

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 tested and evaluated **nature-based social prescribing (NBSP)** to **reduce loneliness** and **improve quality of life of urban residents**.

NBSP bridges local health systems and nearby nature to alleviate loneliness by fostering nature and social connection in an inclusive, adaptable person-centred approach suitable for all communities.

In **Spain, 20% of the population suffers from loneliness** and an additional 29.3% report having suffered moderate or severe levels of loneliness in the past. In Barcelona, approximately 100,000 individuals suffer from loneliness, which represents an almost two-fold increase since 2020.

These data reveal a high prevalence of loneliness among younger adults, reinforcing the need to address loneliness from a life-course perspective.

In Barcelona, among 320 adults, we found that after 9 weeks of the “Friends in Nature (FiN)” intervention, meeting together 2 hours per week, the facilitator-led group sessions in urban natural environments **significantly reduced loneliness** by 10% post intervention. Further loneliness reductions were observed at 6 and 12 months (12% and 17%, respectively). The FiN group model was **more cost-effective** in reducing loneliness and had a **higher social return on investment (SROI)**, when compared to signposting, a lighter touch nature prescription.

The following evidence-based recommendations advance healthier and more nature-connected urban communities, and align with a cross-sectoral and co-created approach linking health systems, community organisations, urban planning, and urban nature.

Integrating Nature-Based Social Prescribing into the Health System

- #1 Formalise NBSP as another dimension of the Catalan Social Prescribing Program, offering evidence-based, non-pharmacological solutions for loneliness and mental health.** The Friends in Nature model—structured group processes, co-created activities, and trained facilitators—focuses on social bonds and peer support.
- #2 Train health and social care professionals on the health-nature link, integrating Friends in Nature evidence and methods.** Focus on energising groups, fostering interaction, and building autonomy for sustainable community connections. Expand training and implementation to services working with young people to address loneliness and mental health, and explore the adoption of NBSP and Friends in Nature approaches across a wider range of health, social, educational, and community services.
- #3 Integrate the FiN digital tool to facilitate the use and management of nature-based social prescriptions,** integrating them into health and social pathways for routine referrals, follow-up and maintenance of the intervention.
- #4 Strengthen interdepartmental and intersectoral collaboration, particularly between health, social rights, and nature-based and environment sectors.** Instruments such as green infrastructure plans, local urban agendas, and the Pla de Barris i Viles of the Generalitat, and alignment with the Catalan National Pact for Mental Health represent strategic opportunities to incorporate NBSP with cross-cutting impact. The Barcelona Strategy to Address Loneliness provides a good practice example of how municipalities can embed coordinated actions on social connection and wellbeing within local policies. This ensures that the social, environmental, and physical dimensions of urban health policy are coherently integrated.
- #5 Secure long-term funding for third-sector organisations, essential as community connectors and NBSP providers.** Their flexibility, trust, and proximity complement public services and should be embedded in regional and local wellbeing strategies. To sustain implementation, municipalities should also allocate dedicated resources and funding mechanisms to support third-sector organisations, recognising their essential role as community connectors and providers of nature-based activities.

Designing Urban Environments that Reconnect People with Nature

- #6 **Prioritise green spaces in vulnerable neighbourhoods.** Access to quality nature is unequal, shaped by social and environmental determinants. An intersectional planetary approach in health and urban planning is essential. In cases of drought and other extreme weather events, prioritize parks as a public health service through maintenance and care strategies that protect local ecosystems to endure climate-related harm and avert severe restrictions, such as full park closures.
- #7 **Revise park design standards to prioritise social inclusion, wellbeing, and connection.** Treat green spaces as health and cohesion assets, with accessible infrastructure for all users. Incorporate shade, park amenities such as benches and bathrooms, and wayfinding to facilitate use and positive experiences.

In Barcelona, evidence from the RECETAS project demonstrates the tangible value of Nature-Based Social Prescribing: measuring loneliness, health-related quality of life, and capability wellbeing. The study found that NBSP improved health outcomes over one year while reducing costs. Notably, every EUR 1 invested in the intervention generated a social return of EUR 1.48 (Papon et al., 2026).

- #8 **Embed NBSP in territorial planning instruments** (Green Infrastructure Plan, Urban Agenda, Pla de Barris) to align nature-based social interventions with urban health and sustainability strategies, recognising them as a cross-cutting priority.
- #9 **Link neighborhoods to nature via public transport to remove mobility and cost barriers.** Equitable access reduces health gaps and ensures NBSP reaches those most in need.

Workforce development and capacity building

- #10 **Strengthen training for NBSP professionals, integrating community health knowledge, group facilitation, and nature familiarity.** Address training gaps to equip health, social, and environmental sectors to identify loneliness and connect people to nature-based activities.
- #11 **Establish stable intersectoral working groups at the local level** (e.g., social prescribing committees) led or co-lead by municipalities, to co-create referral circuits linking nature assets with health, social, and community services, grounded in a health promotion and community health approach. These groups should foster community participation, empowerment, and co-production with local actors, ensuring that NBSP contributes to reducing health inequalities and strengthening community assets. The Taula de Salut i Natura exemplifies such governance, uniting stakeholders across sectors. Clarify roles and ensure coherence across all system levels.

Taken together, these 11 recommendations form a coherent and actionable roadmap to make Barcelona a pioneer in nature-based public health. By formally integrating NBSP into community health systems, guaranteeing equitable access to urban nature, embedding social connection outcomes into urban planning, and building sustainable intersectoral governance, the city has both the evidence and the institutional capacity to scale these interventions — transforming urban environments into spaces where social connection becomes a fundamental, equitable, and cost-effective component of public health policy.

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