



SILVER ECONOMY LANDSCAPE

Understanding the Silver Economy Landscape in Vas County

Vas County, in western Hungary, is at a crossroads. Its population of 249,513 is shrinking and ageing rapidly — more than one in five Hungarians is already over 65, and rural areas like Vas County are ageing even faster due to out-migration of younger generations. But what if demographic ageing were not only a challenge, but also an economic opportunity? That is precisely the question the Silver Up Interreg Europe project set out to answer.

A Comprehensive Picture of the County

As part of the Silver Up Interreg Europe project, the Vas County Local Government Office has completed a Regional Landscape Report (RLR) — a detailed analysis of the county's demographic trends, economic context, care infrastructure, and potential for silver economy development. The silver economy encompasses all products, services, and economic activities driven by the needs of people aged 50 and above: a population segment that, across Europe, is set to reach 222 million people by 2025 and generate spending equivalent to 31% of European GDP.

Challenges Hiding in Plain Sight

The county faces real and growing pressures. Waiting lists for residential elderly care can exceed two to three years. There is a severe shortage of qualified care workers, many of whom leave for Austria or other Western European countries in search of better wages. In rural areas — where 59% of the county's 216 settlements have fewer than 500 inhabitants — basic services are disappearing as young people move away. The county's population has already declined by nearly 7,000 people since 1990, and projections suggest that by 2050 more than one-third of residents could be over 65.

An Unexpected Finding: Community as Care

One of the more inspiring findings of the RLR concerns the emergence of 'caring communities' — local initiatives where neighbours, volunteers, and municipalities work together to fill gaps in care provision. Research shows these models can be both effective and dignity-preserving. However, they must be adequately supported and must not be used as cheap substitutes for proper public services.

Real Opportunities to Develop

Vas County is far from helpless. It has a strong industrial base, a growing thermal spa and wellness tourism sector (Bük and Sárvár thermal baths attract over 200,000 visitors annually), and an emerging silver economy ecosystem. Silver Club Szombathely is a hands-on space where seniors can try smart home and health-monitoring technologies before purchase, building confidence and giving businesses direct feedback from end users. At national level, the Gondosóra programme deployed nearly 90,000 emergency and support devices to people over 65 in just three months — proof that rapid, scalable technology solutions for ageing populations are entirely achievable.

What Comes Next

The RLR reveals a clear policy gap: the county's main strategic document, the Territorial Development Programme 2021–2030, does not yet treat the silver economy as a dedicated development priority. That is about to change. The insights from this report will directly feed into proposed improvements to the policy instrument, informed by lessons from Silver Up partner regions across Europe. Together, we aim to build an age-friendly county where ageing is embraced as a resource — not feared as a burden.