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Final report of transnational Pilot – Part 2



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI - Artificial Intelligence

CDR - Corporate Digital Responsibility

CE - Central Europe

COEUS - Corporate digital responsibility skills in central European Smart specialization

ESG - Environmental, Social, and Governance

SME – Small and medium Enterprises

A. Executive summary

The Final report of transnational Pilot - Part 2 summarises the implementation and results of Activity Transnational pilot part 2: testing of CDR training to SMEs, focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across COEUS partner countries. The pilot was implemented in Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Italy, following a joint transnational methodology while allowing for national adaptations based on SME needs, digital maturity levels and institutional contexts.

The primary objectives of the pilot were to validate the relevance, applicability and effectiveness of the CDR training programme for SMEs, assess the suitability of training materials and methodology, and collect structured feedback to inform further improvements. The pilot combined transnational online seminars with national kick-off meetings, individual one-to-one mentoring and final evaluation sessions.

Overall, the pilot confirmed strong SME interest in CDR-related topics, particularly cybersecurity, data protection, responsible use of AI and digital sustainability. At the same time, it highlighted the need for more practical, modular and SME-oriented materials, clearer guidance for trainers and flexible delivery formats. Lessons learned from all partner countries provide a solid evidence base for refining the CDR training programme and scaling it beyond the project lifetime.

B. Introduction

COEUS – *Corporate Digital Responsibility Skills in Central European Smart Specialisation* – is a transnational project co-funded by the Interreg Central Europe Programme. The project aims to support responsible, sustainable and inclusive digital transformation of SMEs by strengthening Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) skills among trainers, companies and relevant stakeholders.

The *Final report of transnational Pilot - Part 2* reports on Transnational pilot part 2– *Testing of CDR training programme with SMEs*, which represents the second pilot phase within Work Package 2 of activities. Building on the outcomes of the first pilot phase (Transnational pilot part 1: testing of CDR training of trainers), which focused on training trainers, Pilot 2 shifted the focus to direct engagement with SMEs. The objective was to test the CDR training concept in SME environments, validate its applicability for companies with different levels of digital maturity and collect feedback for further refinement of both materials and methodology.

C. Transnational framework and methodology – Pilot 2

The second transnational pilot under Transnational pilot part 2: testing of CDR training to SMEs was implemented using a jointly agreed transnational framework, combining common elements at project level with flexible national adaptations. The pilot aimed to test the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme which had previously been tested by 50 trainers—10 from each pilot partner—in real SME environments and to validate its applicability for companies with different levels of digital maturity and operating in different economic sectors.

The transnational framework was designed to ensure methodological consistency across partner countries while allowing sufficient flexibility to address national contexts, institutional settings and SME-specific needs. It covered the full pilot lifecycle, including the selection of participating SMEs, the structure and content of training activities, implementation modalities and feedback collection.

SME selection as an integral part of the transnational framework

The implementation of Transnational Pilot 2 was supported by a structured and harmonised SME selection process, which formed an integral part of the overall transnational framework. The selection methodology was jointly developed at project level and is fully described in Deliverable SME selection methodology, process, and overview. Its purpose was to ensure that the pilot engaged a coherent, motivated and diverse group of SMEs suitable for testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme across different national and sectoral contexts.

The SME selection was carried out in line with the common methodological framework prepared by the Lead Partner and applied by all project partners. This framework ensured transparency, fairness and comparability of the selection process, while allowing partners to adapt procedures to national administrative requirements and market realities.

In line with the SME selection methodology, process, and overall framework, the selection was based on the following key principles, while allowing each partner to select the final SMEs based on their own professional judgment, in accordance with the common methodology, taking into account the availability, engagement, and suitability of SMEs at the local level.

- **Eligibility and formal compliance**
  All selected companies fulfilled the EU definition of SMEs, were actively registered and operating in the respective partner regions, and complied with the requirements related to indirect state aid under GBER Article 20a.

- **Motivation and readiness to participate**
  SMEs were selected based on their demonstrated motivation to engage in CDR-related upskilling and their willingness to actively participate in training, mentoring and evaluation activities throughout the pilot period.

- **Balanced representation of sectors and company profiles**
  A deliberate effort was made to ensure a balanced composition of SMEs, including:

  - an approximately equal number of enterprises operating in **traditional sectors** (e.g. manufacturing, agri-food, services) and **innovative sectors** (e.g. ICT, digital services, technology-oriented companies),
  - representation of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises,
  - sectoral and geographic diversity in line with regional smart specialisation priorities.

