounted for at least 30 % of the population included: Ourense (north-west Spain, 31.2 %); Creuse (central France, 30.1 %) and Alto Tamega (northern Portugal, 30.0 %).

This data indicates the scale of the regional variations that exist across the EU when it comes to the share of older people in the total population. It reinforces the point made earlier that demographic

trends affect EU regions in different ways. Overall, it points to high concentrations of older people in rural, sparsely populated regions.

An earlier EPRS briefing, published in June 2020, highlighted the trends in terms of declining numbers and depopulation occurring in certain rural, remote and border regions across the EU. While ageing will affect all EU regions, it points out that certain rural, border and remote regions will suffer from both ageing and depopulation. It notes that the social and economic consequences associated with such trends '... are likely to have profound implications both nationally and regionally'.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 2 – People aged 65 years or over by NUTS level 2 regions (2018) (% share of total population)



Source: [Eurostat](#).

<sup>10</sup> [NUTS](#) refers to the nomenclature of territorial units for statistics, a geographical nomenclature subdividing the EU into regions at three different levels: NUTS1, 2 and 3, moving from larger to smaller territorial units.

<sup>11</sup> V. Margaras, [Demography on the European agenda: Strategies for tackling demographic decline](#), EPRS, European Parliament, June 2020.



The ESPON policy brief 'Shrinking rural regions in Europe',<sup>12</sup> published in 2017, explains how depopulation results from 'a complex 'vicious circle' of interrelated economic and social factors, presenting acute challenges for regional development and governance'. These can include, for example, the restructuring of rural areas where agriculture has become less labour intensive and where selective out-migration occurs involving the loss of younger and well educated workers. Such areas suffer from fewer job opportunities, and underutilised and unviable public services including transport and health services. These factors, when combined, impact on local living conditions undermining the attractiveness of such areas and leading to a 'downward spiral of demographic decline through falling fertility rates and enforced ageing of the remaining population' (ESPON, 2017 section 2). The ESPON briefing further points out that, in 2015, the majority of European regions with high shares of elderly populations and with a corresponding high old-age dependency ratio were rural regions.

### 3. Situation / Challenges facing older people in rural areas

Set within the context of the above demographic features of rural areas, a review of research on rural ageing identifies a number of issues that impact on older people living in such areas. An earlier review<sup>13</sup> of research on rural ageing in the EU, undertaken by Burholt and Dobbs, highlighted a range of challenges. At a time, when all Member States are making preparations for their national strategic plans, which will form a key element of the Commission's proposals for the common agricultural policy (CAP), this analysis is very timely.

Table 1 identifies a series of issues and themes relevant to older people, taking into account a range of challenges concerning social, economic and political factors, the role of technology, the impact of climate change, and specific challenges in relation to agriculture. This approach helps to identify a series of key topics on the future of rural ageing, focusing on the nature and significance of the challenges for the rural agenda within the EU. The authors of the original version of Table 1 stressed from the outset the way the trend towards an ageing population requires the adoption of a multi-disciplinary perspective, involving collaboration between scientists and researchers in a variety of disciplines. This point becomes apparent when the issues identified in Table 1 are considered. In addition to the demographic features of rural ageing, these include, for example: health issues, including access to services; the issue of social isolation and loneliness; lifelong learning; the role of older people in the development of programmes and policies; the issue of generational renewal in agriculture; the role of technology and the existence of a 'digital divide'; and the impact of climate change. The impact of the pandemic must also be added to this analysis.

<sup>12</sup> ESPON, 2017 (op. cit.).

<sup>13</sup> V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, '[Research on rural ageing: Where have we got to and where are we going in Europe?](#)', *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 28, pp. 432-446, October 2012.

Table 1 – Overview of future topics for rural ageing research in the EU

Themes	Challenges			Agriculture
	Social, economic and political issues	Technology	Climate change	
<b>Demography</b>	Rural poverty in different parts of the EU	Digital exclusion	Energy efficiency and fuel poverty Excess winter / summer deaths by region type	Land abandonment Sustainable local production
<b>Health and access to services</b>	Future physical and mental health needs	Telemedicine Smart housing	Increase in insect-borne diseases	Abandonment and service provision decline
<b>Relationships</b>	Changing family patterns	New virtual social spaces New surveillance and interactive monitoring in caregiving for frail elderly people	Fuel cost impact on transnational inter and intra generational relationships	Abandonment and impact on informal support
<b>Lifelong learning</b>	Employment and retirement patterns Educational needs	Distance learning Remote employment opportunities Health promotion	Role of older people as 'thrifty' mentors in sustainability	Retirement from agriculture
<b>Participation</b>	Leisure Volunteerism Physical activity	Transport Security and fear of crime	Social, collective activism Sustainable communities	Choice of space and place in the face of changing trends in agriculture
<b>Policy and planning</b>	From recommendations then development to implementation	Rural planning	Psychosocial impact of change	The biofuel debate

Data source: EPRS adaptation from: V Burholt and Dobbs C., 'Research on rural ageing: Where have we got to and where are we going in Europe?', *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 28, pp. 432-446, 2012.

While this is not necessarily an exhaustive list of issues, an examination of each of these provides information on their scale and significance in the light of the ongoing debate on the future of the CAP and related policies concerning the future of the EU's rural areas.

### 3.1. Health and access to services

An issue of key concern to older people living in rural areas is the importance of access to services in general and to health and care services in particular. This raises questions concerning the costs (both public and private) of providing such services given the distances involved, the difficulty of recruiting staff and the viability and disproportionate costs that arise from serving a more dispersed

rural population. It is generally recognised that demand for health care is likely to increase with an ageing population. Statistics at regional level<sup>14</sup> within the EU show certain patterns for rural areas:

- people living in rural areas account for the highest proportion of adults with unmet needs for medical examination in seven EU Member States – particularly notable in Greece (11.7 %) and Romania (6 %);
- the proportion of adults with unmet dental examination needs is higher in rural areas (3.1 %) of the EU than it is in cities (3 %) or in towns and villages (2.4 %). In rural parts of Greece, Latvia and Portugal, more than 10 % of all adults have unmet dental examination needs.

In addition to the above statistics, EUROMONTANA (the European Association of Mountain Areas) has noted<sup>15</sup> that in countries such as Greece, Sweden and Spain, more than 50 % of the population in mountainous areas live more than an hour's drive from the nearest hospital.

A study<sup>16</sup> reviewing policies in eight high-income countries regarding hospitals in rural or remote areas found that only one of the eight countries (Italy) had actually drawn up a national policy on hospitals in rural or remote areas. The study noted that hospital centres in remote areas provided basic emergency care, even with catchment areas lower than 80 000 people and yearly admissions below 20 000. It found that the percentage of hospitals reaching the minimum threshold volume of 20 000 yearly admissions decreased sharply when moving from urban areas (77 %) to rural (21 %) and remote rural areas (4 %). The study noted the small size of Estonia's hospital catchment areas, ranging from 8 600 to 576 000 people, with hospitals in 10 of the country's 15 counties having catchment areas of fewer than 50 000 people. Such small catchment areas are seen as a threat to the long-term sustainability of hospitals. The study also highlighted the way in which the financial sustainability of small hospitals in rural or remote areas had become a major concern, reflecting high capital expenditure and running costs on the one hand and the difficulty of attracting highly skilled medical staff to such locations on the other.

There is ongoing concern and debate regarding how to attract more young physicians to work in rural areas. For example, in Germany, rural areas have been facing the challenge of ensuring access to general practice and family medicine.<sup>17</sup> In Saxony-Anhalt, University of Magdeburg's Institute of General Practice and Family Medicine has developed an innovative undergraduate medical course to improve the potential of medical training to improve health care in rural areas. It involved a programme over two weekends to teach students rural medical practice skills, in order to provide them with insight into different forms of rural practice and the social importance of their role in such areas. Early evaluation evidence indicated an increased willingness to consider a career in rural practice. In France, plans were announced in February 2020 to attract young doctors to rural areas through a series of measures to improve access to medical care in such areas.<sup>18</sup> These include the provision of 750 contracts for medical assistants to help doctors with their administrative tasks and free them to concentrate on their core activities and increase the number of patients they can see.

<sup>14</sup> Eurostat, [Health statistics at regional level](#), Statistics Explained, March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Euromontana, [Ageing in mountain areas – Contribution of Euromontana for the Green Paper on Ageing](#), June 2020. Euromontana is a European multisectoral association for co-operation and development of mountain territories. It embraces regional and national mountain organisations throughout greater Europe, including regional development agencies, local authorities, agriculture organisations, environmental agencies, forestry organisations and research institutes.

<sup>16</sup> B. Rechel et al., '[Hospitals in rural or remote areas: An exploratory review of policies in 8 high income countries](#)', Health Policy, Vol. 120, Issue 7, pp. 758-769, July 2016 (the countries included Italy, Spain, UK, Croatia and Estonia).

<sup>17</sup> See J. Holst and M. Hermann, '[Structural challenges for improving rural medical training in Germany](#)' in Journal of Health Education Research and Development, Volume 14, Issue 1, February 2016.

<sup>18</sup> See French Government website: '[Garantir un accès aux soins](#)', 19 February 2020.

The measures also include the creation of positions for salaried doctors and mixed town-hospital activity in rural territories. A target has also been set to create 1 500 additional internships for medical students (minimum six months) in rural areas.

This examination of access to health services raises the issue of the provision of informal care and local support in rural areas, an area explored in the following section on the role of social networks and community support involving older people.

### 3.2. Social isolation and loneliness

Commentaries on rural living have often pointed to the issues of social isolation and loneliness experienced by older people in both urban and rural contexts (see Box 1).

#### Box 1 – Age, the digital divide and rural living: older people and loneliness in France

A 2019 survey of people over 60 carried out by CSA Research Institute with support from [AGE Platform Europe](#)'s French member organisation, Les Petits Frères des Pauvres, indicated that 900 000 older people in France, representing around 6 % of those aged 60 or over, experienced severe loneliness leading to social exclusion. It also showed that:

- isolation increased with age, reaching a peak at around 85 years of age;
- rural living and the lack of digital skills were two major factors in social exclusion.

Source: [Solitude et isolement des personnes âgées en France](#) (Loneliness and isolation among older people in France), CSA Research Institute with financial support from the Foundation des Petits Frères des Pauvres, September 2019.

Poor transport links and geographical isolation make it difficult to join in social activities. A number of observations can be made concerning these issues.

