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# D3.2.1 Regional Action Plan - Bulgaria

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Regional Action Plan outlines Bulgaria's approach to strengthening the digital, green and innovation capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises in the food and beverage sector within the RISE project framework. The food and beverage sector is one of the largest manufacturing industries in Bulgaria, with around 6,000 enterprises and an estimated 80,000 to 130,000 employees. It plays a key role in rural employment, regional value chains and export performance. However, despite its economic importance, the sector faces structural challenges. Many SMEs operate with outdated or semi-manual production processes, rely on basic spreadsheet-based management systems and lack integrated digital tools. Awareness and practical implementation of energy-efficient and circular solutions remain limited, and managerial capacity gaps further constrain transformation.

The Regional Action Plan responds to these challenges through a mentoring and advisory-based model. As direct funding or technical investments cannot be provided at regional level, the focus is placed on capacity building, knowledge exchange and structured support. The selected priority areas include practical adoption of digital, energy and circular solutions; mentoring and collaboration mechanisms; strengthening business support organizations as regional anchors; and ensuring long-term sustainability of the mentoring ecosystem.

Three main actions will be implemented between 2026 and 2028. First, knowledge-sharing events will promote good practices in digitalisation and sustainability. Second, structured mentoring sessions using B2GreenHub assessment tools will provide tailored guidance to SMEs. Third, financial literacy and investment-readiness training will strengthen SMEs' capacity to plan and prepare for future investments.

Transnational cooperation is a core component of the plan. Through cross-border mentoring, joint webinars and shared digital tools, Bulgarian SMEs will gain access to wider expertise within the RISE partnership. This cooperation strengthens regional capacity while embedding local actions within a broader European mentoring ecosystem.

A structured monitoring framework with clear KPIs will track participation, mentoring outcomes and long-term sustainability. Through this integrated approach, the Regional Action Plan supports the twin digital and green transition of Bulgarian food and beverage SMEs and contributes to regional competitiveness and resilience.

## 2. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The food and beverage sector in Bulgaria represents one of the largest manufacturing. The sector plays a significant role in regional value chains, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, contributing substantially to employment and economic resilience<sup>1</sup>. Strengthening the competitiveness and sustainability of this sector is therefore directly linked to regional cohesion and long-term economic stability.

According to the latest national statistic data business demography release, the total number of active enterprises in Bulgaria was **404,257 in 2023**<sup>2</sup>. This figure includes companies from all sectors of economic activity, including manufacturing, services, trade, construction and others. **Around 6,000 companies** operate in the food processing sector, nearly half of which are concentrated in the south-central and southwestern regions.

Food production represents the largest component of the sector. Among its main activities are meat processing, dairy production, grain milling, bakery and farinaceous products, vegetable and animal oils, confectionery, and the manufacture of prepared foods. Bakery production is the most widespread activity in terms of number of enterprises and territorial coverage. It is present in almost every municipality and plays a significant role in local employment. Dairy production remains an important branch due to the country's livestock base and established product traditions. Meat processing also holds a substantial position within the sector's structure.

The production of vegetable oils and grain-based products has strong relevance for export markets, particularly in connection with sunflower oil and cereal products. Confectionery and chocolate production show higher added value and a stronger export orientation compared to many other food activities. The production of ready-to-eat meals, dietetic foods and specialized nutritional products is gradually expanding in response to evolving consumer preferences and health trends.

Beverage production forms a distinct but closely related part of the sector. It includes wine, beer, distilled alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and mineral water. Wine production

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<sup>1</sup> National Statistical Institute (2025). *Structural Business Statistics - Manufacturing (NACE C10-C11)*. <https://www.nsi.bg/en>

<sup>2</sup> National Statistical Institute, *Demography of the enterprises, 2023* - <https://www.nsi.bg/statistical-data/406/1166>

is a traditional industry with long-standing export markets and growing emphasis on quality and branding. Beer production is characterized by a relatively higher level of technological modernization and capital intensity. The segment of non-alcoholic beverages and mineral water has demonstrated dynamic development in recent years, supported by domestic consumption and regional export opportunities.

