

WorkIn Stara Zagora

Bulgaria

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Name of the organisation	Municipality of Stara Zagora
Type of organisation	Other
Address	6000 Stara Zagora, 107 Tsar Simeon the Great Blvd. Bulgaria
Web page	https://www.starazagora.bg/
Contact person	Name and surname: Rositsa Raykova Job position: Head of Investments, Energy Efficiency and Green Transition Department E-mail: r.raykova@starazagora.bg
Topic of the good practice	Labour market policy and employment Youth and students: apprenticeships and the first job in the EU and EEA
Geographical focus	Nation-wide
Duration	28/4/2023 – 4/4/2026
Summary of the good practice	General Information WorkIn Stara Zagora is an innovative local initiative in Stara Zagora aimed at strengthening the connection between young people, businesses, educational institutions, and the local labour market. The initiative addresses challenges such as youth migration, shortage of qualified workforce, and the mismatch between education and labour market needs. It is the largest career forum in Southern Bulgaria and one of the most recognisable events in the field of labour market development, professional realization, and human capital development. Organised by the Municipality of Stara Zagora and Invest Stara Zagora, the forum has, for

four consecutive years, created a sustainable environment for interaction between employers, institutions, educational organisations, students, and job seekers.

Context and Need

Stara Zagora is among the most dynamically developing industrial regions in Bulgaria and is currently undergoing an economic and energy transformation related to the transition from coal-based energy production.

This process increases the need for reskilling, workforce adaptation, and the creation of new employment opportunities. WorkIn Stara Zagora has developed as a practical tool for directly connecting people with employers and supporting the adaptation of the regional labour market.

The initiative also contributes to retaining young people in the region by demonstrating that Stara Zagora offers real opportunities for career growth and professional realization.

Description of the Practice

WorkIn Stara Zagora is a two-day multi-format career and business event combining an employer exhibition, networking environment, lecture programme, expert panels, and discussions on topics such as the future of work, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, and skills development.

The forum includes two main areas:

- Exhibition area where companies present job vacancies, internship and trainee programmes, and career opportunities;
- Lecture and discussion stage featuring HR experts, entrepreneurs, and business representatives.

The main focus is on direct interaction between employers and participants, enabling real conversations, access to job opportunities, and professional networking.

Over time, the forum has established itself not only as a career event, but also as a platform for human capital

development, employer branding, and stimulation of regional economic activity.

Cooperation Between Business, Education, and Institutions

A key strength of the initiative is the cooperation between local authorities, businesses, educational institutions, and organisations working with young people.

Partners include Trakia University, Employment Agency, International Youth Centre, employer organisations, and international partners.

The initiative applies an integrated approach combining employment, skills development, youth policies, and talent retention as part of a regional strategy.

International Dimension

In recent years, the forum has expanded its international participation through organisations such as American Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria, British Bulgarian Business Association, Bulgarian-Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and BESCO.

Around 40% of participants find employment, internships, or new career opportunities after the event.

- more than 40 companies participate;
- over 900 visitors attend;
- the total number of participants exceeds 4,000 people.

The high level of repeat participation by companies proves the forum's practical effectiveness and value.

The initiative has a strong social impact through retaining young people and reducing migration from the region.

The growing interest demonstrates its sustainability and necessity.

Conclusion

WorkIn Stara Zagora is an established platform for career and business development and a successful example of

	cooperation between institutions, businesses, and education. The initiative has the potential to be adapted and implemented in other regions facing similar challenges. It responds to the priorities of the European Labour Authority related to the transition from education to employment, stakeholder cooperation, and the development of sustainable local labour markets.
OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES	
Background/context What challenge, need or gap were you trying to solve or respond to? Why was this issue relevant or urgent in your context (sector, region, country)?	► The "WorkIn Stara Zagora" initiative was established in response to several interconnected challenges directly affecting the regional labour market. In recent years, the Stara Zagora region has established itself as one of the leading industrial and economic hubs in Bulgaria, resulting in an increased demand for qualified professionals across a wide range of sectors. Paradoxically, while employers face growing difficulties in finding trained personnel (structural deficit), a significant portion of young people remains poorly informed about the real opportunities for career growth and the high standards of employment offered by the local economy. ► A primary challenge is the ongoing migration of young and highly educated individuals to the capital or abroad (brain drain), which deprives the region of valuable human capital and threatens sustainable economic growth. This issue is further compounded by the existing mismatch between the skill profiles provided by the educational system and the actual practical requirements of businesses, as well as a lack of sufficiently flexible coordination among employers, academia, and job seekers. ► These challenges take on critical urgency in the context of the deep economic and energy transformation currently unfolding in the region. As the economic heart of the largest coal-mining basin in Bulgaria, Stara Zagora is in an active phase of transition to a low-carbon economy. This process demands rapid, large-

