



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. Nature-Based Social Prescribing offers a promising response to alleviate loneliness as a growing public health concern, bringing together the benefits of nature and social connections in an inclusive and adaptable approach suited to diverse community contexts.

In Melbourne, a team working with LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers and refugees delivered **Friends in Nature interventions**.

The Melbourne pilot engaged 37 participants in closed groups of 6 to 12, delivering 8-week sessions in natural settings encompassing a range of activities such as forest therapy, community gardening, and birdwatching.

The results? A **meaningful reduction in loneliness** from severe to moderate levels, increased nature connectedness, and qualitative evidence of improved wellbeing, belonging, and confidence.

This document draws on the RECETAS project to offer recommendations for cities seeking to address loneliness as a health issue through Nature-Based Social Prescribing across different sectors : health, social, environmental and urban planning.

Strengthening Healthcare Systems with Nature-Based Social Prescribing: A Policy Action

- #1 Establish multi-entry referral pathways.** Referrals into NBSP should come not only from GPs and clinical services but also from community health, neighbourhood houses, migrant and refugee services, local councils, libraries, social workers, peer workers, and self-referral pathways.
- #2 Invest in connector or link-worker functions.** A trusted intermediary role is essential for matching people to the right activity, addressing confidence barriers, supporting first attendance, and maintaining engagement across the early stages of participation.
- #3 Develop specialised training.** Training should cover loneliness literacy, trauma-informed and culturally safe practice, facilitation in outdoor settings, risk management, accessibility, and knowledge of local nature and community assets.
- #4 Formalise evaluation and recognition.** Public health and mental wellbeing frameworks should include indicators that capture social connection, wellbeing, participation, and nature engagement, so that NBSP is visible in policy and funding decisions.

Designing Urban Environments that Reconnect People with Nature

- #6 Prioritise nature access in underserved and higher-risk communities.** Planning should consider proximity, transport access, shade, seating, toilets, safety, walkability, and accessibility for people with disabilities or low mobility.
- #5 Design parks and natural spaces for social use as well as ecological value.** This includes small-group gathering spaces, sensory diversity, welcoming signage, and features that support slow, guided, or reflective activities.

- #7 **Protect and activate nearby nature assets through partnerships.** Councils, Parks Victoria, community organisations, and health services should jointly identify spaces suitable for recurring NBSP activities and ensure these spaces remain accessible and well-maintained.
- #8 **Embed social connection outcomes into green space planning.** Urban nature strategies should explicitly consider how parks, trails, gardens, and biodiversity projects can foster a sense of belonging, intergenerational contact, and community participation.

Integrating Nature into Social and Cultural Policy Agendas

- #9 **Support partnerships** with community arts organisations, migrant and refugee services, neighbourhood houses, and grassroots groups working on inclusion and belonging.
- #10 **Encourage small-scale, local, relational programming** adapted to culture, language, age, ability, and trauma history.

Building Sustainable Governance for the Effective Implementation of Nature-Based Social Prescribing

- #11 **Establish a cross-sector steering group with clear referral pathways**, an agreed monitoring framework, and mechanisms for lived-experience voices to inform design and evaluation.
- #12 **Convene a Melbourne policy committee** — bringing together the Victorian Department of Health, local government, Parks Victoria, community health, settlement organisations, and RECETAS partners — to develop a shared implementation roadmap.

RECETAS Melbourne demonstrates that loneliness requires responses that go beyond clinical or generic social participation approaches. Nature-based social prescribing offers a practical, preventive, and relational model that connects people, place, and wellbeing — particularly relevant in a city-region facing intersecting pressures of mental health, inequality, and social fragmentation.

To move from pilot to systemic change, this brief recommends a cross-sector policy committee built on a council-health-community partnership, ensuring shared governance across state and local government, health services, and community organisations. With the right governance and resourcing, Melbourne can embed nature-based social prescribing as a core component of a broader public health transition toward prevention, connection, and place-based wellbeing.

More information about

- RECETAS in Melbourne:
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