Major players include Oliva, ADM (Amylum Bulgaria), Coca-Cola Hellenic Bottling Company, Bella Bulgaria, Alcao, Boni Holding, Ameta Holding, Nestlé Bulgaria, Mondelez Bulgaria, Milky Group Bio, Papas, and Carlsberg Bulgaria. The sector continues to expand production capacity and improve product quality through investment in automation, digitalization, and sustainable practices, reflecting a broader shift toward innovation and efficiency.

Employment in the food and beverage sector is also significant within the manufacturing workforce. According to the annual NSI report for non-financial enterprises, the total number of persons employed in manufacturing was approximately **550,829 in 2024**, representing 24.6 % of all people employed in non-financial enterprises in Bulgaria. While this figure includes all manufacturing sub-branches, the food and beverage subsectors typically account for approximately **15 to 25 % of employment within manufacturing**, based on sectoral employment distributions in structural business statistics. This suggests that the number of persons directly employed in food and beverage production in 2024 was in the **range of 80,000 to 130,000 individuals**. These estimates are consistent with employment patterns in comparable manufacturing economies and corroborated by statistical breakdowns across industrial subsectors.

The food and beverage sector in Bulgaria is closely integrated with domestic agricultural production and retail trade. Raw materials such as cereals, milk, meat, fruits and sunflower seeds form the basis of processing activities and link the sector directly to rural economies. Processing enterprises range from small local producers to large industrial plants that supply national and international markets. Distribution is increasingly influenced by large retail chains, which shape pricing, quality standards and supply requirements. Export channels are particularly important for products such as vegetable oils, wine and confectionery. The structure of the value chain therefore combines strong domestic supply linkages with growing exposure to international market dynamics.

The **institutional ecosystem is structured around several central authorities**. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is responsible for agricultural policy, rural development, food

safety and implementation of sectoral strategies. The State Fund Agriculture manages financial support mechanisms under the Common Agricultural Policy and distributes grants and subsidies to beneficiaries.

The Bulgarian Food Safety Agency ensures compliance with food and feed standards and applies regulatory control along the entire food chain. The National Agricultural Advisory Service provides consulting and technical assistance to farmers and processors.

The funding framework is significantly influenced by the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plan 2023–2027, which allocates approximately EUR 3.5 billion for agriculture and rural development, including EUR 420 million for investments in agricultural product processing and EUR 148 million for environmentally oriented processing investments. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan further supports green transition and digitalization through investments in technological modernization and digital systems across the farm-to-fork chain. The Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2027 identifies digital technologies, mechatronics and healthy food industries as priority domains for innovation-driven growth<sup>3</sup>. At EU level, the Farm to Fork Strategy under the European Green Deal establishes requirements for sustainability, traceability and waste reduction across the agri-food value chain<sup>4</sup>.

**The supporting ecosystem includes universities, research institutes and testing facilities that provide technological and scientific expertise.** The Agricultural University of Plovdiv and the University of Food Technologies in Plovdiv play key roles in education and applied research. The Agricultural Academy in Sofia contributes to research and innovation in agricultural and food systems.

Bulgaria possesses **infrastructure capable of supporting digital readiness assessment, energy efficiency testing, product validation and pilot scale experimentation.** These centres are mainly located within academic institutions and technology parks. Their services include laboratory testing, product development support, and demonstration of innovative technologies related to food processing and resource efficiency. However, awareness among SMEs regarding available testing and demonstration services remains limited. Many micro enterprises do not actively cooperate with research institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Innovation and Growth (2021, updated 2023). *Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021–2027*. <https://www.mig.government.bg>

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2020). *Farm to Fork Strategy*. COM(2020) 381 final. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0381>

There is also a gap between existing laboratory capacity and the practical needs of small-scale food processors, particularly in rural regions. Sofia Tech Park and regional innovation centres provide laboratory and incubation infrastructure, although access is more common for technology-oriented start-ups than for traditional food producers.