Within the project context, *traditional SMEs* were understood as companies operating in more established, less digitally intensive sectors, typically characterised by lower or medium levels of digital maturity. *Innovative SMEs* referred to companies whose core activities are strongly linked to digital technologies, innovation-driven business models or advanced digital solutions, and which generally exhibit higher digital maturity levels. This balance was essential to test the applicability of the CDR training programme across heterogeneous SME environments and to assess its relevance for companies with different starting points and needs.

- **Qualitative assessment and matching potential**
  Interviews were used to assess SMEs' digital maturity, expectations and thematic interests (e.g. cybersecurity, AI, ESG, data protection, sustainability). This information supported the subsequent matching of SMEs with trained CDR trainers and ensured that pilot activities could be tailored to concrete company needs.

- **Final approval and formal commitment**
  Selected SMEs were formally approved and contracted prior to the start of Pilot 2, ensuring clarity of roles, availability during the implementation period and commitment to active participation.

By integrating this structured selection process into the transnational framework, Pilot 2 ensured that the CDR training programme was tested with SMEs that were both representative of the Central European economic landscape and suitable for meaningful evaluation. The balanced inclusion of traditional and innovative SMEs allowed the pilot to assess how the training concept performs across different levels of digital maturity and sectoral contexts, thereby strengthening the validity and transferability of the pilot results.

Structure and implementation of Pilot 2 activities

The second part of the pilot was implemented at two complementary levels. At transnational level, a series of seminars focusing on CDR-related topics was organised in order to ensure a shared understanding and a common methodological approach among all partners. At national level, pilot activities were implemented in each participating country with the objective of adapting the actions to local contexts and addressing the specific needs of SMEs and trainers.

Within this framework, the **eight online transnational seminars** were organised jointly for all participating countries. The seminars were structured as:

- **four transnational seminars for SMEs operating in traditional sectors**, and
- **four transnational seminars for SMEs operating in innovative sectors**.

The seminars for traditional and innovative SMEs addressed the **same core topics**, but the content, examples and discussion focus were adapted to reflect the specific characteristics, challenges and digital maturity levels of each target group. This approach ensured methodological consistency at transnational level while allowing meaningful sector-specific adaptation.

The transnational seminars covered the following topics:

1. **Introduction to Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR)** – providing a shared understanding of the CDR concept, its relevance for SMEs and its link to responsible and sustainable digital transformation.
2. **Social Corporate Responsibility and CDR** – focusing on the social dimension of digitalisation, including responsibility towards employees, customers and society.
3. **Cybersecurity** – addressing cybersecurity risks, basic protection measures and good practices relevant for SMEs.
4. **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** – focusing on responsible, ethical and safe use of AI, with emphasis on opportunities and risks for SMEs.

Each topic was delivered once for traditional SMEs and once for innovative SMEs, resulting in a total of eight transnational seminars.

In parallel with the transnational seminars, the **national-level pilot activities** implemented in each partner country included:

- national kick-off meetings,
- individual one-to-one mentoring and pilot implementation at SME level,
- tailored workshops or consultations depending on SME needs,
- final feedback and evaluation meetings.

The one-to-one mentoring approach represented a central methodological component of Pilot 2. It allowed trainers to adjust the training content to each SME’s digital maturity, sector, organisational

capacity and strategic priorities, and to translate CDR principles into concrete, feasible improvement measures.

Overall, the transnational framework enabled a balanced combination of joint learning and exchange at transnational level and tailored support at SME level, ensuring meaningful testing of the CDR training programme across diverse national and sectoral contexts.

D. Implementation overview of transnational pilot by country – Pilot 2

The pilot implementation followed different timelines across partners countrys in Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Italy. Activities started earlier in the Czech Republic, where the pilot began already in August 2025, while in the remaining partner countries the main pilot activities were carried out between September and November 2025. Despite this difference in starting dates, all partners followed the same overall methodology and participated in the joint transnational components of the pilot.

Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, Pilot 2 was coordinated and implemented by Innovation Centre of the Ústí Region (ICUK) and focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme with ten small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from the Ústí Region. The pilot was implemented between August and November 2025, making the Czech Republic the first partner country to start Pilot 2 activities. The pilot combined joint training activities and individual company-level support, following the common transnational methodology.

At national level, the Czech pilot started with a face-to-face kick-off meeting held on 26 May 2025 in Ústí nad Labem, which enabled direct interaction between SMEs and trainers, clarification of roles and expectations and discussion of company-specific needs related to Corporate Digital Responsibility. The in-person format played an important role in building trust and ensuring smooth communication throughout the pilot.

