



# Building Healthier and Better Socially Connected Communities Through Nature

RECETAS is a transdisciplinary research project uniting 13 partners across 6 pilot cities worldwide (European Horizon 2020 programme). It tests and evaluates **nature-based social prescribing (NBSP)** to reduce loneliness and improve quality of life of urban residents. Loneliness, a major public health crisis, is addressed by NBSP, which combines nature and social connection in an inclusive, adaptable approach suitable for all communities

**In Helsinki**, the RECETAS team implemented the Friends in Nature (FiN) intervention across 22 assisted living facilities, enrolling 319 lonely older adults (mean age 83). The results are striking: **loneliness decreased at 3 months**, sleep improved over 12 months, and cognitive functioning and nature connectedness both improved. Explore 12 evidence-based recommendations for healthier, more connected communities, aligned with a One Health approach.

## Fostering Loneliness Prevention: Systematically Identify and Address Predictable Risk Factor

- #1 Require health, social, and long-term care services to screen for known life-course transitions**, such as retirement, bereavement, declining health, and relocation, that increase the risk of loneliness. These predictable risk points should be integrated into preventive planning, allowing services to initiate timely support before loneliness deepens.
- #2 Train professionals in health, social, and long-term care to ask about loneliness systematically and sensitively.** Sensitive enquiry helps older adults recognise and articulate their experiences, providing a meaningful starting point for effective support. Addressing loneliness requires professionals who are equipped to ask, listen, and respond appropriately — otherwise these experiences remain invisible and opportunities for timely support are lost.
- #3 Require dementia-friendly care practices that recognise the rights, preferences, and individuality of people living with memory disorders.** This includes training professionals in person-centred communication and ensuring that care planning respects each person's values, needs, and wishes. Effective communication requires adequate training for healthcare professionals and close relatives in dementia care, as well as increased awareness of person-centred approaches and patients' rights.

## Improving Access to Nature in Long-Term Care Settings and Scaling Up Evidence-Based Interventions

- #4 Require wellbeing services counties and municipalities to implement structured, evidence-based loneliness interventions rather than ad-hoc activities.** Proven models — such as Circle of Friends (CoF) and Friends in Nature (FiN) and other facilitated group programmes — should be adopted, resourced, and monitored to ensure quality and impact.
- #5 Strengthen cross-sectoral public policies that integrate accessible nature environments, participatory planning, innovative service models, and professional training** into health, social, and wellbeing services to ensure access to nature-based solutions and enable prevention and early action.
- #6 Guarantee safe, regular, and supported access to nearby nature for older adults, particularly those in assisted living facilities.** Policies must address barriers such as mobility limitations, inadequate infrastructure, and rigid care routines that restrict time spent outdoors.
- #7 Develop regional and local plans to ensure access and availability of natural spaces for people across the lifespan and different abilities**, integrating nature-based interventions into health, social, and wellbeing services as a core element of prevention — not an optional add-on.

## Reinforcing Governance and Ensuring Sustainable Funding for the Third Sector

- #8 Provide stable, long-term funding and formal cooperation structures enabling NGOs and community organisations to deliver social-rehabilitative, nature-based, and relationship-building activities.** Their role as connectors between residents, services, and communities should be embedded in national and regional wellbeing strategies.
- #9 Strengthen interface work (Yhdyspintatyö) — the collaboration points between organisations involved in promoting health and wellbeing.** This requires cooperation across sectors to improve client-oriented service pathways, support coordinated health promotion across regions, and facilitate the recruitment of volunteers and access to activities through digital platforms.
- #10 Embed the governance of nature-based social prescribing within a shared cross-sector framework** bringing together wellbeing services counties, municipalities, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare (THL), and third-sector organisations, to guide implementation, monitoring, and sustainable funding of NBSP at national and regional scale.

RECETAS Helsinki provides robust evidence that structured, nature-based group interventions can effectively reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing among older adults, including those living in long-term care.

Building on the proven Circle of Friends model, the Friends in Nature intervention demonstrates that accessible nature, when embedded in a social prescribing framework, offers a practical and cost-effective response to one of Finland's most pressing public health challenges.

To scale this impact, the brief calls for strengthened cross-sector governance (linking wellbeing services counties, municipalities, health services, and NGOs) alongside sustainable funding for third-sector organisations and systematic professional training. With these foundations in place, Finland has the opportunity to integrate nature-based social prescribing as a permanent, prevention-oriented pillar of care for its ageing population.

### More information about

- RECETAS in Helsinki:  
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