- There is a perception that older people in urban areas may be more likely to be lonely than those in rural areas. This reflects a perception that older people may have closer social ties in rural communities. This is open to challenge given the various changes rural areas may have experienced including changes in family structure.
- There is also a perception that loneliness in rural areas can be hidden. One research review on rural ageing, cited in 2012, noted the 'lack of research on loneliness in rural areas in Europe', describing it as 'lamentable' especially as this makes it difficult to determine the most appropriate or effective interventions to adopt.<sup>19</sup>
- A distinction is often made between **social isolation** and **loneliness**. The former is seen as being a more objective state ranging from the absence of contact with others to high levels of contact. In contrast, **loneliness** is seen as the state of mind of a person with negative feelings regarding their levels of social contact.<sup>20</sup>
- As possible responses to social isolation and loneliness, befriending programmes have been used. These can involve mentoring or technology to facilitate social interaction, with regular home visiting services involving volunteer befrienders and community-based social groups, activities and outings.

Further insight into ageing patterns in eastern Europe is provided by an analysis of experience from Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>21</sup> It explains the way in which the post-socialist transformation of society and economy in these countries has loosened family ties that used to be very strong. Young people

<sup>19</sup> V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> E. Bantry White, S. O'Sullivan, L. Kenny and C. O'Connell, '[The symbolic representation of community in social isolation an loneliness among older people: Insights for intervention from a rural Irish case study](#)', *Health and Social Care in the Community*, March 2018.

<sup>21</sup> J. Kulcsar Laszlo, C. Bradatan, '[The Greying Periphery – Ageing and community developments in rural Romania and Bulgaria](#)', *Europe Asia Studies*, Vol. 66, No 5, July 2014, pp. 794-810.

moved to urban areas during the 1990s in search of better paid jobs, leaving the rural areas with an ageing population. This research illustrates how rural areas experience different development patterns as a result of their geographical location. For example, villages close to urban areas benefit from their location whereas more remote villages can fail to generate growth. The researchers highlight how subsistence agriculture has never generated much income in Romania and Bulgaria. Competition from large, subsidised farms has undermined the products of small family farms and villages have become depopulated. In these circumstances, older people are disproportionately affected, their low incomes being based largely on pensions from low wage agricultural work.

Further issues identified in this research include the decline of family-based elderly care, creating problems for those remaining. The outmigration of young people from rural areas has impacted on traditional family structures. In the villages studied, the family was perceived as the most important and often the only institution responsible for taking care of older people. The exit of many young people to urban areas has added to a negative perception of older people being seen as a burden. The researchers conclude that '...the changing family structure and intergenerational relationships have a negative impact on the elderly in Eastern Europe'. This is reflected in terms of feelings of 'hopelessness, pessimism, loneliness and regret...'. Older people living in remote villages that do not benefit from proximity to large urban areas lack the safety net that the collectivist model may have provided for previous generations.

Potential policy responses include community-led programmes, the potential offered by immigration to fill the gap, and return migration, involving those who had left for work elsewhere. In such cases, local policies are seen as playing a key role in making communities attractive to those returning.

### 3.3. Technology and the digital divide

In light of the above observations, technology offers both opportunities for older people but also challenges in terms of the 'digital divide'. When it comes to opportunities, previous studies have highlighted how technology, involving a wide range of applications, can help to reduce isolation and loneliness among older people, giving them greater choice, independence and control over their lives and helping them maintain social contacts.<sup>22</sup> These applications are especially relevant in the case of health care including e-health, mobile health devices. This is illustrated in Table 2, compiled from a report drawn up by the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) network published in 2019.<sup>23</sup> The latter also identified a number of challenges concerning the implementation of new technologies in the health and social care sectors. These include issues such as access to and use of the internet by older people, which varies across the EU. Overall, by 2018, 89 % of households had internet access (some 29 percentage points more than in 2008). However, internet access rates were lower in rural areas, as confirmed by Eurostat data for 2019.<sup>24</sup> In some 23 EU Member States, the percentage of households in rural areas with internet access was lower than the equivalent proportion of households in cities or towns. Eurostat data also shows that older people go online less frequently than younger people. (For example, in 2016, 45 % of people aged 65 to 74 used the internet at least once a week compared with 82 % of the 25 to 64 age group).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> European Commission, [ICT and Ageing – European Study on Users Markets and Technology](#), Final Report, 2010; Age UK, Technology, [Older people evidence review](#), 2010.

<sup>23</sup> European Parliamentary Technology Assessment, [Technologies in care for older people](#). EPTA report 2019. Evaluation and Research Secretariat (ERS) of the Swedish Parliament.

<sup>24</sup> Eurostat, ['Digital economy and society statistics - households and individuals'](#), Statistics explained, June 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat, Infographic: [A look at the lives of the elderly in the EU today](#), September 2017.

Table 2 – Opportunities and challenges facing older people in rural areas in the application of technology

Opportunities offered by technology	Challenges and barriers faced by older people
<p><b>e-Health</b> – using digital technology for remote care</p> <p>Telehealth: remote collection of patient data</p> <p>Telecare: remote care with the help of environmental sensors to detect falls or fires</p> <p>Telemedicine: delivery of medical care over a distance</p> <p>Telecoaching: delivered by digital tools such as computer and smart phone</p> <p>Mobile health (M health): mobile health applications for self-diagnosis</p> <p><b>Active and assisted living:</b> home-based devices to support diverse activities of older adults.</p> <p><b>Robotic technology:</b> robotic wheelchairs, shower chairs and technologies to prevent falls.</p>	<p>Access to and use of internet</p> <p>Digital divide / digital alienation among older people</p> <p>Loneliness</p> <p>Lack of digital infrastructure in rural areas</p> <p>Funding</p> <p>Integrity and privacy</p>

Source: EPRS adaptation from: European Parliament Technology Assessment. [Technologies in care for older people](#), EPTA Report 2019, Swedish Parliament.

These data highlight the issue of digital alienation among older people, especially for those in the older age group of 74 years and over. This issue was identified in the Cork Declaration 2.0,<sup>26</sup> issued in 2016. It called for policies to overcome the digital divide between rural and urban areas and to develop the connectivity and digitalisation of rural areas. Greater recognition is also being given to the potential offered by the 'smart village concept' to promote active ageing and sustainable independent living in later life.<sup>27</sup> Eurostat data<sup>28</sup> show however that digital alienation varies across Member States with Poland and Greece experiencing higher levels than elsewhere. Although older people in the EU are closing the digital divide, they remain relatively slow to adopt new technologies (see Box 2).

In addition to the above findings, more in-depth analysis of ICT usage and digital skills of rural areas highlights the human resource gaps that can exist in rural areas in terms of IT usage and digital skills.<sup>29</sup> Evidence<sup>30</sup> from one of the least developed regions in northern Hungary points to a low number of university educated employed people, with around 25-27 % of the regional population having never used a computer in 2017, and low rates for those accessing the internet on a daily basis, i.e. the internet is not used even for private searches, shopping, work or e-health. Such findings highlight the role of investment in education and training to increase digital skills for the over 65s

<sup>26</sup> [Cork 2.0 Declaration](#) 'A Better Life in Rural Areas', Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> L. Philip and F. Williams, '[Healthy ageing in smart villages? Observations from the field](#)', European. Countryside, Vol. 11(4), 2019, pp. 616-633.

<sup>28</sup> Eurostat, [Statistics on social life and opinions](#), Statistics explained, June 2019. See also Eurostat, [Ageing Europe: Looking at the lives of older people in the EU](#), 2019 edition.

<sup>29</sup> See P. Khodabakhsh, [Chances and challenges of digitalisation in rural areas](#), Annual North Sea Conference 2017, Göttingen, 29 June 2017.

<sup>30</sup> H. Nagy, J. Kaposzta and A. Varga-Nagy, '[Is ICT smartness possible development way for Hungarian rural areas](#)', 17th International Scientific Conference Engineering for Rural Development, May 2018.



in rural areas.<sup>31</sup> The issue of lifelong learning for older people in rural areas is examined in the next section.

### Box 2 – ICT usage by older people across the EU

Evidence from Eurostat data, drawing on the [annual Community survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals](#) shows that although older people in the EU are closing the digital divide, they remain relatively slow to adopt new technologies:

- Two-fifths or 40 % of people aged 65-74 had never used a computer in 2017. This proportion was higher in Italy, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria and Greece (78 %).
- Almost half (48 %) of those aged 65 to 74 had not used the internet for the three months preceding the survey.
- In 2017, almost one third (31 %) of the EU adult population had above basic digital skills, while the shares for older people were much lower: 16 % for those aged 55 to 64; and 7 % for those aged 65 to 74.
- In 2018, less than a fifth of older people took part in social networks, compared with an average of 56 % for all adults.

Data source: [Eurostat](#).

## 3.4. Lifelong learning

This examination of the digital divide raises issues concerning lifelong learning opportunities and the potential they offer to older people in rural areas. Evidence from the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills<sup>32</sup> (i.e. programme for the international assessment of adult competencies – PIAAC) shows how the skills of a person tend to deteriorate over time if they are not used frequently. Consequently, the gap in literacy proficiency skills between generations is more than two-thirds of a proficiency level, (equivalent to approximately five years of education). The survey highlighted the need for people to continue their learning throughout life. It also demonstrated the way that skills are generally highest for the 25-34 age-group and decrease steadily for older generations (with the oldest age group in this survey, 55-65 years scoring considerably lower than the youngest group).

Educational opportunities for older adults in rural areas are often perceived as being more limited than in urban areas. The research literature points to 'a dearth of research about the role of an adequate network of educational organisations and educational programmes for older people in rural communities'.<sup>33</sup>

A study<sup>34</sup> from Slovenia examined the extent and quality of educational opportunities for older adults between selected urban and rural municipalities. Two of the municipalities selected were rural, had low levels of services and information accessibility, lower than national average educational levels and only modest opportunities for older adults, reflected in 'moderate and low levels of well-being'. By contrast, in the urban municipality, many different formal and non-formal educational opportunities were available for older people. In the rural municipalities, voluntary associations offered non-formal educational and leisure time activities. Other key findings provide

<sup>31</sup> See Eurostat, Statistics Explained: [Digital economy and society statistics- households and individuals](#), June 2019. See also Eurostat, [Ageing Europe – statistics on social life and opinions](#), June 2019.