Following the joint activities, a one-week individual pilot implementation was carried out in each SME. During this phase, each company worked in a one-to-one format with an assigned trainer, focusing on analysing existing digital practices, identifying concrete risks and gaps and discussing feasible improvement measures tailored to the company's internal capacities and digital maturity level. This approach ensured that the pilot activities were closely aligned with real operational conditions in each SME.

The pilot concluded with a joint online feedback meeting on 25 November 2025, organised by ICUK together with all participating SMEs. The meeting focused on reflection on the pilot experience, structured feedback on the training approach and materials and discussion of possible improvements and future use of results at regional level.

Several challenges were identified during the implementation of the Czech pilot. These included limited time availability of SME representatives, significant differences in digital maturity levels among participating companies and low initial awareness of the CDR concept, which was often perceived as abstract. SMEs consistently expressed a preference for practical, concrete guidance rather than theoretical or highly conceptual content.

These challenges were addressed through flexible scheduling, a combination of online and face-to-face formats and, most importantly, through individual one-to-one cooperation. Trainers adapted content to the specific needs and maturity level of each SME, using simplified explanations and

practical examples linked to existing business practices. SMEs were encouraged to focus on small, achievable steps, rather than comprehensive or resource-intensive changes.

Based on the Czech pilot experience, several recommendations for improving the training materials and implementation approach were formulated. These include the need to increase the practical orientation of the materials, for example through the addition of concrete checklists, tools and step-by-step guidance for SMEs. SMEs and trainers recommended further simplification of language and clearer structuring of content to make it more accessible for non-technical audiences. It was also suggested to strengthen methodological guidance for trainers, particularly when working with heterogeneous SME groups, and to provide clearer instructions on how to adapt content to different levels of digital maturity. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of follow-up support, such as additional check-ins after the end of the pilot, to reinforce implementation of agreed measures and support longer-term adoption of CDR practices.

Overall, Czech SMEs confirmed that the pilot helped them better understand Corporate Digital Responsibility and its relevance for everyday business operations. The Czech pilot demonstrated that a combination of transnational input and targeted individual mentoring is effective in supporting SMEs with diverse levels of digital maturity, while also highlighting concrete areas for further refinement of the training programme.

Austria

In Austria, Pilot 2 was coordinated and implemented by the Styrian Business Promotion Agency (SFG) and focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme with ten small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from the region of Styria. The pilot aimed to assess the comprehensibility, applicability and usefulness of the proposed methodology and training materials for SMEs with different levels of digital maturity.

The Austrian pilot was implemented between September and November 2025 and combined national-level activities with individual one-to-one mentoring at company level. Initially, 10 trainers were involved; however, two trainers withdrew during the implementation phase. Despite this change, all ten SMEs remained in the pilot, and implementation continued by reallocating responsibilities, with two trainers supervising two SMEs each.

The pilot started with a kick-off meeting on 14 October 2025, organised in a hybrid format and combined with an existing SFG event. This approach enabled direct interaction between SMEs and trainers and supported high participation. During the kick-off meeting, roles and expectations were clarified, the CDR concept was introduced, and the specific needs of participating SMEs were discussed. The face-to-face component proved important for building trust and facilitating communication during the subsequent phases of the pilot.

As part of the pilot framework, Austrian SMEs participated in joint transnational online training sessions, followed by one-week individual pilot implementation in close cooperation with an assigned trainer. The individual support focused on analysing existing digital practices, identifying concrete risks and gaps, and defining practical and feasible improvement measures tailored to the company's internal capacities and priorities. This one-to-one approach enabled a high degree of flexibility and ensured that recommendations were directly applicable in the SME context.
After completion of the individual pilot phase, a joint online feedback meeting was held on 19 November 2025, providing an opportunity to reflect on experiences, collect structured feedback and discuss possible improvements and future use of results. Additional supporting activities included a webinar on 4 November 2025 and a workshop on 4 December 2025, which further supported exchange of experience and consolidation of learning outcomes.

Several challenges were identified during the Austrian pilot, including limited time availability of SME representatives, significant differences in digital maturity among participating companies and low initial familiarity with the CDR concept, which was often perceived as abstract. These challenges were addressed through flexible scheduling, strong reliance on individual mentoring and a focus on small, realistic and short-term measures rather than comprehensive organisational changes. SMEs

expressed a clear preference for practical content and reported higher engagement when CDR topics were directly linked to everyday business operations.