The ecosystem includes **incubators and accelerators** that provide **mentoring, training and early-stage investment**. Programs such as EWA Bulgaria, Able Activator, Cleantech Bulgaria, Climate-KIC Accelerator Bulgaria, and Launchlabs Sofia support technology-based and foodtech-oriented start-ups. Regional initiatives such as Start 2 UP in Varna provide targeted acceleration services for early-stage projects.

**Advisory services** are available through regional agencies, chambers of commerce and business support organizations. These structures provide assistance in project preparation, access to funding schemes and participation in international networks. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these services varies across regions.

Coworking spaces and entrepreneurial hubs are concentrated mainly in Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. These environments stimulate networking and knowledge exchange but are less accessible for enterprises located in smaller municipalities.

Beyond public funding, the ecosystem includes an expanding **venture capital and business angel community**. Funds such as Eleven Ventures, Innovation Capital, LAUNCHub Ventures, BlackPeak Capital and Vitosha Venture Partners invest in innovative enterprises, including those operating in food technology and sustainable production. Business angel organizations provide early-stage equity financing and mentorship. However, venture capital financing primarily targets scalable technology ventures rather than traditional small food processors. As a result, most micro enterprises in the food and beverage sector continue to rely on grants, bank loans and self-financing.

The findings of the *SMEs Critical Factor Diagnosis Report – Needs Assessment for Manufacturing Solution Seekers in Food and Drink Sector for Bulgaria*, prepared under the RISE project<sup>5</sup>, confirm the **existence of systemic barriers affecting food and beverage SMEs**. The analysis highlights four interrelated structural challenges affecting the sector as a whole.

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<sup>5</sup> RISE Project (2026). *SMEs Critical Factor Diagnosis Report – Needs Assessment for Manufacturing Solution Seekers in Food and Drink Sector (Bulgaria)*. Prepared by PP RAPIV under the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme.

First, significant **technology and automation gaps** persist. A considerable share of SMEs operates with outdated or insufficient production equipment. Manual or semi-manual processes remain common in packaging, labelling, tracking, and production management. This limits efficiency, scalability and consistency, increases exposure to operational errors and constrains resource optimisation.

Second, there is a widespread **deficit in digital management and organisational systems**. Many enterprises rely on manual procedures or basic spreadsheet tools for order management, pricing calculations, inventory control and production planning. The absence of integrated digital systems such as ERP platforms prevents centralised production management and limits data-driven decision-making. These findings are consistent with broader assessments of SME digital maturity challenges in Bulgaria, as reflected in the Digital Decade Country Report 2025 and the European Innovation Scoreboard<sup>67</sup>.

Third, the report identifies a **limited awareness and knowledge base regarding sustainable and green solutions**. Although sustainability is recognised as strategically important, practical understanding of energy-efficient technologies, renewable energy integration, resource optimisation and circular economy practices remains insufficient.

Fourth, a pronounced **skills and capacity gap** constrains effective transformation. SMEs require targeted support in identifying suitable digital tools, implementing automation technologies and operationalising green solutions. Limited managerial competences related to innovation planning and process optimisation further reduce transformation capacity.

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2025). *Digital Decade Country Report 2025 – Bulgaria*. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-decade-2025-country-reports>

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2025). *European Innovation Scoreboard 2025*. [https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/european-innovation-scoreboard_en)

### 3. INTERVENTION AREAS

The intervention areas derive directly from the systemic barriers identified from the needs assessment of the companies through the company interviews and interviews with the stakeholders. The assessment confirms that Bulgarian food and beverage SMEs demonstrate strong willingness to modernize and adopt digital and green solutions, yet face structural, technological and knowledge-related constraints. Addressing these gaps requires a coordinated set of structural, operational, digital and cross-border measures.