	scale, and coordinated reskilling and upskilling of the workforce to ensure its smooth transition into new industrial and technological sectors. ▶ In this complex environment, "WorkIn Stara Zagora" has emerged as a key practical platform bringing together businesses, higher and secondary educational institutions, local authorities, school pupils, university students, and job seekers. The primary objective of the initiative is to facilitate direct dialogue among all stakeholders, increase labour market transparency, and support the building of a more flexible, competitive, and inclusive regional economy. ▶ The initiative directly addresses the need for enhanced partnership between the education sector, business, and public institutions, while simultaneously supporting the retention of young talent, fostering professional development, and contributing to the long-term sustainability of the region.
Objectives What were the main goals of this practice (e.g. better compliance, faster processing, improved worker protection)? (Please limit to three) Who or what were these goals intended to help or change? (Please limit to three)	▶ The primary objective of the "WorkIn Stara Zagora" initiative is to build a sustainable ecosystem for direct contact that connects employers, job seekers, university students, and school pupils, thereby facilitating their smooth transition from education to employment and optimizing their access to high-quality career opportunities. ▶ Alongside this, the practice aims to stimulate long-term structural dialogue and coordination between businesses, academia, and local authorities, which enables overcoming the structural deficit in the labor market and aligning the qualifications of the future workforce more closely with the actual practical requirements of companies. ▶ Last but not least, the initiative is designed to actively support the retention of young talent in the region and to prepare the workforce for adaptation in the context of the ongoing economic transformation and just energy

	transition, providing real alternatives for professional realization and lifelong learning at the local level. ► These objectives are directly targeted at three main groups whose development and interaction the initiative seeks to transform and facilitate. First, it addresses young people-including pupils, university students, recent graduates, and youths seeking their first job, by providing them with clear prospects and real career paths locally. Second, the practice supports employers and investors in the region who face a growing need for qualified professionals, interns, and young talent, helping them increase their competitiveness through direct recruitment and strong employer branding. Third, the initiative transforms and assists the work of educational institutions, public authorities, and partner organizations involved in human capital development by facilitating more effective coordination and planning of regional policies in response to actual labor market demands.
Main activities What were the main steps or actions you carried out to put the practice into effect? Were any tools, materials, partnerships, or processes created?	► The practical implementation of the “WorkIn Stara Zagora” initiative is based on a strictly coordinated and cyclical process of strategic planning, partnership building, and active stakeholder management. The initial phase of each edition begins with a detailed analysis of local labor market needs and the identification of economic sectors with the highest growth potential and labor shortages in the region. ► A key element in the preparation is the creation and maintenance of a permanent partner network bringing together the Municipality of Stara Zagora, Invest Stara Zagora, Trakia University, the Employment Agency, the International Youth Centre, business associations, and employer organizations. This institutional tool guarantees that the forum's format and content reflect the real and current needs of business and education in the region. ► The two-day event itself is structured as an integrated multi-format process that combines a large-scale exhibition area for direct recruitment, where companies

	present vacancies and internship programs, with a specialized lecture and discussion stage for panels featuring HR experts, entrepreneurs, and industry leaders. Parallel to this, career guidance sessions and targeted professional networking meetings are conducted. ► As a long-term tool of the practice, a specific organizational and operational model was developed, which includes a targeted communication strategy, strong media partnerships, and an implemented feedback system from employers and participants. This process of continuous monitoring and evaluation allows the initiative to evolve annually, upgrade its program, and sustainably expand its scope and positive impact on the regional economy.
Funding/organisational resources	The organisational model of WorkIn Stara Zagora is based on a combined approach that brings together institutional support, business participation and shared organisational resources. The initiative is implemented through cooperation between the Municipality of Stara Zagora, Invest Stara Zagora, and a broad range of partners from the business sector, educational institutions, and organisations active in employment and youth policy. The financial model includes multiple sources of support, such as institutional funding, company participation through different participation packages (Basic, Pro and Premium), as well as additional contributions from sponsors and partner organisations. This approach provides flexibility and reduces dependence on a single source of funding. A significant part of the organisational resources is ensured through the existing expert and administrative capacity of the organisers and partners. This includes planning, communication, logistical support, marketing, and event coordination, relying on already established structures and networks. This combined financial and organisational model enables the efficient use of available resources while ensuring high-quality delivery of the event and its