Overall, the Austrian pilot confirmed the relevance of the CDR training programme for SMEs, while highlighting the importance of flexibility, practical orientation and individualised support when working with heterogeneous SME groups.

Poland

In Poland, Pilot 2 was implemented with ten small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme through a highly operational and practice-oriented approach.

The pilot implementation was preceded by a working online coordination meeting with trainers on 30 September 2025, during which the training structure, methods, forms of cooperation and documentation requirements were agreed. It was decided that all online meetings would be documented and that, following each training module, SMEs would complete knowledge tests prepared by the trainers to support self-learning and assessment of understanding of the CDR content. The official launch of the pilot took place on 13 October 2025 with an introductory session presenting the COEUS project, its objectives and activities, the regional innovation context and the Corporate Digital Responsibility concept. During this initial phase, trainers presented the overall training programme and module structure, combining project materials with their own professional experience and external CDR-related resources. SMEs completed an entry survey to support the initial assessment of their digital readiness, challenges and development potential.

The core of the Polish pilot consisted of individual one-to-one cooperation between trainers and SMEs, implemented through a combination of online and on-site activities. These included operational assessments, company visits, desk analysis and guided self-learning. After each training session, SMEs independently studied the relevant modules and completed tests prepared by the trainers. Test results were aggregated and used to support monitoring of learning progress. All activities were systematically documented.

In parallel, Polish SMEs and trainers participated in joint transnational training activities, which enabled exchange of experience and discussion on CDR implementation across countries. The online individual training phase was completed on 31 October 2025.

The pilot concluded with a final on-site meeting on 20 November 2025, focusing on group work, presentation of concrete SME needs and solutions, discussion of individual CDR action plans and collection of conclusions relevant for regional digitalisation strategies. SMEs and trainers completed final evaluation surveys. An additional summary online meeting with SMEs on 21 November 2025 provided space for reflection on the training process, key outcomes and future steps.

Overall, Polish SMEs confirmed that the pilot was highly operational and practice-oriented. They expressed strong satisfaction with the operational assessments, the concrete recommendations provided by trainers and the overall training process. Several companies indicated their intention to continue cooperation with trainers beyond the pilot. SMEs particularly valued the training sessions related to digital practices, legal context and cybersecurity, noting increased awareness of how everyday digital practices influence business operations, client trust and market positioning. The CDR framework was perceived as useful in consolidating existing knowledge and newly acquired competences into a single, coherent thematic area, reinforcing the understanding that CDR implementation is a continuous process rather than a one-off activity.

From the SMEs' perspective, the most relevant areas of intervention included digital security, data management, cybersecurity, responsible use of AI, cloud work, access control and password policies, incident response planning, electronic documentation circulation, safe use of networks, website management and accessibility, energy consumption and equipment lifecycle management. SMEs clearly stated that CDR should be seen not as a cost, but as an investment in innovation and competitiveness, contributing to stronger market position and increased client trust. They emphasised

the importance of training all employees, not only management, to build awareness, responsibility and digital competences across the organisation.

Based on the pilot experience, SMEs and trainers formulated several recommendations for improving the training materials and implementation approach. They highlighted the need for clearer, simpler and more concise materials, tailored to the regional, economic and legal context of SMEs and supported by practical examples relevant for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Key CDR information should be summarised in compact and easily accessible formats, such as one-page visual overviews, posters or checklists, to support internal communication and awareness-raising.

Operational assessments and on-site work with trainers were identified as particularly valuable and should be maintained in future editions of the programme. Furthermore, SMEs stressed that CDR implementation should be supported by a structured implementation plan, defining concrete actions, responsibilities and indicative budgets for the next six months, one year and a longer-term perspective. Finally, trust built between trainers and SMEs was recognised as a critical success factor for effective and sustainable CDR implementation and for translating recommendations into concrete operational practices.

Slovenia

In Slovenia, Pilot 2 was coordinated and implemented by Digital Innovation Hub Slovenia (DIHS) with Chamber of commerce and industry of Slovenia (CCIS) and focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme with 10 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The pilot was implemented between mid-September and the end of November 2025 and followed a structured approach combining preparatory meetings, individual mentoring-based training and a final evaluation phase.

The pilot started with an in-person kick-off meeting on 15 September 2025, where trainers and participating SMEs met for the first time. The meeting focused on introducing participants, clarifying expectations and presenting the overall structure, objectives and timeline of the CDR training programme. Particular emphasis was placed on explaining the one-to-one mentoring approach, the roles of trainers and SMEs, and the expected outputs of the pilot.