<sup>32</sup> OECD: [The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion](#), third edition, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, 2019. See also European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture, [Survey of Adult Skills \(PIAAC\): Implications for education and training policies in Europe](#), 8 October 2013.

<sup>33</sup> See V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> S. Krasovec and S. Kump, [The educational opportunities for older adults in rural and urban municipalities](#), Anthropological Notebook, 20, pp. 51-68, 2014.



insight into issues concerning educational opportunities and lifelong learning for older people in rural areas. These include:

- A low level of participation in education was 'often connected with a low level of education and the poverty of older people, regardless of where they lived'.
- The level of earlier education and the previous occupation of older adults influence the educational process. The higher the educational level, the more likely a person will be actively involved in community activities and in trying to influence opportunities for education. Those who left school early and had not pursued education as adults showed no interest in third age education.
- Research on farms in rural areas in Slovenia showed that farmers did not participate in wider social networks, with their social network consisting only of their closest siblings.
- In terms of barriers facing older people in rural areas, mobility and limited access to education were those cited most often.

To overcome the barriers that older people face, the study points to the need to organise transportation for older adults, the provision of learning possibilities involving study groups, traveling libraries and home visits in smaller settlements, and the provision of educational programmes free of charge with content based on older adults' needs. In short, the research suggests that the participation of older adults in education does not depend only on the extent of educational opportunities in municipalities, the above measures are also needed.

Although this is just one study based on experience from Slovenia, it involved primary research within the framework of research on care for the older people within communities in Slovenia. It included interviews with providers of education for older adults and with older people in order to find out why and how often they participated in educational programmes and the barriers they faced. Other sources that provide insight into the role and significance of lifelong learning for older adults in rural areas include a range of initiatives and case studies in this field. Some researchers see lifelong learning as a way to reduce development gaps between rural and urban areas, especially in the context of the role of education in promoting sustainable development.<sup>35</sup> It is seen as a way to empower vulnerable rural individuals to gain knowledge and improve their living conditions.

If there is one point of consensus or agreement within the extensive literature that exists on older people, it is the role that lifelong learning can play in maintaining an active mind, thereby enhancing personal and community wellbeing.<sup>36</sup> Those who have studied lifelong learning in detail make the link between participation in lifelong learning and enhanced social capital and wellbeing. Adult education is seen as a way to enhance the well-being of older people. As people become more knowledgeable and more socially engaged, there is a positive impact on both personal and community wellbeing.

Evidence on the experience of universities of the third age (UTAs) suggests they fulfil a range of positive social and individual functions, such as helping older people to increase their social integration in society, including organising and coordinating their social / cultural activities (Box 3 summarises the experience of UTAs in Finland).

Set within the above context, educational lifelong learning opportunities can be seen as significant for the future of rural areas especially in light of the evidence on social isolation and the need to

<sup>35</sup> M. R. Stanef, A. M. Manole and M. Militaru, '[Lifelong learning – a way to reduce development gaps between rural and urban areas](#)', *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 46, 2012, pp. 4 508-4 512.

<sup>36</sup> S. B. Meeriam and Y. Kee, '[Promoting community wellbeing: the case for lifelong learning for older adults](#)', *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 64(2), 2014, pp. 128-144.

address the digital divide. Research evidence points to the role of lifelong learning in addressing or promoting both individual and community well-being.

### Box 3 – Third age universities in Finland

Universities of the third age (UTAs) have been defined as 'socio-cultural centres where senior citizens may acquire new knowledge of significant issues or validate the knowledge they already possess...'. (M. Formasa, 2019). They target people in the third age phase of their lives. Finland established its first UTA in 1985 in the University of Jyväskylä, followed by the University of Helsinki.

The university programmes are a form of Open University and aim to impart knowledge of topical research findings to older people. Although the UTAs in Finland are located in urban environments, the activities organised by it are open to those in rural areas.

Sources: Case study 5.5: 'Third Age Universities in Finland-an unused adult education resource for rural areas?', in Euroacademy, [The role of educational and lifelong learning in sustainable rural development](#), Euroacademy Thematic Guide Series, 2009; See also: [www.avoinyliopisto.fi](http://www.avoinyliopisto.fi); and M. Formosa, [Universities of the Third Age](#), January 2019.

## 3.5. Care strategies for rural areas

One of the consequences of demographic ageing is the increasing number of older people in need of care. Earlier data from Eurostat indicated how older people were more inclined to live in rural areas. Further analysis of Eurostat data indicates that while the overwhelming majority of older people continue to live in private households, there is a trend towards single households with elderly individuals living alone. In 2017, the share of women in single households was 40 % across the EU, while the share for older men was 22.4 %. A key challenge presented by the ageing population is the management of care needs. Traditionally, in rural areas, the family has often been seen as the provider of such care. This model is beginning to give way to new ways of organising or arranging social care.

### Box 4 – Ageing in rural areas of Spain – changing care strategies

A study of demographic change in the Pyrenean foothills identified the impact of the 56 % depopulation from 1910 to 2010. Migration flows from rural areas to urban areas have resulted in elderly people living on their own. Women migrated to urban areas in Spain seeking work in the service sector in higher numbers than men. This emigration has impacted on the reproductive capacity of those areas experiencing such outmigration, such as the Pyrenean valleys and mid-western regions of Spain, which are facing increasing care needs. New ways of organising social care have had to be adopted.

Temporary co-residence has developed where parents and their offspring live together when such support is required. This addresses the desire of older people to remain where they are but also helps to facilitate intergenerational exchange. It helps families maintain their traditional social function of providing care.

Other forms of support include community networks, neighbours providing mutual care and cooperation in tasks such as helping older people visit the doctor, or shopping. In addition, men are now more likely to become caregivers given the above demographic changes.

Source: Begona Elizalde-San Miguel and V. Diaz-Gandasegui '[Ageing in rural areas of Spain: the influence of demography on care strategies](#)', The History of the Family, Vol. 21, No 2, pp. 214-230, 2016.

Evidence from rural areas in Spain (see Box 4) points to new ways of organising or arranging social care that take account of the changing demographic and cultural trends these areas have

experienced.<sup>37</sup> These highlight the importance of strong community networks and of a shared identity, which helps to boost resilience and prevent further depopulation of such areas. The example in Box 4, above, highlights the importance of informal sources of support. The authors of the study point to 'a complex puzzle of care for the elderly in rural areas'. This can be seen in the context of the role of the social services sector, home-helps, tele-home care or the more formal care homes sector. Eurostat data shows that there is a relatively high proportion of people aged 75 years or over who face severe difficulties in carrying out a range of everyday tasks.<sup>38</sup> Although this is not broken down for urban/rural areas, it can be expected that there will be increasing demand for such services over the coming years in rural areas. This last point becomes more poignant against the backdrop not only of an ageing population but also rising numbers of people with dementia. It has been estimated that the EU will experience almost a doubling of the number of people living with dementia by 2050.<sup>39</sup> The ageing population, will be a significant factor in the increase in the number of people with dementia, especially for people aged 85+ (based on prevalence rates remaining consistent per age range). Older people with dementia in rural communities face specific challenges in accessing services where traditional types of specialist service system are not available.<sup>40</sup>

## 4. Climate change, the pandemic and older people

### 4.1. Coronavirus pandemic

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of older people's immune systems. Eurostat data has highlighted the relatively high shares of older people living in rural regions. The pattern of infections and deaths from the coronavirus has shown that older people have been extremely vulnerable to the virus. As the pandemic has unfolded, the virus has posed a considerable threat to those populations with larger proportions of older, more fragile people. This has been confirmed by evidence from both the United States<sup>41</sup> and the EU. In the case of the latter, the Joint Research Centre (JRC), using data from the European surveillance system database developed at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Covid-19 related fatalities were found to be higher among men aged 60 in all countries with the exception of Cyprus and Slovakia. The male disadvantage was particularly pronounced for the 65 to 70 age group.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the impact of the pandemic on older people, the JRC report notes how the incidence of the virus has been highest globally in densely populated urban cities; it also points out that the coronavirus has affected different places differently, giving for example patterns of transmission for small villages in the Lombardy and Veneto regions in Northern Italy compared with large global metropolises. It noted that intermediate and rural regions in Europe were not immune to the spread of the virus. These areas were particularly vulnerable due to their demographic profile, i.e. with a larger elderly population and share of chronic diseases than urban regions, and income levels and limited access to medical resources translating into a shortage of health workers, hospitals and

<sup>37</sup> Begona Elizalde - San Miguel and V Diaz-Gandasegui 'Ageing in rural areas of Spain: the influence of demography on care strategies', *The History of the Family*, Vol. 21, No 2, pp 214-230, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Eurostat, [Ageing Europe: Looking at the lives of older people in the EU](#), 2019 edition.

<sup>39</sup> Alzheimer Europe, [Dementia in Europe Yearbook 2019: Estimating the prevalence of dementia in Europe](#), Luxembourg, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> This issue is documented in an edited collection of research studies focusing on dementia in remote and rural areas: A. Innes, D. Morgan and J. Farmer (ed.), [Remote and rural dementia care - policy, research and practice](#), Policy Press, Bristol, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US, [Rural Communities](#); and C. Henning-Smith, 'The unique impact of COVID-19 on older adults in rural areas', *Journal of Ageing & Social Policy*, Vol. 32 (4-5), 2020, pp. 1-7.

<sup>42</sup> Joint Research Centre, [Age, gender and territory of COVID-19 infections and fatalities](#), JRC Technical Report, 2020.

intensive care beds. One study<sup>43</sup> published in March 2020 using population age data for Europe's NUTS-3 regions, concluded that failure to mitigate the pandemic would mean that 'the most affected regions would be the remote periphery with relatively older populations and less healthcare facilities'.

In addition to the vulnerability of older people to this virus, those in this group who live in rural areas face a range of challenges associated with this pandemic. They include:

- issues concerning access to health care during the pandemic, obliging older people to seek treatment in larger urban centres that might have better facilities and equipment to deal with the effects of the virus;
- the impact of the virus on care homes and its effects on health and social care workers, becoming infected by the virus and passing it on to patients, creating a shortage of carers in such areas;
- the effects of family members returning to rural areas either as visitors or to look after elderly relatives, or visiting such areas as they may be considered a safe haven;
- the impact of social distancing measures resulting in older people facing increased levels of social isolation and loneliness even if this can be addressed through internet connections and the use of online platforms.