	sustainable development over time. The repeated participation of companies and the growing interest in the forum serve as additional indicators of the effectiveness of this model and its financial and organisational sustainability.
PARTICIPATION	
Stakeholders involved Organisations or entities actively contributing to the design, implementation, monitoring, or support of the good practice (e.g. labour inspectorates, social security institutions, trade unions, employers' associations, or other).	► The practical implementation of “WorkIn Stara Zagora” is based on active and deep cooperation between local government, business, educational institutions, and specialized organizations working in the fields of employment, skills development, and human capital. The main driver and organizer of the event is Invest Stara Zagora, which functions as the specialized investment department of the Municipality of Stara Zagora. This municipal department bears full responsibility for strategic planning, operational preparation, logistical support for the forum, the active communication campaign, and coordination with all external stakeholders, acting as a central hub for implementing regional economic policies. ► The key partners integrated into the structure of the practice have specific roles that guarantee its multidisciplinary scope. Trakia University actively participates in strengthening the link between higher education and business, stimulating student participation and promoting local opportunities for career growth. The Employment Agency brings crucial expertise regarding labor market trends, providing specialized employment services and career counseling, while the International Youth Centre in Stara Zagora coordinates work with youth communities, supports their inclusion in the forum, and encourages the development of personal and professional skills. Employer organizations and business associations contribute directly to the design of the lecture program, promote the initiative among their members, and facilitate structural dialogue between the private sector and public institutions.

	► Direct corporate participation is provided by companies from key economic sectors in the region, which present vacancies and internship programs, and interact directly with job seekers, university students, and school pupils. The international dimension of the forum and the exchange of good practices are expanded through partnerships with reputable international business organizations such as the American Chamber of Commerce in Bulgaria, the British Bulgarian Business Association, the Bulgarian-Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and BESCO, which support dialogue related to the investment environment and human capital development. ► This comprehensive partner network is the defining factor for the sustainability of the initiative, turning “WorkIn Stara Zagora” into a shared platform that transforms cooperation between municipal government, education, and business to the benefit of a competitive regional labor market.
Target groups Main groups or categories that the practice is directly aimed at, who should receive its services or who engage with it (e.g. employers, mobile or posted workers, labour inspectors and social security officers, or other).	► The “WorkIn Stara Zagora” initiative is purposefully designed to support a wide range of key participants who form the ecosystem of the regional labor market. The primary focus of the practice is on young people, including secondary school pupils, university students, recent graduates, and youths entering the labor market for the first time. Through the forum, they gain direct access to leading employers, specialized career guidance, internship programs, and up-to-date information on long-term professional development at the local level. ► Alongside them, the initiative directly targets job seekers and established professionals, including unemployed citizens or individuals striving for a career change and professional advancement, for whom the event provides an environment for direct contact with managers and access to real job vacancies. Employers and companies themselves represent another vital target group, ranging from local small and medium-sized enterprises to large-scale national and

	international corporations, which utilize the platform as a powerful tool for recruitment, building a strong employer brand, and engaging directly with potential employees. ► The practice also integrates and transforms the activities of educational institutions, including universities, vocational high schools, and training centers, by helping them strengthen their cooperation with real business and adapt their curricula to current market demands. In addition, the initiative encompasses public institutions and organizations engaged in the labor market, such as employment services, local authorities, and youth organizations, for which the forum serves as a shared platform for coordination, information exchange, and the development of joint policies for employment and talent retention. By bringing all these target groups together into a single, synergistic, and collaborative environment, “WorkIn Stara Zagora” optimizes the transition from education to employment, improves the matching between labor supply and demand, and contributes significantly to the sustainable development and competitiveness of the regional economy.
Final beneficiaries Individuals or groups that ultimately benefit from the outcomes of the practice, even if they are not the direct target or user (e.g. mobile or posted workers, vulnerable workers at risk of exploitation, employers benefiting from clearer rules or reduced admin burdens, or other).	► The final beneficiaries who indirectly yet sustainably benefit from the long-term outcomes of “WorkIn Stara Zagora” encompass the broader socioeconomic spectrum of the region. First, the families of young people and local communities derive a direct social benefit, as young specialists find high-quality, well-paid career opportunities within their home region, which drastically reduces youth emigration rates and preserves the integrity of the local community. ► Second, the regional economy of Stara Zagora as a whole, including future foreign and local investors, serves as a final beneficiary; by stabilizing the labor market and ensuring a predictable, qualified workforce, the initiative enhances the city's investment attractiveness and supports a smooth, sustainable