To ensure consistency in implementation, an additional online coordination meeting with trainers was organised on 16 September 2025. During this meeting, the training flow, modules and implementation logic were reviewed, and open questions regarding content delivery, level of depth and adaptation to SME needs were clarified.

Following the preparatory phase, trainers and SMEs had approximately two months to implement the CDR training activities. The Slovenian pilot was based primarily on individual one-to-one cooperation between trainers and SMEs, complemented by online and in-person meetings as needed.

The implementation was highly tailored. Trainers adapted the content to the digital maturity level, sector and organisational context of each SME, using concrete examples, company-specific scenarios and practical discussions. Several SMEs explicitly highlighted the value of practical interpretation of theoretical concepts and the possibility to directly relate CDR principles to their everyday operations.

During the pilot, several challenges were identified. SMEs faced limited time availability due to operational pressures, while trainers encountered significant differences in digital maturity among participating companies. In addition, parts of the training materials were perceived as too theoretical, requiring additional effort from trainers to translate them into practical SME-relevant guidance. SMEs also expressed high expectations regarding artificial intelligence, particularly in terms of practical and safe use in business processes. Furthermore, trainers noted that the materials provided limited methodological guidance, which increased the need for individual preparation.

These challenges were addressed through flexible scheduling, strong reliance on individual mentoring and prioritisation of topics most relevant for each SME. Trainers complemented the materials with practical examples, checklists and simple tools, and focused primarily on cybersecurity basics, data

protection and responsible AI use. Continuous and informal communication between trainers and SMEs helped maintain engagement and allowed issues to be resolved efficiently throughout the pilot period.

The pilot concluded with a final in-person meeting on 25 November 2025, during which SMEs presented their experiences, key takeaways and satisfaction with the training programme. Trainers shared reflections on the implementation process, and both SMEs and trainers completed evaluation questionnaires. Trainers also submitted final reports summarising the activities carried out with individual SMEs and the main outcomes of the pilot.

Overall, Slovenian SMEs confirmed that the pilot was highly relevant and effective when delivered through a mentoring-based and practical approach. They particularly valued the individualised support, concrete examples and direct applicability of recommendations. The pilot increased awareness of digital responsibility, cybersecurity and responsible AI use, and supported SMEs in translating CDR principles into concrete operational practices.

Based on the pilot experience, several recommendations for improving the training materials and methodology were identified. These include reducing repetitive theoretical content and strengthening the practical orientation of materials, developing clear methodological guidelines for trainers, and providing ready-to-use presentation materials. SMEs and trainers also recommended expanding AI-related content with concrete business examples, creating concise checklists and templates for key CDR topics, and simplifying language to improve accessibility for non-technical audiences.

Finally, Slovenian SMEs emphasised that CDR implementation should be treated as an ongoing process, supported by follow-up assessments and a structured implementation plan, enabling companies to review progress and reinforce implementation over time (e.g. after six months). The Slovenian pilot demonstrated that sustained impact depends on long-term engagement, trust between trainers and SMEs, and continuous support beyond the initial training phase.

Italy

In Italy, Pilot 2 was implemented by Città Metropolitana di Torino (CMTO) in cooperation with the technical partner Fondazione Piemonte Innova (FPI). The pilot focused on testing the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme with ten small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in the metropolitan area of Turin. The implementation took place between September and November 2025.

Out of the ten SMEs involved, nine successfully completed the programme, while one company did not complete the activities despite repeated follow-up attempts by the trainer, FPI and CMTO. The Italian pilot combined in-person workshops, individual one-to-one activities and online sessions, following a structured but flexible implementation model.

The programme started with an initial in-person workshop in Turin on 26 September 2025, followed by individual one-to-one activities between trainers and SMEs. These included introductory and analysis sessions and three thematic training phases delivered in a blended format. A mid-term online meeting with SMEs was held on 11 November 2025 to review progress and address emerging issues, while the pilot concluded with a final in-person workshop on 21 November 2025, focused on collecting feedback and discussing overall results.

From an organisational perspective, the Italian pilot demonstrated several key strengths. SMEs appreciated the blended format, combining in-person and online activities, which facilitated participation and reduced organisational burden. The modular structure of the programme was considered clear and coherent, and the overall organisation allowed a certain degree of flexibility, including the possibility to add extra sessions to support the drafting of tangible outputs. The involvement of trainers with diverse professional backgrounds was perceived as an added value, and the use of collaborative and visual tools supported a dynamic, peer-oriented interaction between trainers and SMEs.

