FROM OIL ECONOMY TO DIGITAL HUB

KRISTIANSAND

Key information

⬟ Location: **Kristiansand (Norway)**

⬟ Population: **92 000**

⬟ Involved in URBACT network:
GEN-Y City

⬟ More information:
http://urbact.eu/gen-y-city

☆ Lead Partner

O ften disregarded as a sleepy retirement town, Kristiansand is reinventing itself as a centre for tech innovation. As part of the URBACT GEN-Y City Network, the municipality worked with student organisations to promote digital skills for citizens of all ages.

Kristiansand is at a crossroads. Situated next to abundant oil and gas reserves, these industries have traditionally provided great wealth to the surrounding area. Now, as the need for cleaner energy models becomes ever more apparent, the city is looking for alternative economic drivers. Demographic change is a big part of the story. Due to the perceived abundance of pensioners who live in the city to enjoy its relatively warm climate, Kristiansand is sometimes nicknamed the Florida of Norway. Like many stereotypes, though, this is deceptive. According to a 2016 census, just 13% of the city's population were over 67 years old, while 23% were under 18. Seen as a whole, the city is actually getting younger.
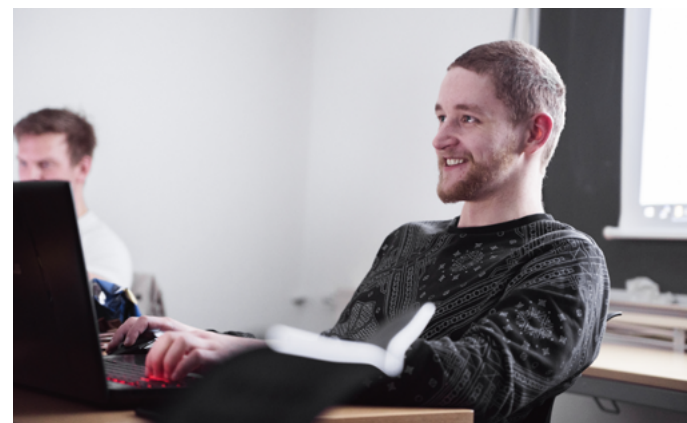
These phenomena represent a dual challenge for Kristiansand's future. The city needs to develop its image and its economic model together — and for this to work, it is vital to harness young people's energies. "When we decided to participate in GEN-Y City we had very specific goals," explains Tina Norheim Abrahamsen, adviser to the municipality. "We focused on connecting directly with young people, to attract and retain talent through engagements with digital technology."

Kristiansand has a headstart in developing this sector. A major asset is the University of Agder, which has a campus on the outskirts of the city, and a strong reputation for Information Technologies. In addition, a number of tech companies are already thriving and, with the right support from local government, could be connected more effectively with a new generation of entrepreneurs. GEN-Y City was an opportunity for a targeted intervention, to streamline the city's talent pipeline more effectively.

⬟ Supporting start-ups

Involved in URBACT, the city set up a group of local stakeholders (URBACT Local Group) to produce an integrated plan for this reason. The URBACT Local Group served as an ideal meeting point for engaged young people

The hackathon was enjoyed by tech enthusiasts across the city

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The view over Kristiansand's port

to interact with leading stakeholders in the city, this was a new experience for all sides. "I was surprised when we first started collaborating with the municipality," says Robin Amir Rondestvedt Moudnib, leader of Systematicus, a student run an Information Technologies organisation, "I guess I had some prejudice about it being a slow and archaic organisation." He and his colleagues were quickly proved wrong. As part of this group they soon came into contact with a lot of people relevant to their professional development, including staff from Egde Consulting, a local tech company, and CoWorx, a collaborative working space. A new start-up called Nexus, the first e-sports restaurant in Kristiansand, was born as a direct result of these interactions.

The local group facilitated collaboration between students and local companies

One of the group's most innovative collaborations came with the organisation and evolution of the city's hackathon. The first edition took place in 2017, led by the municipality as a way of bringing programmers, software developers and designers of all ages together to showcase the importance, and fun, of learning about tech. The following year, Systematicus were among the organisers. "The municipality helped with prize money, open data and the venue, but the whole process felt like we were the focus,"

reflects Mr Moudnib, "we got the possibility of having an open problem for the attendants to solve, as opposed to solving a case for an organisation that sponsored the event." For Ms Abrahamsen this passing of responsibility was a major vindication of the URBACT project: "This was the biggest success for me, watching the students take control for themselves."

⬟ Teaching the kids to code

While GEN-Y City was primarily focused on millennials, one of its biggest successes was targeted at an even younger demographic. Just as the project was getting started, one of the city's most important volunteer programmes, a local coding club for children, was forced to close down due to lack of capacity. The URBACT Local Group came together to diagnose why and develop a sustainable solution. Systematicus joined forces with another student organisation, OpenSource UiA, to provide volunteer teachers. They were assisted by Aftenskolen Agder, a night school, which helped organise the lessons, while Egde Consulting provided technical support. The municipality provided a venue, at the local library.

By autumn 2017 the coding club was back in action, educating more children than ever and at the same time revitalising one of the city's neglected civic spaces. In recognition of this success, the municipality agreed to provide funding to cover some costs for the volunteer staff in October 2018. Mr Moudnib will continue to play a leading role. "The fact that we got the coding club back up and running is such a big win. I can't emphasise that enough."

"I think there will be a long-term legacy for the GEN-Y City project, a network of individuals that works every day to raise tech competence among people of all ages, and create value for the region."

Robin Amir Rondestvedt Moudnib

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