	economic transformation during the just energy transition. ► In the long term, the citizens of Stara Zagora themselves are ultimate beneficiaries, since retaining young, active, and highly educated individuals stimulates local consumption, improves the demographic profile of the region, and generates higher added value and a better quality of life for society as a whole.
GOOD PRACTICE CRITERIA	
Achievements and outcomes What specific results did the practice achieve? (e.g. How many workers or employers were reached, number of publications created? What processes became faster?) What kind of broader benefits did it bring? (e.g. Did it improve understanding of rights and obligations, enhance cooperation between authorities, or reduce legal uncertainty and inconsistent application of rules?)	► Over its four consecutive editions, the “WorkIn Stara Zagora” initiative has demonstrated sustainable growth and established itself as the largest career forum in Southern Bulgaria and a leading platform for the regional labor market. The quantitative and measurable achievements of the practice to date include the annual active participation of over 40 companies from diverse economic sectors and more than 900 visitors per edition, resulting in an aggregate reach of over 4,000 participants throughout the forum's history. ► The initiative achieves direct optimization and acceleration of recruitment processes by shortening the time for initial contact between businesses and candidates and enabling direct interviews within the event itself. Systematic feedback from participating companies confirms that the forum significantly facilitates subsequent hiring, the launching of new internship programs, and the building of long-term professional partnerships that continue to develop well beyond the event's timeframe. ► Beyond direct quantitative results, “WorkIn Stara Zagora” generates large-scale strategic benefits for the regional ecosystem by raising awareness of market opportunities and strengthening structural cooperation between business, academia, and public institutions. ► The practice contributes substantially to reducing structural mismatches between the educational profile

	and the actual practical requirements of employers through the coordinated planning of future skills needs. In the long term, the initiative exerts a strong strategic impact by enhancing the overall attractiveness of the regional labor market, supporting the effective retention of local talent, and serving as a key instrument for the smooth socioeconomic transformation of the workforce in the context of the ongoing Just Energy Transition.
Cost effectiveness How did you keep costs low while still achieving results? (e.g. Did you reuse existing tools, automate processes, or share resources across teams?) Can you show that the outcomes were worth the investment? (e.g. Did small changes lead to big improvements, or were expensive tools avoided?)	▶ WorkIn Stara Zagora demonstrates cost-effectiveness through the efficient use of existing institutional capacity, strong stakeholder cooperation and a shared-resource organisational model. Rather than relying solely on public funding, the initiative combines the organisational capacity of the Municipality of Stara Zagora and Invest Stara Zagora with contributions from participating companies, sponsors and partner organisations. ▶ Many key activities are delivered through existing networks and expertise, with partners contributing knowledge, communication channels and organisational support. This collaborative approach minimises operational costs while maintaining a high-quality programme and broad outreach. ▶ The forum has developed a sustainable participation model in which employers choose between different participation packages according to their needs and visibility objectives. This contributes to the financial sustainability of the initiative while ensuring that companies remain actively engaged in its development. ▶ The investment has generated substantial value by bringing together more than 40 employers and over 900 visitors annually, creating opportunities for recruitment, internships, professional networking and stronger cooperation between businesses, educational institutions and public authorities. The growing number of returning companies and the continuous expansion of the forum demonstrate that the benefits delivered

	consistently justify the resources invested and confirm the long-term sustainability of the initiative.
Transferability What are the key features that make this practice work well? (e.g. a digital platform, clear guidelines, a joint inspection process, or strong coordination) What would another country or organisation need to make this work for them? (e.g. certain laws, IT systems, or staff training)	► The key features that make the “WorkIn Stara Zagora” initiative so successful and transferable lie in its flexible organizational model and strong inter-institutional coordination. The practice does not rely on heavy administrative procedures or expensive technological infrastructure, but rather on building a functioning ecosystem in which Invest Stara Zagora acts as a trusted mediator between business, academia, and youth communities. The success of the forum is due to its integrated multi-format approach - combining a direct recruitment area with educational panels and career guidance, which transforms the traditional job fair into an interactive space for skills development. The clear operational processes of planning, assessing business needs prior to the event, and systematically collecting feedback are easily applicable tools that guarantee the initiative remains flexible and responsive to market dynamics. ► For another organization, municipality, or country to successfully implement this practice at the local level, specific national legislation or complex IT systems are not required. The primary requirement is the presence of a proactive local structure or coordination team that possesses the necessary skills for stakeholder management and partnership building. ► The new organization would need to develop a capacity for youth engagement and digital communication skills to effectively involve the target groups. The process solely requires a willingness to cooperate on the part of the local university or schools and readiness from the local business community for open dialogue, making the model highly accessible and easy to adapt in any European region undergoing economic and industrial transformation.
Sustainability	► The sustainability of WorkIn Stara Zagora is based on the combination of strong institutional leadership, long-

How is the practice sustainable from a social, financial or environmental perspective?