**From a structural perspective**, the primary need lies in improving coordination and accessibility within the supporting ecosystem. Although Bulgaria has a comprehensive institutional and funding framework, SMEs often encounter administrative complexity and limited advisory capacity at regional level. The RISE assessment highlights fragmented cooperation between enterprises, research institutions and technology providers. **Strengthening structured mentoring schemes, improving regional outreach of advisory services and facilitating easier access to testing and demonstration infrastructure would enhance the practical uptake of innovation.** Particular attention should be given to enterprises located **in rural and semi-urban areas**, where food processing plays a key role in employment and local economic resilience.

**Operationally**, the most pressing intervention area concerns **modernization of production processes**. The interviews reveal persistent technology and automation gaps. Many SMEs rely on manual or semi-manual packaging, labelling, dosing and tracking systems, which reduce efficiency, limit scalability and increase the risk of errors. Gradual introduction of automated and semi-automated solutions adapted to the scale of micro and small enterprises is essential. In parallel, resource efficiency and sustainability must be embedded into operational improvements. Companies have expressed interest in renewable energy systems, water filtration and reuse technologies, and waste reduction measures. Supporting technical guidance would enable enterprises to translate sustainability awareness into measurable operational improvements.

**Digital maturity** represents a central cross-cutting intervention area. The needs assessment confirms a widespread reliance on spreadsheets and fragmented management practices for order processing, pricing, inventory control and production planning. The absence of integrated digital systems limits data-driven decision making and process optimization. Implementation of ERP systems tailored to SME capacity, digital tools for automated material calculations, and traceability solutions aligned with

EU regulatory requirements should therefore be prioritized. In addition, digital marketing and e-commerce capacities require strengthening. Several enterprises lack structured online presence or advanced digital marketing tools, which constrains market visibility and export readiness.

**Sustainability** should not be treated only as an environmental obligation, but as a strategic competitiveness factor. Increasing consumer demand for eco-friendly products, traceability and responsible sourcing creates opportunities for Bulgarian producers. Intervention measures should therefore support the integration of sustainable branding, transparent labelling and green marketing practices. This approach aligns environmental performance with market positioning and export potential.

**Cross-border and networking interventions** complement the structural and technological priorities. The RISE findings underline the importance of partnership development, participation in industry events and improved access to new markets. SMEs demonstrate openness to collaboration and mentoring, yet require structured support to engage in transnational initiatives. Facilitating participation in European networks, cluster partnerships and cross-border innovation projects would enhance knowledge exchange and market integration. Digital internationalization tools can further support access to niche European and global markets, especially for companies offering innovative or sustainable products.

## 4. PRIORITY AREAS

Selection of the priority areas is based on the Transnational Strategy for Deploying Cross-Sector Mentoring Program Services, identified needs and intervention framework for Bulgaria. The selected priority areas reflect the most pressing gaps identified among Bulgarian food and beverage SMEs and the realistic scope of implementation, taking into account that in Bulgaria support will be provided in the form of mentoring, consulting and advisory services, without direct funding or technical investments.

The main identified priority areas are presented in the following matrix:

Priority Area (as in the Transnational Strategy)	Relevance for the Region	Key Regional Challenges Addressed	Why this Priority Was Selected
PA1. Practical adoption of digital, energy & circular solutions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Low digital maturity, outdated equipment, limited sustainability know-how	Directly addresses automation gaps, spreadsheet-based management, and limited awareness of green technologies in food SMEs
PA2. Mentoring, matchmaking & collaboration mechanisms	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Weak SME-academy links, limited access to experts, rural isolation	Could be provided structured mentoring and cross-sector matchmaking to close knowledge and capacity gaps
PA3. Strengthening Business Support Organisations as anchors	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Fragmented ecosystem, uneven regional outreach	BSOs are essential multipliers for embedding mentoring services in rural and semi-urban areas
PA5. Long-term sustainability & scalability of mentoring ecosystem	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low	Risk of post-project discontinuity	Essential to ensure continuity of mentoring services beyond RISE

### PA1. Practical Adoption of Digital, Energy and Circular Solutions

This priority area is strongly aligned with the identified needs of Bulgarian food and beverage SMEs. The needs assessment confirms persistent automation gaps, reliance on manual or spreadsheet-based management systems, and limited practical knowledge regarding renewable energy, resource efficiency and circular practices.