The OECD has undertaken an analysis<sup>44</sup> of the implications of the pandemic for rural development. It has noted how demographic characteristics, namely a higher share of older people in the population and geographic features such as longer distances to access health care centres, coupled with reduced health care staff and facilities, hamper the ability of rural regions to respond to the pandemic. It acknowledges the opportunity the crisis offers rural areas in terms of encouraging the role of local networks and cooperative structures. The analysis refers to a range of initiatives taken at the local level in response to the crisis. Examples of these initiatives are shown in Table 3, drawing on the OECD analysis and the European Rural Development Network (ENRD) website.<sup>45</sup>

Table 3 – Examples of local-level initiatives of relevance to older people in rural areas in the context of the coronavirus pandemic

Member State	Initiative
Croatia	An app available to all Croatian smart phone users advises people on how to diagnose and manage suspected coronavirus infections. It is especially relevant for people in places with remote access to health services. The 'Call for Health' project is designed to provide medical advice and free delivery of medicines to immobile and chronically ill patients.
France	Agricultural cooperatives in the Vexin region helped caregivers by delivering their reserves of masks and protective equipment to the hospital at Gisors. The Millesoins network brings together 15 general practitioners, pharmacists and physiotherapists, etc. to work together to address the pandemic in the remote Millevaches Plateau region, where access to hospitals is difficult.

<sup>43</sup> I. Kashnitsky and J. M. Aburto, '[COVID-19 in unequally ageing European regions](#)', March 2020. The model assumed that five sixths of the populations get infected and experience age-specific infection – fertility ratios were modelled by Imperial College London.

<sup>44</sup> OECD, [Policy implications of coronavirus crisis for rural development](#), June 2020 and the [European Network for Rural Development](#).

<sup>45</sup> See the website for the European Network for Rural Development, [Rural responses to the COVID-19 crisis](#).

Member State	Initiative
Ireland	The COVID-19 Community Outreach initiative <sup>46</sup> was established as a national response, involving a network of community champions in every Irish county, to ensure that older people and people with long-term medical conditions have access to information and support. It is coordinated by the Wheel and Irish Rural Link and funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development.
Italy	A local engineering company used 3D printing to meet hospital demand for breathing valves for ventilators. The Federation of Italian Farmers organised a home delivery of fresh agricultural produce for vulnerable people and those at risk during the height of the coronavirus crisis. <sup>47</sup>
Spain	A community of 11 villages and 12 000 inhabitants pool initiatives such as producing masks and creating a common household aid fund for the most vulnerable in the community. <sup>48</sup> In the Sierra Norte de Madrid area, the GALSINMA local action group undertook a series of actions, such as checking up on seniors by phone and using apps such as Zoom or Skype to help people who may have suffered from loneliness during the confinement. <sup>49</sup> In the Basque country, a programme relying on volunteers and a network of pharmacies provides a service for older people with chronic diseases and living alone, ensuring they do not have to go to the pharmacy, to avoid the risk of coronavirus exposure. The Guztion Artean network channels voluntary solidarity initiatives to asymptomatic people over 70 years of age who cannot leave home. <sup>50</sup>

Source: Compiled and adapted by EPRS from: OECD, [Policy implications of coronavirus crisis for rural development](#), June 2020 and the [European Network for Rural Development](#).

The above examples illustrate the role played by local action groups and their ability to focus on specific demographic groups. The example of the Sierra Norte Accion platform, referred to in Table 3, is a case in point, with its focus on supporting the most vulnerable and building collaborative arrangements with other organisations.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold, analysts are already beginning to identify the lessons to be learned from its impact on rural areas in general and older people in particular. These range from calls on Member State governments to promote better cooperation and solidarity between rural and urban areas, to the need for careful monitoring of pandemic-related trends (such as migration from urban to rural areas) and the adoption of an integrated strategy promoting better cooperation between rural and urban areas, recognising their interdependence.<sup>51</sup>

More specific lessons are beginning to be identified with respect to older people in rural areas. For example, in the case of Slovenia (see Box 5), these include: the importance of clear messages and accurate information to ensure older people stay healthy; early detection of older people who are socially deprived; the strengthening of field services; and the potential value of voluntary work.

As events have shown, the pandemic is not yet over. Additional risk factors exist for older people as Europe faces a second wave of the virus. A policy paper<sup>52</sup> prepared by the Forum for Research in

<sup>46</sup> The [COVID-19 Community Outreach initiative](#).

<sup>47</sup> See ENRD, '[Italian farmers delivering food at home](#)', 20 April 2020.

<sup>48</sup> See ENRD, '[A Spanish rural community takes action against COVID-19](#)', 3 April 2020.

<sup>49</sup> See ENRD: '[Sierra Norte Accion on COVID-19](#)', 23 June 2020.

<sup>50</sup> See OECD: [Policy implications of Coronavirus crisis for rural development](#).

<sup>51</sup> B. Bock and J. Duncan, '[Rural-urban relations in times of COVID-19](#)', Special online discussion on rural-urban relations. Rural Sociology Wageningen. University, 20 April 2020. (Note ROBUST – a Horizon 2020 project on rural-urban regions [blog](#) on rural-urban relations in times of Covid-19).

<sup>52</sup> M. Myck, M. Oczkowska and K. Trzcinski, '[Safety of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic: Co-residence of people aged 65+ in Poland compared to other European countries](#)', Free Network Policy Paper, 18 May 2020.

Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies examined the safety of older people during the coronavirus pandemic based on evidence from Poland. Noting that a major challenge in the months ahead will be to keep the population of older people safe and contain the spread of the virus in that segment of the population, the study focuses on the housing situation in EU countries and the rate of co-residence with the younger population. Its findings included the following:

- Poland has the highest rates of people aged 65 and over sharing their households with younger adults and children, with nearly 40 % living together with people aged up to 50 years old (excluding partners). 13.9 % of women and 14.7 % of men aged 65 and over shared a household with people aged 19 to 30. These proportions were significantly higher in rural areas, with over 40 % of the population aged 65 and over in Poland living in rural areas.
- In contrast, Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany have lower rates of co-residence among the older population. Older people in these countries tend to be in formal care facilities. For example, in Belgium, it is calculated that 'almost every fourth person aged 80+ is a resident of a care facility'. These countries report a much higher availability of beds in such facilities. For example, Denmark has 50 beds per 1 000 people aged 65+. Poland has a very low share of older people who relocate to a formalised care facility, reflecting the low number of vacancies in such facilities.

#### Box 5 – Lessons from the Alpine Space Transnational Governance of Active and Healthy Ageing (ASTAHG) project

In April 2018, the ASTAHG project was established, co-financed by the EU's [Interreg Alpine Space programme](#). Covering five Alpine countries (Italy, Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland and France), it aims to improve public policies dedicated to active ageing within the Alpine space. Running until April 2021, the project supports regional authorities by sharing good practices and innovation in the field of active ageing.

In the case of Slovenia, the average age in the Slovenian Alps is high. In 2018, 22 % of the Slovenian population was over 65 years of age. Slovenia's National Institute of Public Health has dedicated a special ASTAHG team to work in the remote areas of the Slovenian Alpine space.

Slovenia has also developed its 'Elderly for Elderly' project. It aims to identify people aged 69 and over living at home, in order to find out about their needs through home visits by volunteers and a questionnaire. This helps to establish a permanent contact with public service providers and NGOs, enabling civil society to monitor provision at home. Needs are taken care of by volunteers or by the services of Slovenia's National Institute of Public Health. Most of the people enrolled on the programme were between 75 and 90 years old.

In the case of Slovenia, the lessons arising from the coronavirus pandemic have begun to be identified. They include: the importance of clear messages and accurate information to ensure older people stay healthy; early detection of older people who are socially deprived; the strengthening of field services; and the potential value of voluntary work.

Source: M. Robnik et al., 'Supporting older people in remote areas in a post COVID-19 time', Ageing, Edition #15, 22 June 2020; ASTAHG Report on European Conference initiatives and public policies for the active and healthy ageing in the Alpine Space, 4 December 2019, Marseille, France.

These findings have implications for policies to control the coronavirus pandemic. In households where older people live side by side with younger people, there may be a significant risk factor not only in terms of the spread of the virus but also its transmission to a highly vulnerable group. In Poland's rural areas many people over the age of 65 live under one roof with school-age children (aged 7 to 18) and even more share a household with adults aged 19 to 30. The paper concludes by advising on the need to have a 'broad-based communication campaign on how to protect the most vulnerable household members' alongside any policy of gradual reopening of schools.



The experience of the pandemic to date has also highlighted the vulnerability of older people in care homes. At the beginning of November 2020, government sources in France indicated that of more than 40 000 fatalities associated with Covid-19 in France, around one third occurred in care homes for older people. Taking into account the number of these older residents who were transferred and died in hospital, it can be estimated that approximately 40 % of the total number of Covid-19 related fatalities in France were older people living in care homes.<sup>53</sup> Statistics for England and Wales show that between 28 December 2019 and 12 June 2020, 19 394 care home resident deaths involved Covid-19.<sup>54</sup> A comprehensive report published by ECDC on Covid-19 in long-term care facilities in the EU/EEA provides additional statistics for other European countries.<sup>55</sup>

## 4.2. Climate change

The research review on rural ageing published in 2012 drew attention to the impact that climate change has on older people.<sup>56</sup> It pointed to the risks of increases in serious diseases, with climate change expected to increase 'the potential geographic range and virulence of tropical diseases such as for example malaria.'<sup>57</sup> Hot summers and cold winters are expected to become more prevalent.

The 2019 report<sup>58</sup> of The Lancet Countdown<sup>59</sup> on health and climate change explains how populations aged over 65 years are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of climate change and to the extremes of heat, especially those with pre-existing medical conditions. The August 2003 European heat wave saw temperatures reach 40 °C, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 14 802 mainly elderly people in France and around 70 000 in Europe. Temperature records were also broken in Europe during the summers of 2006, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2014 and 2015. In the case of 2015, the summer heat wave is estimated to have caused more than 3 000 deaths in France alone.<sup>60</sup> Figure 3 shows the change in the number of heatwave exposure events relative to the 1986-2005 average. In 2018, those aged 65 or over experienced 220 million heatwave exposures globally. This was due to a series of heatwaves across India and across central and northern Europe. It has been estimated that mortality increases in Member States will be 1 to 4 % for every one degree rise in temperature.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Santé Publique France, the French National Health Agency, [Weekly epidemiological record of 5 November 2020](#), Table 2, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> [Deaths involving COVID-19 in the care sector](#), England and Wales, deaths occurring up to 12 June and registered up to 20 June 2020 (provisional), 3 July 2020. (It should be noted that of these 19 394 cases, 16305 (84.1 %) were classified as 'confirmed Covid-19' and 3089 (15.9%) were classified as 'suspected Covid-19'.

