

## **Honoured guests, welcome to Vähikkälä!**

While the village of Vähikkälä in the municipality of Janakkala in Kanta-Häme is located in peaceful countryside, it is still at a central location for commuting to work in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area or in other directions. The rural village has approximately 450 inhabitants, and the number triples during the summer.

At the heart of the village is one of the oldest school buildings in Finland. The venerable building celebrates its 137th year of operation this year, while schooling in Vähikkälä in general celebrates its 140th anniversary. Keeping a school running in the village has inspired the people of the village to cooperate closely for decades. We have always lived with a bit of uncertainty about whether the school will open its doors again next autumn or not.

The new generation of village activists have also participated in the fight for the school, wanting the best for their own children. It sparked the idea of finding out if the school and its surroundings could be transformed into a multi-service centre offering services for everyone from babies to grandparents and bringing the generations even closer together. It would also create stability and new services for the future, in addition to bringing new entrepreneurship and new inhabitants to the village and creating more vitality. More than that, it would offer concrete measures for implementing the strategy of the municipality of Janakkala.

The village association started a feasibility study project in 2016, which was funded by the Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland, the Linnaseutu Leader group. The objective of the project was to strengthen the vitality of our village by developing basic services for its permanent and summer residents, taking their needs into account. Based on service needs surveys, the actual demand for services was mapped together with an outside expert. The objective of the study was to find a functional and profitable model for transforming the Vähikkälä school into a multi-service centre through cooperation across sector borders. The aim was to discover how different kinds of services could be provided in connection with the village school.

A condition assessment of the school building, analyses of different operating models, renovation and new construction needs, as well as preliminary cost estimates were implemented in the project. Negotiations were also held with external entrepreneurs regarding their interest in launching business activities. Based on the information gathered during the feasibility study project, we can state that the possibilities of transforming the school into a multi-service centre are realistic. There is a demand for the services in the village. However, the role and commitment of the municipality would be important for the implementation.

According to the study,

a local centre would offer the following to the village:

- neighbourhood services for people of all ages
- a deeper sense of community and more shared activities for people of different ages

it would give the municipality:

- positive visibility and a good reputation
- an additional attraction
- options for multifunctional housing
- concrete solutions for future changes
- potential savings
- more entrepreneurship and job opportunities
- cooperation with educational institutions

The aim was to implement the following at the multi-service centre:

1. Day care and pre-primary education (a nature-oriented private day care centre, an afternoon club for schoolchildren)
2. Municipal comprehensive school, grades 1–6 (sports- and nature-oriented)
3. Village cafeteria (meal services for the day care centre, pre-primary education, school, services for the elderly – taking advantage of local food)
4. Housing services for the elderly (entrepreneur-led group home for the elderly, holiday substitutes for informal carers during their holidays)
5. Facilities for local exercise and hobbies (village indoor and outdoor exercise locations and other hobby facilities for everyone)
6. Other possible additional services (village office, summer cottage caretaker, health care services, wellbeing services)

A proposal was made to establish a public utility limited liability company to start the operations. In addition, it would have been necessary to discuss purchasing or renting additional land next to the school in order to allow for additional buildings. Another basic need was a cooperation agreement, in which the municipality would commit to implementing basic education in Vähikkälä for the next 10 years. This would make investments and goal-oriented development possible in addition to including entrepreneurs. Different funding options were investigated.

Why would it have been worth it for Janakkala to join the Vähikkälä local centre project? For instance, it offered the chance to be a pioneer, create something new, and put Janakkala on the world map. It would have also brought the benefits of a wide national cooperation network with it. It would have enabled all municipal residents to participate and influence matters and offered new ways to provide neighbourhood services for the residents.

The village worked for hundreds of hours for the project on a volunteer basis to show all the best things that a village school could be as a village centre. If centralisation is a trend in our country, there is also a demand for decentralisation. There is a great need to find new ways of providing services. Rural areas of different kinds will be needed more than ever in the next 20 years due to the changes in the development of bioeconomy. During the project, several cooperation and development negotiations were held with different parties ranging from locals to major players on the national level and in the Commission. For their part, the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) and the Federation of Finnish Enterprises have also brought the message of local centres to municipalities. There has been much interest in the topic and it has been in great demand all around Finland. We hoped that the work we had already done on the feasibility study project as well as our competence and networks would be appreciated in our own municipality. Vähikkälä and the municipality of Janakkala would have had the advantage of being involved in a pilot in Southern Finland and participating in the creation of a new innovation that could revolutionise the future of rural services. This model and network would have offered support and expertise for the planning of new school centres. Small means agile in testing and building new kinds of operating models, which can then be transferred to larger units easily. Services can be brought back to people's neighbourhoods without increasing the overall costs by taking advantage of technology and logistics. Local centres – close to people!

It would have taken courage for the decision-makers to start a trial that could have a socially significant impact (service chain package). The municipality of Janakkala was not willing to take the risk or the chance to implement a new service model, which means that this work remains incomplete. At that stage, a village

community operating on a volunteer basis did not have the resources or know-how to continue the project without municipal support.

But... when one door closes, another may open elsewhere. The people of the village did not lie down in defeat; instead, they picked ideas from the study that they could implement themselves and added a bit of something new. How could we provide exactly the services that we, our families and our village need? Hobby activities were created, a crowdfunding campaign was implemented, a successful Finnish artist celebrated the release of an album with a three-day mini festival, the cooperation with the village associations was intensified, we marketed our own activities and competence, and we joined the Smart Village competition as well as innovation development with an open mind. We worked for ourselves and succeeded, and our activities spread outside the borders of our own village, municipality and the region. We feel that this is just the start of this road. Our goal is to become the most well-known village in Finland in the future and a provider of diverse cultural services.

**See you in Vähikkälä – we welcome you to hear more about how the village of the year 2019 in Häme lives and develops!**

*Vähikkälän väljämä ry, village association*