What makes this practice able to continue over time? (e.g. It is now part of regular work or has been built into law or procedures?) and how are you making sure it lasts beyond the pilot or project phase?

term partnerships and a resilient organisational and financial model. The successful implementation of the forum over four consecutive years demonstrates that the initiative has moved beyond the pilot phase and has become an established platform for the development of the regional labour market.

- ▶ The initiative is integrated into the long-term vision of the Municipality of Stara Zagora and Invest Stara Zagora for economic development, investment attraction, human capital development and talent retention in the region. Each new edition builds upon the results of previous years, while the programme is continuously updated in line with feedback from employers, participants and partners, as well as evolving labour market needs.
- ▶ Financial sustainability is ensured through a combined model that includes institutional support, business participation through different participation packages, sponsorship contributions and the active involvement of partner organisations. This approach reduces dependence on a single source of funding and creates favourable conditions for the long-term continuation and development of the initiative.
- ▶ Social sustainability is reflected in the established community of employers, educational institutions, public organisations and young people who participate in the forum every year and contribute to its continuous improvement. The repeated participation of companies and the expanding partnership network confirm the high level of trust in the initiative and its practical value for the regional labour market.
- ▶ WorkIn Stara Zagora continues to develop as a sustainable platform for cooperation between business, education and public institutions, while also having the potential to be adapted and implemented in other regions facing similar challenges related to labour market development and economic transformation.

Innovativeness

What makes this practice new or different in your field or country? (e.g. Is it the first of its kind, or does it combine actors who don't usually work together, or activities not performed before?)

How does it improve older or less effective approaches? (e.g. By reaching more people, using data better, or simplifying complex procedures)

- ▶ The innovative nature of WorkIn Stara Zagora lies not simply in organising a career forum, but in creating a sustainable platform for cooperation between local authorities, businesses, educational institutions and organisations working in the fields of employment and human capital development. Rather than delivering separate and disconnected initiatives, the forum brings together all key stakeholders within a single ecosystem focused on addressing the specific challenges of the regional labour market.
- ▶ In the context of Stara Zagora, a region undergoing industrial and energy transformation, WorkIn provides an integrated approach that connects employers, secondary school pupils, university students, job seekers, educational institutions and public organisations. In doing so, the initiative supports not only access to employment opportunities but also the development of long-term partnerships, skills development and workforce adaptation to the evolving needs of the labour market.
- ▶ The practice goes beyond the traditional concept of a career fair by combining recruitment, career guidance, professional development, expert discussions and strategic dialogue between public institutions and businesses within a single event. This integrated approach creates significantly greater added value for both employers and participants than conventional recruitment events.
- ▶ The initiative is continuously improved through the systematic collection and analysis of feedback from participants and partners, enabling the programme to evolve in line with emerging labour market trends, employers' needs and regional economic developments. As a result, WorkIn Stara Zagora has established itself as a good practice with strong potential to be adapted and implemented in other regions facing similar labour market and economic transformation challenges.

Digitalisation

What kind of digital tools or platforms were used in this practice? (e.g. online portals, automated case tracking, data sharing, digital databases or other)

How did these tools help in reaching your goals? (e.g. Did they save time, facilitate access to data in real time, reduce errors, help detect fraud, or improve coordination between authorities?)

- ▶ WorkIn Stara Zagora uses modern digital tools for the organisation, communication and promotion of the initiative. The forum has its own website, which provides up-to-date information about the programme, participating companies, participation conditions and registration opportunities.
- ▶ The participation process is partially digitalised, as visitors to the forum register in advance through an online registration form available on the official website of the event. This enables better planning, improved management of participant flow and more efficient organisation of the event.
- ▶ Social media channels are a key communication tool for reaching different target groups. The initiative actively uses Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to promote the event, share content from previous editions, present participating companies and reach young people, students and job seekers. This significantly broadens the initiative's outreach and increases audience engagement.
- ▶ After the event, structured feedback is collected through online surveys, allowing for systematic analysis of participant and employer satisfaction. This approach supports the continuous improvement of the format and its adaptation to the needs of the target groups.
- ▶ Participating companies use digital solutions to present job vacancies, internship programmes and application opportunities, including QR codes, online forms and corporate career platforms. This facilitates access to up-to-date information and enables faster and more direct communication between employers and potential employees.
- ▶ Digital tools also support coordination between organisers, partners and participants, making the processes of preparation, communication and event management more efficient.

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- While the core value of WorkIn Stara Zagora lies in direct face-to-face meetings between employers and candidates, the use of digital technologies complements the in-person format, improves access to information and creates a more efficient and user-friendly experience for all participants.