<sup>55</sup> ECDC Technical report: [Surveillance of COVID-19 at longterm care facilities in the EU/EEA](#), 19 May 2020. See also: ECDC Technical report: [Baseline projections of COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK: update](#), 17 September 2020.

<sup>56</sup> V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) noted that in 2018 there were 8 349 malaria cases reported in the EU/EEA. Nearly all were imported / travel related. 14 cases were confirmed as acquired in the EU (10 in Greece, two in Spain and one each in France and Italy. Source: ECDC: [Malaria: Annual Epidemiological Report for 2018](#), Surveillance Report, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> N. Watts et al., [The 2019 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate](#), *The Lancet*, Vol. 394(10211), 2019.

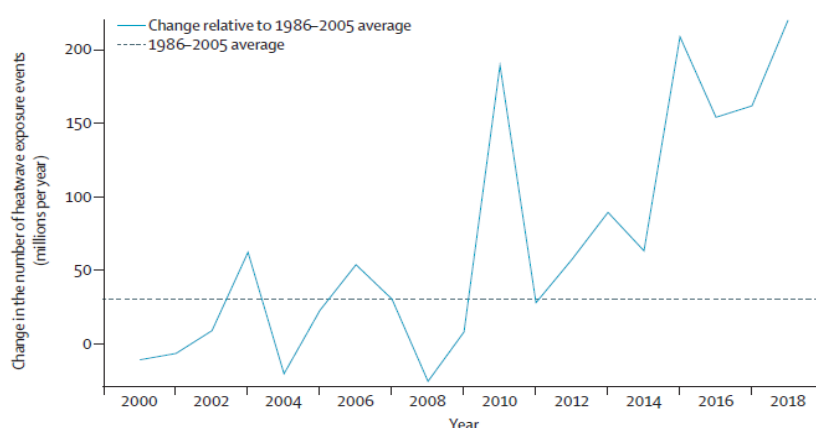
<sup>59</sup> The Lancet Countdown is an international multidisciplinary collaboration dedicated to monitoring the evolving health profile of climate change.

<sup>60</sup> European Environment Agency, Indicator Assessment- [Extreme temperatures and health](#), 20 December 2016. See also evidence on the impact of the summer 2003 heat waves in Europe in '[Eurosurveillance](#)', *European Communicable Disease Journal*, Vol. 10 (7-9), ECDC, July-September 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Helene Rossinot, Lancet Countdown 2018 Report: [Briefing for EU policymakers](#), November 2018.



Figure 3 – Changes in the number of heatwave exposure events in people aged 65 years or over compared with historical 1986–2005 average number of events



Source: The 2019 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change.

Although the above sources focus on the impact of climate on the health of older people in general, the issues will be particularly relevant to older people living in rural areas. Such areas may require different responses depending upon the nature of the emergency generated by climate change. One example might be the extent to which older people in rural areas would be prepared to leave their place of residence in an emergency.<sup>62</sup>

## 5. Generational renewal in agriculture

### 5.1. The demographics of the EU farming sector

The demographic challenge affecting the rural population is particularly acute in the EU's farming population. A large majority of farmers are above the age of 55, while young farmers are becoming scarce, raising uncertainties as to the renewal of the profession. This section delves further into the issue of generational renewal in agriculture, as there is a strong and special relationship between farmers and the rural environment. Farmers play a vital role not only in producing food for all EU citizens, but also keeping rural areas alive. Farming is an important activity, creating local employment, in particular in the food-processing sector, and a variety of economic opportunities for rural dwellers. Farming also delivers multiple social, environmental and territorial benefits.

#### 5.1.1. The farming population

Although there are around 9.7 million people employed in agriculture (representing 4.2 % of total EU employment),<sup>63</sup> the EU's farming population has been declining continuously for decades. This reflects a number of major structural changes involving productivity gains, specialisation and farm restructuring, leading to a loss of farming jobs. The share of people employed in agriculture fell from 5.7 % of total EU employment in 2005 to 4.4 % in 2016. A total of 5.6 million workers left the agricultural sector in the EU between 2005 and 2017, a reduction of more than one third (35 %) of the total labour force in agriculture.<sup>64</sup> The number of farms has been in steep decline for many years.

<sup>62</sup> See G. Haq and G. M. Gutman, '[Climate gerontology – Meeting the challenge of population ageing and climate change](#)', *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*, 2014, pp. 462–467.

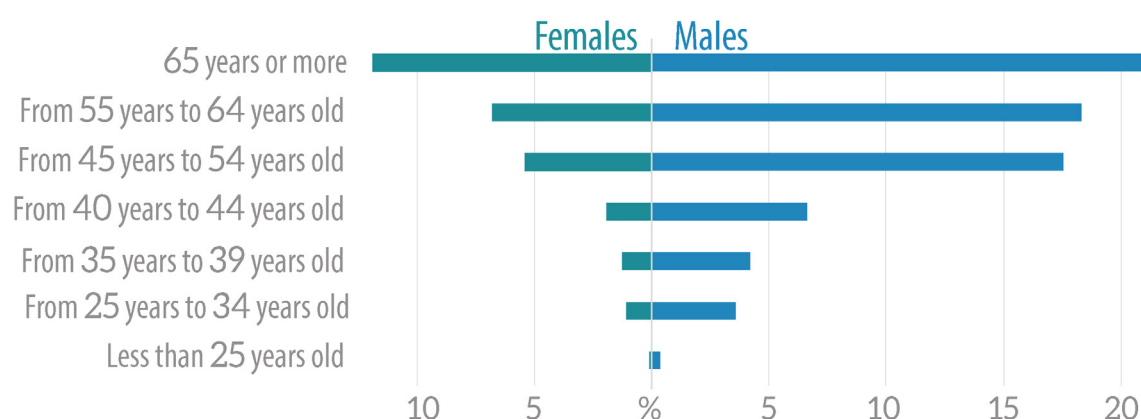
<sup>63</sup> Eurostat, [Farmers and the agricultural labour force](#) – Statistics Explained, November 2018.

<sup>64</sup> European Commission, 'CAP Specific Objectives ...explained', [Jobs and growth in rural areas](#), Brief No 8, 7 May 2019.

It decreased by about one quarter between 2005 and 2016.<sup>65</sup> This represents losses of up to 4.2 million farms across the EU, the vast majority of which – about 85 % – were small farms of a size under 5 hectares. Over the same period, the average size of the farms increased by about 36 %.<sup>66</sup> The European agricultural workforce is expected to decline by a further 28 %<sup>67</sup> between 2017 and 2030 as structural changes continue, with higher investments in technology.

In terms of demographic trends, nearly 60 % of farmers are 55 years old or over in the EU, while one third are 65 or older (see Figure 4). Less than 11 % are young farmers under the age of 40 (the share is lower for female farmers at 8.6 %) and only 5.1 % are under the age of 35.

Figure 4 – Farm managers in the EU by age group and gender



Source: [Eurostat](#), 2018.

Demographic structures differ across Member States.<sup>68</sup> In Portugal, half of all farmers are over 65, whereas in Germany, Austria and Poland, less than 10 % of all farmers carry on working beyond the age of 65. Young farmers are particularly scarce in certain Member States, such as Cyprus (3.3 %) and Portugal (4.2 %). Nevertheless, the youngest farmers tend to have bigger farms in terms of area, livestock and standard output than the oldest ones (over 65 years of age).

### 5.1.2. Barriers to entry in the farming sector

A number of economic, financial and social factors are deterring young people from entering the farming sector. They include:

- limited access to land owing to high prices and the reluctance of older farmers to retire;<sup>69</sup>
- limited access to finance and credit;
- difficulty in securing a sufficient and stable income;
- long hours and few holidays;
- many risks and uncertainties linked to markets and climate;

<sup>65</sup> Eurostat, [Farms and farmland in the European Union – statistics](#), November 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Research for AGRI Committee – [Young farmers – policy implementation after the 2013 CAP reform](#), Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels, European Parliament, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission, [EU Agricultural Outlook](#): European agricultural labour and total income expected to decrease by 2020, 19 December 2017.

<sup>68</sup> European Commission, Modernising and simplifying the CAP. [Background Document Socio-economic challenges facing EU agriculture and rural development areas](#). December 2017.

<sup>69</sup> European Court of Auditors, [EU support to young farmers should be better targeted to foster effective generational renewal](#), Special Report No 10, 2017.

- possible social isolation and difficult access to basic infrastructure and services in rural areas.

According to several studies, access to land is the largest barrier to new entrants to farming in Europe.<sup>70</sup> It is limited by the low supply of land for sale or rent in many regions,<sup>71</sup> as well as competition from other farmers, investors and residential users. Significant differences in national legislation on taxation, land and inheritance make it more difficult to find EU-wide solutions.<sup>72</sup>

## 5.2. CAP support for generational renewal in the current period

In the 2007-2013 period, the CAP's second pillar included a measure encouraging older farmers to retire so as to pass on their farm to a successor. In the following period, 2014 to 2020, this measure was discontinued and CAP support for generational renewal, under both pillars, has focused on incentives for young farmers. Under the first pillar, the Young Farmer Payment<sup>73</sup> is a compulsory scheme for Member States to implement. It targets farmers of no more than 40 years of age who are setting up an agricultural holding for the first time as head of the holding. Under the second pillar, the measure 'Farm and business development' (Article 19) includes start-up aid for young farmers setting up an agricultural holding for the first time.<sup>74</sup> Box 6 provides an example, drawn from the European Network for Rural Development, of how EU financial support can address the issue of generational renewal in practice.

In its special report drawn up in 2017, the Court of Auditors concluded that EU support for young farmers was based on a poorly defined intervention logic, with no expected result and impact specified, and that it should be better targeted to foster effective generational renewal.<sup>75</sup>

### Box 6 – Case study: generational renewal project in the Czech Republic

Using technical assistance under its rural development programme (RDP), the Czech Republic funded a project to facilitate the process of generational renewal. It involved a series of seminars and farm visits between March and October 2018 across four regions involving visits to six farms. This created a platform for the exchange of knowledge between established farmers, young farmers and newcomers to the sector.

This also provided opportunities to share experience on the preparation, submission and implementation of RDP projects.