At the same time, several organisational weaknesses were identified. The overall timeline of the programme was perceived as too tight, limiting SMEs' ability to fully absorb the content and implement changes between sessions. The intensive schedule was particularly challenging for small organisations with limited internal resources. In addition, trainers noted limited opportunities for structured exchange and coordination among themselves during the implementation phase. Concerns were also raised regarding the replicability and cost-efficiency of a model involving a high number of trainers.

With regard to the training content, SMEs and trainers highlighted several strengths. The programme was considered well structured, with a balanced combination of theoretical concepts and practical elements. The personalised approach allowed trainers to adapt content to the specific tools, processes and daily challenges of each SME. Particular value was attributed to the focus on tangible outputs, such as draft policies, manifestos or contractual clauses, which provided immediate and usable results for companies.

However, several content-related weaknesses were also identified. The programme was perceived as too general in some areas, offering a broad overview without sufficient depth on specific topics. SMEs expressed a need for more in-depth and technically oriented guidance, particularly in areas requiring concrete operational implementation. Some examples used during the training were considered less relevant for micro and small enterprises, as they referred to contexts closer to large organisations. In addition, parts of the regulatory content were perceived as too complex for non-expert audiences, and Module 3 was considered less developed compared to the other parts of the programme. Issues related to the accessibility of training materials, such as insufficient visual contrast in some slides, were also noted.

Based on the Italian pilot experience, a comprehensive set of recommendations for future improvements was formulated. Key recommendations include the need for greater customisation and verticality of the training programme, adapting content more strongly to sector-specific contexts and different levels of digital maturity. Participants recommended offering optional deep-dive materials for SMEs wishing to explore certain topics in more detail, as well as simplifying regulatory content through summaries, practical checklists and SME-oriented guides.

Further recommendations focused on structure and duration, including extending the programme timeline or increasing scheduling flexibility, integrating additional hands-on exercises and verification mechanisms, and rebalancing the structure of the programme to ensure adequate focus on all thematic areas. From a delivery perspective, SMEs and trainers suggested strengthening trainer support, including better preparatory materials, regular exchange sessions among trainers and the creation of a repository of ready-to-use templates and policy documents.

Finally, the Italian partners emphasised the importance of assessment and follow-up mechanisms, such as more advanced diagnostic tools for digitally mature companies, structured follow-up sessions after programme completion to verify implementation of agreed actions, and optional technical labs for more specialised discussions. Improving the accessibility of training materials was also highlighted as a necessary step to ensure inclusiveness and usability for all participants.

Overall, the Italian pilot confirmed the value of a structured, personalised and practice-oriented CDR training programme, while clearly identifying concrete organisational, content-related and methodological improvements to enhance effectiveness, scalability and long-term impact in future implementations.

E. Lessons learned from Pilot 2 implementation

The implementation of Pilot 2 highlighted several key lessons learned, which are directly aligned with the challenges identified during the activity Transnational pilot part 2: testing of CDR training to SMEs and the ways these were addressed through workshops, transnational seminars and one-to-one support.

- **Limited time availability of SMEs requires flexible and realistic delivery models**
  SMEs face strong operational pressures, which significantly limit the time they can dedicate to training activities. Pilot 2 showed that flexible scheduling, blended formats and clear prioritisation of key topics are essential to ensure SME participation and completion of activities.

- **Heterogeneous digital maturity must be addressed through individualised support**
  Differences in digital skills and readiness were evident both across and within SME groups. The pilot confirmed that one-to-one mentoring is the most effective way to tailor content, pace and depth to individual company needs and capacities.

- **Low initial awareness of CDR can be overcome through practical contextualisation**
  At the beginning of the pilot, CDR was often perceived as abstract. SMEs engaged more effectively when CDR concepts were clearly linked to existing business practices, regulatory obligations and concrete operational challenges.

- **Excessive theoretical content reduces relevance for SMEs**
  SMEs consistently valued practical tools, checklists and concrete examples over conceptual explanations. Trainers played a key role in translating theory into actionable guidance, highlighting the need for more practice-oriented and SME-focused training materials.

- **High expectations regarding AI require clear scope and realistic framing**
  SMEs expected concrete guidance on the use of artificial intelligence. The pilot demonstrated the importance of focusing on responsible, realistic and SME-relevant AI use cases, rather than advanced or highly technical solutions that exceed SME capacities

- **Trainer guidance and support are critical for consistent implementation**
  Trainers were central to the success of Pilot 2, but often lacked sufficient methodological guidance and ready-to-use tools. Stronger trainer guidelines, shared resources and clearer implementation frameworks are necessary to ensure quality, consistency and scalability of the programme.

