



German demography

Ageing but supple

BERLIN

Responding creatively to shrinking populations

THE little town of Schladen-Werla in rural Lower Saxony, right alongside the former barrier between East and West Germany, is in a demographic “devil’s spiral”, says Andreas Memmert, its mayor. The place is projected to lose about a third of its population by 2030. “The young and clever leave and the less mobile stay,” he notes. As the population thins out, bus routes, crèches, schools, banks, convenience stores and libraries close for lack of demand. This makes life even harder for remaining residents, so they leave too.

Germany has one of the world’s most rapidly ageing and shrinking populations, even though an uptick in immigration has temporarily halted its overall decline since 2011. By 2060 it is estimated that the total number of Germans will have tumbled by 20m, equivalent to Romania’s population today. But decline is unevenly spread. Some cities are growing. Other areas, mainly in the east and the countryside, are emptying, (see map).

But local people in those places are not giving in. Some get together to start volunteer van services to replace buses. Others merge government services and shops under one roof. Usually, though, they run slap into Germany’s dense thicket of rules and laws. Those locals who somehow prevail are “heroes”, says Reiner Klingholz of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, a think-tank. They are “breaking up our bureaucracy and making it more flexible.”

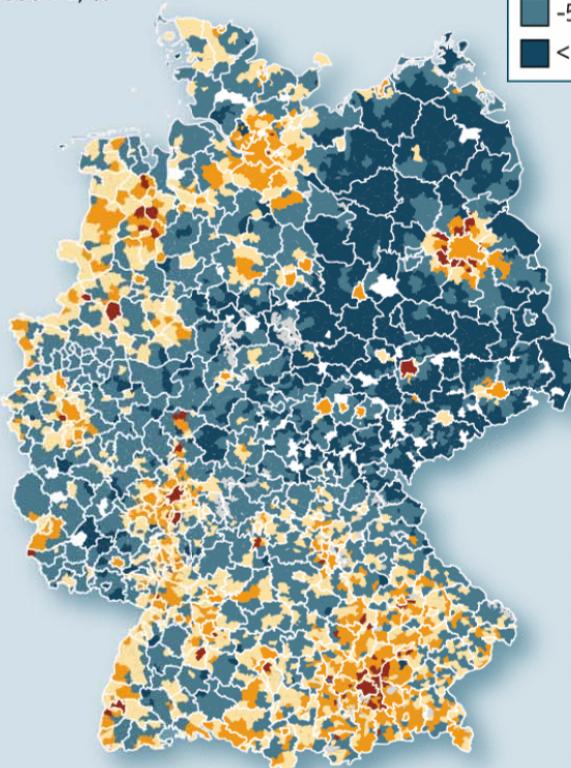
Mr Memmert is one example; he even won an innovation award. He saw a crunch coming in 2008. In a town that once had five doctors, several had retired and the others were thinking of leaving. The 9,000 residents were at risk of having no doctor at all. A care home for the old would have had to close; families would have had to move for lack of paediatric care. So Mr Memmert found ten doctors in

Growing and going

Population change in Germany

2006-11, %

5+
1 to 5
-1 to 1
-5 to -1
<-5



Source: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR)

fairly distant cities in Lower Saxony and an investor in Nuremberg. He offered them the use of a big empty building, where a discount store had moved out, and persuaded them to take turns commuting to the town for one or two days a week, without quitting their old practices. Between them the doctors and a physiotherapist give continuous service.

The first hurdle was the doctors’ association, a state-sponsored agency of self-regulation; it refused to grant permits. Mr Memmert overcame that with fierce lobbying. Then came volumes of pedantic laws. Mr Memmert either bent them or complied as far as possible. The physiotherapist, for example, must use a separate door, for reasons nobody quite understands. In the end he triumphed, and Schladen still has doctors. “Germans think ‘the state is clever—the citizen is stupid’. We have to get more flexible,” says Mr Memmert. ■