Source: [European Network for Rural Development](#).

In its brief on structural change and generational renewal, the European Commission notes that 'in many cases older farmers remain active beyond the normal retirement age, as the farm is not only

<sup>70</sup> See [Research for AGRI Committee](#), 2017, op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> See European Parliament [resolution](#) of 29 May 2018 on the implementation of CAP young farmers' tools in the EU after the 2013 reform.

<sup>72</sup> European Commission, [Modernising and simplifying the CAP](#), 2017, op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> See European Parliament: [Fact Sheet on the EU: First Pillar of the CAP- Direct Payments to farmers](#), February 2020. Under the Young Farmer Payment, farmers receive an annual 25 % top-up to their basic payment for a period of five years from the date of their installation. Under the second pillar, the measure 'Farm and business development' (Article 19) includes start-up aid for young farmers setting up an agricultural holding for the first time.

<sup>74</sup> It is a flat-rate payment, amounting to maximum €70 000, paid in at least two instalments over a maximum of five years, and conditional upon the submission and successful implementation of a business plan. Other rural development measures targeting young farmers are 'Investments in physical assets', with a higher support rate (up to +20 %), 'Knowledge transfer and information actions' and 'Advisory services, farm management and farm relief services' which provides for 'specific advice for farmers setting up for the first time'.

<sup>75</sup> European Court of Auditors, [Special Report No 10](#), 2017, op. cit.

their business, but also their home. Some farmers may reduce their farming activities to a minimum, but continue working to complement their pension'.<sup>76</sup> Recent research undertaken in Ireland provides further insight into this issue.<sup>77</sup> Based on a nationally representative sample of the Irish farming population aged 55 and over, involving 633 questionnaires and 19 in-depth one to one qualitative interviews with farmers, the research highlighted the following findings:

- Farmers appeared to have a unique relationship with their land and animals.
- There was an expectation within the farming community that 'farmers do not retire'.
- There was a resistance to 'alter the status quo of the existing management and ownership structure of the family farm', given the loss of recognition and social status this would entail.

For the authors of this study, the human dimension of retirement and farm transmission should be taken into account when devising policies to encourage generational renewal. In short, 'the emotional and social issues involved' – which they refer to as 'soft issues' i.e. the human dynamics involved, both distort and dominate the older generation's decisions on retirement.

As a consequence, a series of recommendations are put forward by the researchers concerning generational renewal in agriculture. Their starting point is the premise that effective intergenerational transfer planning lies heavily on the senior generation's acceptance and willingness to engage in the process. The main recommendations include:

- the need for greater understanding of 'the language of farming' and how painful it is for the older generation to relinquish their farm;
- the need for any policy for structural reform in agriculture to be accompanied by 'a comprehensive set of interventions to deal with the personal and social loss an older farmer may experience in transferring the family farm';<sup>78</sup>
- greater recognition be given to the older generation's store of knowledge which they refer to as 'soil-specific human capital' which would be of value to the succeeding generation. The authors suggest that this may help to diminish '...the stigma and defeatist stereotype associated with transferring the family farm';
- the development of certified farm succession facilitators modelled on the International Farm Transition Network (IFTN) in the United States, to facilitate discussions between old and young family members on objectives, goals and expectations for the farm. Such facilitators would guide and support farm members through the succession planning process.

A key message from this research is that financial incentives are not sufficient in themselves to address generational renewal in agriculture. Instead, the research study argues for policy interventions that address the complex nature of the farm succession process in general and the emotional and social dimensions involved more specifically.

<sup>76</sup> European Commission, CAP Specific Objectives: '[Structural change and Generational Renewal](#)', 7 November 2019.

<sup>77</sup> S. F. Conway, J. McDonagh, M. Farrell and A. Kinsella, '[Human dynamics and the intergenerational farm transfer process in later life: A roadmap for future generational renewal in agriculture policy](#)', *International Journal of Agricultural Management*, Vol. 8(1), pp. 22-30, 2019. See also ARC2020, Rural Dialogues, '[Not necessarily money – farm renewal and \(inter\) generational considerations](#)'. 29 October 2019.

<sup>78</sup> One suggestion made by the research study is that the term 'early retirement scheme' (which refers to an earlier EU funded scheme, no longer available, should be referred to as a 'farm progression scheme', which might portray a sense of purposefulness rather than one of cessation to an older farmer (Conway et al., op. cit.).

## 6. EU policy responses to the needs of rural areas and their older populations

### 6.1. EU rural development policy

In the context of the European Union's rural development policy, there is a range of measures to improve the quality of life of the rural population. Regulation (EU) No 1305/2013 provides support for rural development.<sup>79</sup> One of its six priorities specifically targets the general local development of rural areas for the welfare of their inhabitants: 'promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas', with a focus on the following areas: facilitating diversification, creation and development of small enterprises; job creation; fostering local development in rural areas; and enhancing the accessibility, use and quality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in rural areas. Among the 20 measures covered by the regulation, some are more suited to addressing the challenges linked to the situation of older people in rural areas.<sup>80</sup> They include Measure 7 'Basic services and village renewal in rural areas' and its sub-measures namely:

- 7.2 'broadband infrastructure, including creation, improvement and expansion, passive infrastructure and access to broadband and public e-government';
- 7.3 'investments in setting-up, improving or expanding local basic services for the rural population including leisure and culture, and related infrastructure';
- 7.6 'investments targeting the relocation of activities and conversion of buildings or other facilities located inside or close to rural settlements'.

Measure 19 – 'Support for the LEADER local development' – is also particularly relevant.<sup>81</sup> Local actors are best placed to identify specific needs in their area, as shown by examples of successful projects in favour of the elderly population described in Table 4.

Table 4 – Examples of projects funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development benefiting older people in the EU's rural areas

Member State	Initiative
Poland	Under the LEADER initiative, a Polish local action group organised a series of three-day workshops in nine municipalities for residents over 50 years old with limited computer skills. The workshops were conducted by a professional trainer. After passing a competency test and committing to 100 % attendance at the workshops the participants received tablets and keyboards to continue practising their skills.
Germany	In Hessen, a former vicarage was converted into a community care facility offering daily health and support services to older people and people in need (LEADER measure).
Finland	In Finland, a small, remote rural community of around 1 300 inhabitants launched a Digi-Hub for older people. The hub helps them to benefit from digitalisation and quickly emerging new online services related to health, banking, shopping and social relations (measure 7).

<sup>79</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) No 1305/2013](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005.

<sup>80</sup> See: European Parliament, Research for AGRI Committee – [Programmes implementing the 2015-2020 Rural Development Policy](#). Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, May 2016.

<sup>81</sup> [LEADER](#) is a bottom-up approach to local development whereby local actors engage in the design and delivery of strategies for the development of their rural areas. It is implemented all across the EU by around 2 800 local action groups covering 61 % of the rural population in the EU.

Member State	Initiative
Lithuania	In Švėkšna, Measure 6 – 'Farm and business development' – was used to set up a healthcare centre for older people, offering medical and aftercare services in this rural area.

Source: European Network for Rural Development, Projects and Practice.<sup>82</sup>

Measure 16 – 'Cooperation' – which promotes forms of cooperation between actors of the agri-food chain sector in particular, can also be used to address challenges linked to the difficulties of older people, as recalled by Commissioner Wojciechowski in his letter<sup>83</sup> of 8 April 2020 to the Member States' agriculture ministers. He reminded them of the opportunities available under the EU rural development policy to finance relevant measures to address the coronavirus crisis. Various types of cooperation could be supported, for example to set up home delivery services of essential products such as food or medicine to isolated rural inhabitants, or to improve services related to health care. The Commissioner also highlighted the possibility of using funds to support investments in small local infrastructures and services 'such as the acquisition of equipment, the adaptation of health centres or the set-up of mobile health facilities in rural areas'.<sup>84</sup>

## 6.2. Other funds and programmes

In addition to the rural development funds, older people in Europe's rural areas can also benefit from projects supported by other structural funds, such as the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which do not specifically target rural territories.<sup>85</sup> In Bulgaria, the European Social Fund has been financing a new social health service named 'Patronage care for adults' since 2019.<sup>86</sup> Older people and people with disabilities receive support at their place of residence from social and health workers. Confronted with the coronavirus crisis, the Kyustendil municipality, located in a remote and mountainous area in Western Bulgaria, readapted the project for patronage care and started supplying food, medicines and other necessities to older people and those in need.

**Interreg Europe** is an interregional cooperation programme covering all EU Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland, under the European territorial cooperation goal.<sup>87</sup> It receives funding from the ERDF. Its main goal is to improve regional development policies through exchanges of experiences and good practice. An example of its application for older people is the 'Silver SMEs' Interreg Europe project.<sup>88</sup> This aims to support regional policies in rural and mountainous areas by

<sup>82</sup> European Network for Rural Development website, [Projects & Practice](#).

<sup>83</sup> European Commission, [Letter to EU agriculture ministers from Commissioner Wojciechowski on rural development and the COVID-19 outbreak](#), 8 April 2020.

<sup>84</sup> As noted in Section 4.1 of this study, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) has published a [collection](#) of projects and initiatives launched by rural communities across Europe in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. LEADER has also funded projects benefitting older people in rural areas.

<sup>85</sup> See the [website](#) for the European Social Fund.

<sup>86</sup> European Commission, ['Protecting the elderly from the coronavirus in Bulgaria'](#), ESF News, 28 April, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> [Interreg Europe](#) is an interregional cooperation programme covering all EU Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland, under the [European Territorial Cooperation](#) goal. It provides co-financing for regional and local institutions, such as public administrations, regional development agencies, educational institutions and others, to create networks and exchange experiences on different subjects, and generate good regional practice at the European level.

<sup>88</sup> The [Silver SMEs](#) Interreg Europe project aims to support regional policies in rural and mountainous areas by highlighting the potential for SMEs to develop new innovative products and services benefitting a senior population. Launched in June 2018, this five-year project will collect 60 good practices from across the EU in the fields of housing, health, wellbeing, robotics, and ICT. The approach will cover sectorial opportunities for SMEs derived from the key needs of three groups: active people (healthy-wealthy); fragile-vulnerable people; and dependent people. The project



highlighting the potential for SMEs to develop new innovative products and services benefiting a senior population. Supporting the development of new SMEs in the 'silver economy' should stimulate the growth and competitiveness of rural and mountainous areas and generate services and goods that will contribute towards improving quality of life within an ageing society.