Mentoring and advisory services can significantly support SMEs in identifying suitable digital tools, improving production planning, introducing traceability systems and developing sustainability roadmaps. Through B2GreenHub assessments and structured mentoring, SMEs can receive tailored guidance on improving digital readiness, energy efficiency and waste reduction practices.

Given the strong emphasis on twin transition priorities at EU level and the strategic importance of sustainability for export-oriented sub-sectors such as vegetable oils, wine and confectionery, this priority area is considered highly relevant.

### **PA2. Mentoring, Matchmaking and Collaboration Mechanisms**

The Bulgarian ecosystem analysis reveals limited cooperation between SMEs and research institutions, as well as uneven access to specialized expertise, particularly in rural regions. The RISE transnational strategy emphasizes the importance of mobilizing a cross-sector mentor community and facilitating structured matchmaking between SMEs and experts. Structured mentoring can directly address skills gaps, managerial capacity deficits and limited awareness of digital and green solutions.

### **PA3. Strengthening Business Support Organisations as Anchors**

The supporting ecosystem in Bulgaria includes regional agencies, chambers of commerce and advisory bodies. However, outreach and coordination remain uneven, particularly outside Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna.

The transnational strategy underlines the role of local multipliers in embedding mentoring services within existing support structures. Strengthening BSOs as regional anchors is therefore essential. They can promote B2GreenHub tools, recruit SMEs, organize information sessions and ensure localized support.

Given the territorial dispersion of food processing enterprises across rural and semi-urban areas, empowering BSOs enhances accessibility and improves regional cohesion.

### **PA5. Long-Term Sustainability and Scalability of the Mentoring Ecosystem**

Ensuring continuity beyond the project lifetime is essential. The RISE Transnational Strategy stresses the need for institutional ownership, governance structures and continuous engagement of stakeholders. Without structured governance and coordination, there is a risk of post-project discontinuity. Therefore, this priority area is considered highly relevant.

## 5. ACTIONS

### Action 1: Organisation of events for sharing knowledge and good practices

#### *Priority areas influenced by the action:*

- PA1. Practical Adoption of Digital, Energy and Circular Solutions
- PA2. Mentoring, Matchmaking and Collaboration Mechanisms
- PA3. Strengthening Business Support Organisations as Anchors
- PA5. Long-Term Sustainability and Scalability of the Mentoring Ecosystem

This action addresses the widespread lack of awareness and practical understanding of digital tools, energy efficiency measures and circular economy practices among food and beverage SMEs. The needs assessment highlighted that many enterprises recognise the importance of modernization and sustainability but lack structured knowledge on how to implement such changes in practice. By showcasing practical experiences rather than theoretical approaches, this action reduces uncertainty and increases readiness for change. It also responds to the regional imbalance in access to innovation infrastructure by delivering events in different regions, including rural and semi-urban areas.

In addition, the involvement of Business Support Organisations as co-organisers strengthens their role as local anchors. Through repeated engagement, BSOs will integrate B2GreenHub tools and mentoring opportunities into their regular service portfolio.

#### **Stakeholders Involved**

Universities, Smart Varna, Agriventures, Business support organizations, successful companies, and financial institutions.