- **Lack of follow-up limits long-term impact**
  SMEs emphasised that CDR implementation should be understood as a process rather than a one-off intervention. Structured follow-up, implementation planning and periodic check-ins are essential to ensure sustained adoption of CDR practices over time.

- **Stronger focus on digital sustainability, inclusion and accessibility is needed to support long-term impac**
  Pilot 2 showed that digital sustainability, inclusion and accessibility need a clearer and more practical focus within CDR training activities. SMEs engaged more effectively when sustainability-related topics were presented through concrete, business-relevant examples and linked to everyday digital decision-making. Strengthening practical guidance, sector-specific examples and tangible outputs in this area is essential to support not only responsible and secure digitalisation, but also its long-term social, environmental and organisational sustainability.

The lessons learned above provide the basis for the systematic overview of challenges and mitigation measures presented in the following table.

F. Key challenges and impact

The implementation of Transnational Pilot 2 highlighted several recurring challenges related to SME engagement, different levels of digital maturity and the practical application of Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) concepts. At the same time, the pilot showed that these challenges can be addressed through a structured training approach that combines practical content, embedded support services and one-to-one mentoring.

Beyond the immediate pilot activities, the results demonstrate clear effects at both transnational and local levels. The findings also show how the pilot contributes to policy and practice, while indicating strong potential for further transfer and long-term sustainability.

The table below summarises the main challenges identified during Pilot 2 and describes how these were addressed during implementation, together with implications for future improvements of the CDR training programme.

Table 1: Key challenges and approaches to addressing them in Pilot 2 (Transnational pilot part 2: testing of CDR training to SMEs)

Challenge	Description	How the challenge was addressed / Implications for future implementation
Limited time availability of SMEs	SMEs have limited time due to operational pressures	Flexible scheduling, blended formats and prioritisation of key topics; future programmes should allow longer and more flexible implementation periods
Heterogeneous digital maturity	Significant differences in digital skills and readiness	One-to-one mentoring and tailored content; future materials should be modular and adaptable to different maturity levels
Low initial awareness of CDR	CDR perceived as abstract at the start of the pilot	Practical contextualisation, linking CDR to business practices and regulatory obligations
Excessive theoretical content	Limited immediate applicability of some materials	Use of checklists, templates and practical examples; stronger focus on operational guidance
High expectations regarding AI	Expectation of advanced and hands-on AI guidance	Clear framing of responsible and realistic AI use cases relevant for SMEs
Limited methodological guidance for trainers	Trainers required additional preparation and interpretation	Need for clearer trainer guidelines, ready-to-use tools and suggested training flows
Lack of follow-up after training	Risk of limited long-term impact	Introduction of implementation plans, follow-up sessions and periodic check-ins
Limited emphasis on digital sustainability, inclusion and accessibility	Sustainability-related aspects not always sufficiently visible or translated into practical SME-relevant guidance	Stronger integration of digital sustainability, inclusion and accessibility as explicit focus areas; use of concrete SME-oriented examples, sector-specific cases and clearer links to operational and strategic business practices

Transnational and local impact, and contribution to policy and practice

The pilot had a clear impact at both local and transnational levels. At local and regional level, it helped SMEs strengthen their capacities in cybersecurity, data protection, responsible use of AI and sustainable digitalisation, directly addressing key territorial challenges and SME needs in Central Europe. SMEs reported higher awareness of digital risks, a better understanding of their implications and clearer ideas on practical improvement measures that can be implemented within existing organisational capacities.

At transnational level, Pilot 2 confirmed that a common CDR training and service model can work across different regional contexts when it is flexible and supported by clear selection procedures, modular content and one-to-one mentoring. The pilot helped consolidate CDR knowledge among project partners and stakeholders and contributed to the creation of a transnational pool of trained CDR trainers, providing a solid basis for further use and rollout of the programme.

The pilot results are directly relevant for policy and practice. The validated programme represents a ready-to-use solution that can be taken up by local and regional public authorities, business support organisations, education and training providers and competence centres. It can be integrated into regional digitalisation strategies, SME support schemes and smart specialisation initiatives, supporting public authorities in addressing digital security, regulatory compliance and sustainable digital transformation in a practical and scalable way.