The European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing (EIP on AHA)<sup>89</sup> was launched in 2011 by the European Commission to foster innovation and digital transformation in the field of active and healthy ageing. An example of the application of the EIP-AHA is the Ageing@Coimbra consortium in Portugal.<sup>90</sup> It is one of 32 reference sites for active and healthy ageing recognised by the EU and the only one in Portugal. Good practices in reducing the burden of brain diseases in older people and tackling social isolation in urban and rural areas are among the top priorities of Ageing@Coimbra. Its main goal is to improve the lives of senior citizens in Portugal's Central Region through better social services and healthcare, as well as to create new innovative products and services and new diagnostic and therapeutic tools. Box 7 provides further insight into its activities.<sup>91</sup>

#### Box 7 – Case study: Ageing@Coimbra (Portugal)

[Ageing@Coimbra](#) is a consortium including over 70 institutions that develop innovative practices to support active and healthy ageing in Portugal. Established in January 2013, it involves an informal network of 70 institutions that form a 'quadruple helix', aligning public institutions, academia, industry partners and civil society organisations.

In practical terms, it has been involved in a range of projects and practices, covering:

- efforts to promote adherence to medical plans, recognising that inadequate adherence to medical plans is one of the factors impacting on older people;
- personalised health management and the prevention of falls;
- lifespan health promotion and the prevention of age-related frailty through anticipatory functional decline of through community based prevention;
- integrated care units and mobile health units to support older people living in isolated rural areas;
- awards for good practice in active and healthy ageing.

Further details available from Malva et al. 2018.

The ageing of the population in the central region of Portugal reflects an increase in life expectancy, the migration of young adults and a decrease in the birth rate. Within this region, some areas are already facing the demographic scenarios expected for Europe in 2060, for example municipalities with an ageing index above 700.<sup>92</sup> About 23 % of residents are aged 65 or over. This territory can be viewed as a regional living laboratory, with different types of environment covering: urban and rural, densely and sparsely populated areas.

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leader is the Spanish province of Teruel, and the other eight project partners from Ireland, Slovenia, Portugal, Spain, France, Sweden and Poland.

<sup>89</sup> See the website for the [European Innovation Partnership in Active and Healthy Ageing](#) (EIP on AHA). A European Innovation Partnership (EIP) is a partnership bringing together all the relevant actors at EU, national and regional levels, at all innovation chain levels, to handle a specific societal challenge. EIPs exist in several policy areas such as: [agriculture](#), smart cities, water, raw materials.

<sup>90</sup> [Ageing@Coimbra](#) is a consortium including over 70 institutions that develop innovative practices to support active and healthy ageing in Portugal.

<sup>91</sup> J. O. Malva et al., 'The quadruple helix-based innovation model of Reference Sites for active and healthy ageing in Europe: The Ageing@Coimbra Case Study', *Frontiers in Medicine*, Vol. 5, 2018, p. 132.

<sup>92</sup> The ageing index refers to the ratio of the number of elderly people of an age when they are generally economically inactive (aged 65 and over) to the number of young people (from 0 to 14). It has been estimated that the current ratio of 1 person aged 65 or over per 4 working-age people will rise to a ratio of 1 person aged 65 or over to 2 working-age people in 2060.



Another source of support for older people has been the Investment Plan for Europe<sup>93</sup>, and its successor InvestEU.<sup>94</sup> This investment support has been used in Poland to set up 'Green care farms' for older people.<sup>95</sup> More than two million older people live in Poland's rural areas – many suffer from isolation, social exclusion and declining health. To tackle isolation and prevent health problems among older people, 15 green care farms have been set up across the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region.<sup>96</sup> 225 seniors suffering from mental or physical illnesses or disabilities spend their days on the farms alongside the farmers, carers and their families for up to six months. The green care farms also create jobs, as the farmers, their family members, staff and other people from the area can become qualified carers for older people and for people with disabilities.

## 7. The European Parliament position

The European Parliament has been involved in a wide range of issues concerning older people. These have included over the years issues concerning health and long-term care, the digital divide, age discrimination, the issues of pension, employment and retirement policies that support active ageing, gender equality and solidarity between generations.

In previous parliamentary terms, the specific needs of rural, mountainous and remote areas have been recognised by Parliament. In a resolution<sup>97</sup> passed on 3 October 2018, Parliament highlighted the importance of support towards overcoming the challenges such areas face, such as rural depopulation, with older people (over 65) representing 20 % of the total population of these areas and young people continuing to leave.

In an earlier resolution in September 2015 on the report on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, reference was made to the rural dimension of the ageing issue.<sup>98</sup> Parliament stressed that in addition to the phenomenon of ageing, there was an ever-increasing number of European regions in which demographic decline was occurring as a result of falling birth rates, combined with population decline and high rates of ageing and a decline in the number of people in work. Such trends were exacerbated in the rural areas of the regions concerned, given the tendency for people to leave rural areas and move to large or medium-sized cities. It also emphasised that 'regions with serious natural or demographic disadvantages – such as, for example, sparsely populated regions, islands and mountain areas – are hit especially hard by the problems associated with ageing, and have fewer resources and less infrastructure in place with which to promote active ageing'. It therefore called 'for consideration to be given to whether stimulus plans are useful in addressing the problem of ageing, which is generally made worse by parallel processes of depopulation affecting many of the regions concerned, and which can pose a threat to the survival of those areas'.

<sup>93</sup> European Commission, [Invest EU programme to support jobs, growth and innovation in Europe](#), press release, 6 June 2018.

<sup>94</sup> See InvestEU [website](#). The InvestEU Fund will act as a single EU investment support mechanism for internal action, replacing all existing financial instruments.

<sup>95</sup> See europa.eu website: ['Green care farms for the elderly: combating loneliness and promoting health in old age'](#).

<sup>96</sup> See Green care farms [website](#) in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodship, Poland. The Kujawsko-Pomorski Agricultural Advisory Centre in Minikowo in partnership with the Local Action Group 'Bory Tucholskie', execute the project under the regional operational programme of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region for the 2014-2020 period.

<sup>97</sup> European Parliament [resolution](#) of 3 October 2018 on addressing the specific needs of rural, mountainous and remote areas.

<sup>98</sup> The European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the report on the implementation, results and overall assessment of the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2014/2255(INI)), in which the rural dimension of the ageing issue was mentioned.

Parliament will have a key role to play vis à vis older people in rural areas when it comes to the ongoing legislative process in relation to the new CAP regulations, the multi-annual financial framework, the Next Generation EU recovery fund and the 'Farm to Fork strategy'. In addition to these developments, Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI Committee) is considering opinions on two own-initiative reports under Rule 56 of Parliament's Rules of Procedure. These cover: an opinion for the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments<sup>99</sup> and an opinion for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) on 'old continent growing older – possibilities and challenges related to ageing policy post 2020'.<sup>100</sup> In the case of the latter, the draft report recognises how rural areas have been affected by demographic change and how the population over 60 grew by 25 % in rural areas between 2000 and 2015. It calls for greater use of EAFRD funds to counteract the isolation of older people in rural areas.

In addition to its legislative role in relation to the CAP post 2020, the European Parliament has also provided a forum for debate and scrutiny of rural development policies. In January 2020, it hosted an event 'Rural Europe: which way to go?' attended by policy-makers and rural stakeholders.<sup>101</sup> A number of key messages were expressed at this event, such as the need for more visibility to be given to rural territories in the coming decades and the need to build on rural development success stories of past decades as in the case of LEADER and the community-led local development initiative. A wide range of policy areas that impact on older and retired people were highlighted. These included issues of anti-discrimination, the employment of older workers and active ageing, social protection, pension reforms, social inclusion, health, elder abuse, intergenerational solidarity, research, accessibility in respect of public transport and the built environment, and the role of new technologies (ICT). In a plenary session of the European Parliament held in Strasbourg in January 2020, a new Parliament intergroup was established on Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas (RUMRA). Building on the achievements of the RUMRA intergroup 2014-2019, it works to enable exchanges on innovative ways to create vibrant rural communities, as outlined in its [manifesto](#).<sup>102</sup> This will become a forum for debates on the future of rural areas.

## 8. Consultative committees

In its opinion of 16 June 2016 on 'The EU response to the demographic challenge', the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) underlines that the ageing of the population is a major concern in rural areas, which is why the CAP is promoting generational renewal and women's employment.<sup>103</sup> The CoR advocates for a CAP that will continue to incorporate measures to foster generational renewal in rural areas, promote female employment and enhance economic diversification, and it insists on the need to improve the methodology of LEADER, increasing the participation of stakeholders from rural areas and drawing up and implementing integrated development strategies.

For its part, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has provided opinions on different aspects of the ageing population, focusing on demographic trends and the labour market. In 2019,

<sup>99</sup> European Parliament, Legislative Observatory: [2020/2039 \(INI\)](#) Reversing demographic trends in the EU regions using cohesion policy instruments.

<sup>100</sup> European Parliament, Legislative Observatory: [2020/2008 \(INI\)](#) Old continent growing older – possibilities and challenges related to ageing policy post 2020'.

<sup>101</sup> ARC 2020: '[Rural Europe: Which way to go](#)', 23 January 2020.

<sup>102</sup> [Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas \(RUMRA\) and Smart Villages](#) and 2019 [manifesto](#).

<sup>103</sup> European Committee of the Regions, [Opinion](#), The EU response to the demographic challenge, 2017.

it provided an exploratory opinion<sup>104</sup> at the request of the Finnish Presidency on the pre-conditions for ageing workers to stay active in the labour market and the new world of work. In another opinion<sup>105</sup> the EESC also recommended the adoption of age-friendly cities to promote active ageing by optimising the health, integration and safety of older people. It suggested that such pilot programmes should be extended to semi-rural areas.

The EESC also hosted a conference on demographic challenge in the EU on 14 November 2019.<sup>106</sup> At the request of the Croatian Presidency, the EESC drafted an opinion on 'Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities'.<sup>107</sup> This was adopted on 5 May 2020. The opinion stresses that specific attention should be given to the rural population, which it noted was ageing even faster than the population as a whole. It pointed to a 'defining trend' in rural life all over Europe, namely a declining population as young people moved to big towns and cities. It also considered that one of the areas where underinvestment was most evident was long-term and health care for ageing people.