#### **Target group**

SMEs

#### **Deadlines:**

2026-2028

## Action 2: Organisation of mentoring sessions

### *Priority areas covered by the action:*

- PA1. Practical Adoption of Digital, Energy and Circular Solutions
- PA2. Mentoring, Matchmaking and Collaboration Mechanisms
- PA3. Strengthening Business Support Organisations as Anchors
- PA5. Long-Term Sustainability and Scalability of the Mentoring Ecosystem

The organisation of structured mentoring sessions will provide tailored guidance to selected SMEs. Through the use of B2GreenHub assessment tools, enterprises will first evaluate their digital readiness, energy efficiency and circularity potential. Based on the results, mentors will provide customised recommendations and practical implementation roadmaps.

Mentoring will focus on areas such as introduction of ERP systems, production tracking solutions, digital traceability tools, energy management practices and resource optimisation strategies. While no direct funding will be provided, SMEs will receive advisory guidance that increases their preparedness for future investment or funding applications.

This action also strengthens collaboration mechanisms. It facilitates direct interaction between SMEs and experts from academia, consulting and industry. Business support organisations will play a coordinating role, ensuring continuity beyond individual mentoring cycles.

The mentoring structure contributes directly to long-term sustainability of the mentoring ecosystem. It builds trust, creates repeat engagement and strengthens the transnational mentor community.

### **Stakeholders Involved**

Universities, Smart Varna, Agriventures, business support organizations,

### **Target group**

SMEs demonstrating low to medium digital maturity and interest in operational modernisation and sustainability improvement. Priority will be given to micro and small enterprises located outside major urban centres.

**Deadlines:**

2026 – 2028

## Action 3: Organisation of financial literacy and investment-readiness training sessions

*Priority areas covered by the action:*

- PA1. Practical Adoption of Digital, Energy and Circular Solutions
- PA2. Mentoring, Matchmaking and Collaboration Mechanisms
- PA3. Strengthening Business Support Organisations as Anchors
- PA5. Long-Term Sustainability and Scalability of the Mentoring Ecosystem

The action responds to difficulties of SMEs in accessing funding due to limited project preparation capacity, insufficient financial planning skills and lack of investment-readiness. Deliver workshops and online sessions on topics such as green finance, investment planning, preparing bankable circular projects, and leveraging EU and national funding opportunities.

Improved financial literacy supports practical adoption of digital and sustainable solutions by enabling SMEs to evaluate long-term returns from automation and energy efficiency improvements. It also enhances their resilience and strategic planning capacity.

Business support organisations will be actively involved in delivering or co-organising these sessions, thereby reinforcing their advisory role at regional level.

**Stakeholders Involved**

Business support organisations, financial experts, consultants specialised in SME finance, representatives of financial institutions for informational purposes, and sector associations.

### **Main Target Group**

Micro and small food and beverage enterprises planning technological upgrades, sustainability investments or market expansion, but lacking structured financial planning capacity.

### **Timeline:**

2027-2028

## **5. TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Transnational cooperation will support the organisation of **joint awareness activities** aimed at sharing good practices across partner regions. While Bulgaria will organise regional knowledge-sharing events, selected events could include speakers or case examples from other RISE regions. This transnational participation will allow Bulgarian SMEs to access experiences from regions that may demonstrate more advanced digitalisation, energy efficiency practices or circular economy models.

Joint thematic webinars will be organised at transnational level focusing on topics such as digital traceability in food production, renewable energy integration in processing facilities, circular packaging solutions or sustainable branding. These sessions could allow SMEs from different countries to learn from comparable enterprises operating in similar sub-sectors such as dairy, bakery, meat processing or beverage production.

By sharing concrete implementation examples rather than abstract policy discussions, transnational cooperation will enhance the credibility of transformation pathways and reduce perceived risks among SMEs. It will also allow mentors and business support organizations to exchange methodologies and improve the quality of advisory services.

In addition, selected regional events in Bulgaria will be promoted through the RISE network to ensure visibility beyond national borders. This will strengthen the transnational dimension of knowledge exchange and position Bulgarian SMEs as active contributors within the Danube innovation ecosystem.