Transferability potential to other regions

The pilot showed that the solution can be transferred beyond the participating regions. This is mainly due to the modular structure of the training programme, the clear distinction between common transnational elements and nationally adaptable parts, and the focus on widely relevant topics such as cybersecurity, data protection, artificial intelligence and sustainability.

By testing the programme in five Central European countries with different governance settings, economic profiles and smart specialisation priorities, the pilot confirmed that the approach can be adapted to other regions, sectors and target groups.It shows that the programme works across different levels of digital maturity and sectoral contexts. In addition, the transnational pool of trained CDR trainers and established stakeholder networks provides a strong basis for further replication, knowledge sharing and scaling beyond the pilot regions.

Sustainability prospects and long-term uptake

The sustainability of Pilot 2 outcomes is expected to be supported through institutional and policy-related frameworks. Project partners, associated organisations and key stakeholders working with SMEs may integrate the validated CDR training programme into their regular service offerings, such as regional training schemes, competence centres and advisory activities. The involvement of public authorities and policy stakeholders during the pilot also creates conditions for embedding CDR-related elements into relevant strategies, roadmaps and support instruments.

From a financial and organisational perspective, the continuation of the programme could build on existing public funding mechanisms, including regional and national instruments and EU funds such as ERDF and ESF.

Overall, Pilot 2 indicates that Corporate Digital Responsibility can be operationalised through a transnational, service-based training model with the potential to deliver benefits for SMEs, support policy objectives and offer a sustainable and transferable approach to responsible digital transformation in Central Europe.

G. Conclusion

Pilot 2 successfully tested the Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) training programme within real SME environments across partner countries through the Transnational pilot part 2: testing of CDR training to SMEs. The combination of workshops, transnational seminars and intensive one-to-one support provided a robust framework for evaluating the relevance, usability and impact of the proposed training solution.

The pilot confirmed that SMEs are most receptive to CDR when it is delivered in a practical, flexible and company-specific manner. One-to-one mentoring proved to be the most effective approach for addressing heterogeneous digital maturity levels, limited time availability and diverse expectations, while group-based activities served as important supporting and contextualising elements.

At the same time, Pilot 2 identified clear challenges related to content complexity, trainer support and long-term sustainability. The ways in which these challenges were addressed during implementation, together with the lessons learned, provide concrete guidance for updating capacity-enhancing materials, strengthening methodological support for trainers and improving delivery formats.

In addition, the findings presented in this report are supported by a preliminary post-training evaluation, based on responses from approximately 70% of the SMEs involved in Pilot 2. Although the evaluation does not yet cover all participating companies, the results provide a sufficiently robust indication of overall trends and outcomes. The feedback confirms a high level of SME engagement, strong relevance of CDR topics—particularly cybersecurity, data protection and responsible use of AI—and a positive assessment of the mentoring-based training approach. These preliminary results further reinforce the validity of the conclusions drawn in this report and will be complemented by a final evaluation once all responses are collected.

Together with Deliverables Final report of transnational Pilot – Part 1 and Transnational pilot monitoring, continuous improvement and evaluation system, this report contributes directly to Output COEUS SME upskilling/reskilling programme – SMEs digital skills boosting for Corporate Digital Responsibility in Central Europe by delivering a validated and improved CDR training framework. The results of Pilot 2 demonstrate that Corporate Digital Responsibility can be effectively embedded in SME practices when supported by targeted mentoring, practical tools and structured follow-up, thereby enabling responsible, secure and sustainable digital transformation in Central Europe. In line with the project Monitoring Plan, this deliverable serves as the means of verification for Milestone M2, confirming that the testing of the COEUS SME upskilling/reskilling programme through the transnational pilot (part 1 and part 2) has been successfully completed.

Building on these results, the added value of Transnational Pilot 2 for the COEUS project as a whole and for transnational cooperation will be further analysed in the *Deliverable Transnational Pilot - Final Evaluation Report*. While this deliverable confirms the successful completion of the pilot 2. The Final Evaluation Report will provide a more detailed assessment of transferability and scalability, examining how the validated CDR training approach can be adapted and replicated by other regions and SMEs beyond the pilot countries. The outcomes of Pilot 2 will be systematically translated into national action plans prepared by each pilot country and integrated into the CDR Strategy for Central Europe, ensuring structured follow-up and long-term uptake. In this way, the pilot results will directly inform future project outputs and create a solid basis for potential policy uptake at regional and transnational levels, supporting the wider implementation of Corporate Digital Responsibility in Central Europe.