## 9. Stakeholder views

A number of stakeholder organisations and networks have highlighted views and opinions on the position of older people in the EU's rural areas. The Poverty Watch 2018 statement 'Older persons' poverty and social exclusion – a reality',<sup>108</sup> published by **Age Platform Europe**,<sup>109</sup> highlights the growing relevance of poverty and social exclusion when it comes to older people. It recognises the risks relating to different groups of older people, such as older women living alone, or the very oldest age group. When it comes to the rural dimension, reference is made to certain issues that older people living in poverty can face. Social isolation does not take the same form in rural and urban settings. In rural settings, geographical distance from neighbours and communities plays an important role, whereas in urban settings there is the anonymisation of social relationships. Among its key recommendations to the EU, the statement highlights the need to address the social and societal dimensions of poverty, including rural isolation. It calls for action to address the situation regarding poverty among older women and men when preparing the EU's post-2020 social agenda. The latter should build on the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which contains a reference to old-age incomes and pensions.

More recently, AGE Platform Europe has called for an urgent inquiry into the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on long-term care across the EU. This request was set out in a joint letter with the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and the European Disability Forum (EDF)<sup>110</sup> and was sent to the President of the European Parliament, the presidents of Parliament's political groups and the chairs of its EMPL and Petitions Committees.

<sup>104</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, [Opinion](#), 'The changing world of work and the longevity / ageing population- the preconditions for ageing workers to stay active in the new world of work', September 2019.

<sup>105</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, [Opinion](#), 'Economic, technological and social changes in advanced services for the elderly' (own-initiative opinion), May 2019.

<sup>106</sup> [Press release](#) of the European Economic and Social Committee 'The EESC conference in Zagreb: tackling demographic issues will be crucial for the EU's survival', 15 November 2019.

<sup>107</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, [Opinion](#), 'Demographic challenges in the EU in light of economic and development inequalities', May 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Age Platform Europe Policy Statement, [Poverty Watch 2018](#) – 'Older persons' poverty and social exclusion – a reality'. October 2018.

<sup>109</sup> [AGE Platform Europe](#) a European network of older people's organisations from across Europe.

<sup>110</sup> See [AGE Platform joint press release](#): 'A call for the European Parliament to investigate the tragic impact of COVID-19 on long-term care across the European Union', Brussels, 1 July 2020.

In June 2020, Euromontana, the European Association of Mountain Areas, published its contribution to the upcoming green paper on ageing, which the European Commission Vice-President for democracy and demography, Duvravka Šuika, had been tasked to produce.<sup>111</sup> Noting that the highest concentrations of people over 65 are found in rural, mountainous and sparsely populated areas, Euromontana sets out a range of measures to address the issues impacting on older people in these areas, including their care needs. For instance, action to:

- ensure accessible and innovative care services;
- improve the quality of life of older people through adapted goods and services;
- address the mobility needs of older people; and
- improve the contribution that older adults can make to areas such as increasing their active engagement in rural communities.

The role of the silver economy sector in providing older people with goods and services adapted to their needs is also highlighted.<sup>112</sup> In addition, the need to involve older people in the political and social life of communities and the importance of intergenerational dialogue and associated initiatives is stressed, as older people retain knowledge and experience that can be shared with younger generations. A list of EU projects and good practices is included in the submission. These illustrate how different sources of EU funding have been used, such as the 2018-2023 Interreg Europe project and Horizon 2020 (2016-2020).<sup>113</sup>

**Volonteurope**, an international network promoting volunteering, active citizenship and social justice in Europe, ran a two-year campaign on rural isolation that involved holding seminars in Rome, Riga and Sofia and a concluding conference in Amsterdam. Key findings from the campaign were brought together in a report published in March 2016.<sup>114</sup> This noted the multidimensional nature of rural isolation. It pointed out how ageing populations were prominent in rural parts of Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Finland and Sweden. It also highlighted the role of volunteering in helping people gain social stimulation to improve their resilience.

## 10. Outlook

This paper has sought to provide information based on research studies as well as EU and other information sources on the situation facing older people living in rural areas across Europe. It has drawn on the findings of the European Commission's Report on the Impact of Demographic Change.<sup>115</sup> The latter indicated that it is estimated that by 2070 30 % of people in Europe will be aged 65 and above. Moreover, from 2019 until 2070, the share of people aged 80 or over is projected to more than double to 13 %. While focusing on these demographic trends, the paper also examined a range of issues and challenges concerning older people's access to health and other services, their

<sup>111</sup> Euromontana, [Ageing in mountain areas: Contributions of Euromontana for the Green Paper on Ageing](#), Brussels, June 2020.

<sup>112</sup> It has been estimated that Europeans aged over 65 have a spending capacity of €3 000 billion (Source: European Commission, ['Growing the Silver Economy in Europe'](#), 2017).

<sup>113</sup> Further information including good practices are included in the [8th newsletter](#) of the [SILVER SMEs project](#), a five-year Interreg Europe project launched in June 2018, it supports the development of new SMEs in the silver economy. The project leader is the Spanish province of Teruel with the other eight project partners coming from: Ireland, Portugal, Spain, France, Sweden and Poland.

<sup>114</sup> Volonteurope, [Rural isolation of citizens in Europe](#), March 2016.

<sup>115</sup> European Commission [Report](#) on the Impact of Demographic Change, 17 June 2020. See also [Commission staff working document](#): Additional figures, maps and tables on the key aspects of demographic change and its impact. SWD (2020) 109 final, Brussels 17 June 2020.

situation within rural communities (including the issue of social isolation); the role of technology and the digital divide, and the issue of lifelong learning. An analysis of the above information has been presented against the backdrop of the impact of continuing climate change and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the preceding analysis. First, one observation on the challenges facing older people in the EU's rural areas is that they are best seen as being multi-dimensional in nature, given the range of issues they cover. One stakeholder group has referred to the need for 'a multi-dimensional response'<sup>116</sup> to issues such as access to healthcare and related services; and broadband connections and efforts to overcome the digital divide. These points highlight the role played by the EU's rural development programmes as well as the other sources of EU funding identified in this paper.

Second, although the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on European agriculture has already been acknowledged,<sup>117</sup> it will continue to be the subject of further debate (including its potential impact on long-term food security). The pandemic has affected all aspects of Europe's rural economy and society, both directly (with rural dwellers being infected) but also indirectly, through the impact of measures such as lockdowns and social distancing.<sup>118</sup> Evidence from the ECDC has highlighted the way in which the pandemic has directly affected older people. In the case of rural areas, the pattern of impact can be seen as a reflection in part of the concentration of older people in such areas. Older people are more likely either to require critical care and/or to die, reflecting their vulnerability to the coronavirus. The literature has also highlighted the effects on older people of having to socially self-isolate to avoid potential infection. As a result, they have become more dependent on others in their respective rural communities for shopping services and other needs. This points to the role played by social support systems, including the role played by those policy instruments that support community capacity building.

Third, another theme to emerge from the review of stakeholder perspectives on ageing in rural areas is the involvement of older people in planning the future of their local communities. This refers not just to involvement in social activities, but also to active engagement and involvement in taking forward decisions on issues that will impact directly on their quality of life and the future direction taken by their localities. The ongoing legislative process on the new CAP, the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework and the Next Generation EU package, and the 'Farm to Fork strategy' all offer opportunities for the future of rural areas to be addressed. In addition to these policy developments, the Commission launched an initiative in July 2020 on the **long-term vision for rural areas**. The aim of this initiative as set out in the Commission's roadmap is to spark a debate on the future of rural areas and the role they play in society. The intention is to set out a vision for the future of rural areas by 2040.<sup>119</sup> This will involve gathering views on a range of challenges, such as demographic change, connectivity, low income levels and limited access to services. It will also explore innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions in the light of climate change, digital transformation and the coronavirus crisis. A communication from the Commission is planned for the second quarter of 2021.<sup>120</sup> This will pave the way for potential (non-legislative) actions to address

<sup>116</sup> Volonteurope (2016), op. cit.

<sup>117</sup> See R. Rossi, [Protecting the EU agri-food supply chain in the face of Covid-19](#) and [Coronavirus crisis support for EU farmers](#), EPRS, European Parliament, April 2020.

<sup>118</sup> J. Phillipson et al., 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and its implications for rural economies', *Sustainability*, May 2020.

<sup>119</sup> European Commission, [Rural development – long-term vision for rural areas](#), Have your say. July 2020. (This hyperlink also provides a link to the Commission's roadmap for this initiative). The feedback period for this roadmap ran from 22 July 2020 to 9 September 2020. The public consultation covers the period 7 September 2020 to 30 November 2020.

<sup>120</sup> The Commission's initiative is listed in the European Commission's State of the Union 2020 [letter of intent](#) to European Parliament President David Maria Sassoli and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Brussels, 16 September 2020. (See

the issues identified. It therefore represents an opportunity for European rural stakeholders and those representing the interests of older people living in rural areas to make their views known.

Finally, a public debate on the future of rural areas offers the opportunity to explore different perspectives and approaches to the issue of demographic ageing in Europe's rural areas. In particular it offers the opportunity to challenge what has been referred to as 'stereotypically negative views' of the older population.<sup>121</sup> Such negative perceptions are based on a discourse that may see older people as a burden, no longer productive and with limited social interaction. One research overview in this policy area noted the danger inherent in a discourse that 'problematises old age constructing it as a process of physical decline, nutritional deficit or immobility and imagines the impact of population decrepitude on rural areas...'.<sup>122</sup> There is of course an alternative to such a perspective; one that adopts a 'supportive community perspective' and that employs a 'productive ageing' discourse where a rural context can be created in which older persons actively contribute to the future development of the communities, where they are living. Support for this latter perspective is evidenced in the range of recent initiatives, some of which have been highlighted in this briefing.

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<sup>121</sup> See: V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, op. cit; and also M. Currie and L. Philip, [Rural Ageing](#), in: D. Gu, M. Dupre (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Gerontology and Population Ageing*, Springer, 2019.

<sup>122</sup> V. Burholt and C. Dobbs, op. cit.



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One of the key demographic challenges facing rural areas is the ageing population, not only among farmers but also among the rural population in general. This paper examines the demographic profile of older people in the EU's rural areas, and presents a series of issues pertaining to the situation facing older people. Topics covered include health and access to services, issues of social isolation and loneliness, the role of technology and lifelong learning, access to social care, and the impact of climate change. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic has brought the health status of older people more sharply into focus and highlighted their vulnerability. The views of a number of stakeholders are summarised along with the measures available under the EU's rural development policy and other structural funds.

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