A central element of transnational cooperation will be the **active use of B2GreenHub** as a shared matchmaking and referral platform. Bulgarian SMEs participating in mentoring sessions will have the opportunity to access expertise from other regions when specialised knowledge is not available locally.

For example, if a Bulgarian SME requires highly specialised advice in advanced digital monitoring systems or circular process optimisation, mentors from another RISE partner region may be engaged through coordinated matchmaking. This mechanism increases the diversity and quality of expertise available to SMEs and ensures that regional limitations do not restrict innovation potential.

Similarly, Bulgarian mentors may provide expertise to SMEs in other regions, strengthening the reciprocity principle of the transnational mentor community. This exchange contributes to professional development of mentors and enhances cross-border collaboration.

Referral mechanisms will also operate at institutional level. Business support organisations in Bulgaria will cooperate with counterparts in other partner regions to exchange information about relevant tools, training modules and advisory approaches. When appropriate, SMEs may be referred to specialised cross-border initiatives or thematic working groups coordinated under RISE.

Transnational cooperation will be strengthened through the **shared use and continuous refinement of B2GreenHub tools and assessment methodologies**. Bulgarian SMEs will apply digital readiness, energy efficiency and circular economy assessment tools developed within the RISE partnership. The use of common tools ensures comparability of results across regions and supports mutual learning.

The long-term impact of transnational cooperation depends on **maintaining an active mentor community beyond the project lifetime**. Bulgarian participation in regular transnational mentor meetings, virtual exchange sessions and thematic workshops will ensure continuous knowledge flow. Mentors will share case studies, implementation challenges and practical solutions across borders. This collective learning mechanism strengthens advisory quality and ensures that Bulgarian SMEs benefit from up-to-date international practices. The development of a transnational peer-learning environment for mentors also contributes to professionalisation and retention of expertise within the ecosystem. It creates incentives for sustained engagement and strengthens the overall mentoring infrastructure.

## 6. MONITORING

The monitoring of the Regional Action Plan implementation is an essential process to ensure that planned activities are effectively executed, progress is measured, and corrective actions are taken where necessary.

It will provide regular insights into the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned during the execution of the four measures, ensuring that the RAP remains aligned with the objectives of the RISE project and the evolving national context.

The following **core KPIs** will be monitored to measure progress under each action:

Action	KPI
<b>Action 1: Organisation of events for sharing knowledge and good practices</b>	6 online/ on-site events 60 participants 12 good practices/ case studies presented
<b>Action 2: Organisation of mentoring sessions</b>	5 entrepreneurs mentored per year; 10 mentors engaged; ≥ 70 % of mentees report digital or green improvement
<b>Action 3: Organisation of financial literacy and investment-readiness training sessions</b>	2 investor events organised; 120 participants; 5 SMEs connected with investors

### Monitoring frequency:

- **Comprehensive evaluation and reporting:** Once per year (December), summarising progress, KPIs, and key findings.
- **Mid-term review:** Conducted in mid-2027, assessing cumulative results and determining if any corrective measures or updates to the RAP are needed.
- **Final evaluation:** Conducted in late 2028, summarising overall performance, sustainability prospects, and policy impact

Monitoring will be implemented by RAPIV with the support of the listed stakeholders under each Measure.

Information will be collected by regular e-mails, provided feedback from the participants in the different initiatives, attendance lists and reports, interviews, and public information available.

If the monitoring process identifies underperformance or KPIs not being met, the following corrective actions will be applied:

1. **Review of the specific measure or action to determine root causes** (e.g., insufficient outreach, budget limitations, or stakeholder engagement).
2. **Adjustment of implementation plans** (e.g., extending timelines, reallocating responsibilities, or introducing additional promotional activities).
3. **Engagement of additional partners or experts to strengthen weak areas** (e.g., trainers, mentors, policy advisors).
4. **Update of the RAP**, if necessary, to realign objectives or adapt to new contextual or policy developments.