

Funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers

Strengthening the outdoor mobility of older adults in the Nordic Arctic region

POLICY BRIEF

from the Nordic Arctic Healthy Ageing Communities project

October 2026

Key Policy Recommendations on healthy ageing in the Nordic Arctic

1. Improve outdoor environments that support healthy ageing and year-round mobility

Invest in age-friendly infrastructure, services, and activities in rural and sparsely populated areas of the Nordic Arctic region. This ensures access to essential services, public transport, and the use of safe and suitably maintained roads and pavements with benches, handrails, and resting space. Priority should also be given to traffic speed regulation, safe walking, wheeling, and cycling opportunities.

2. Promote social participation, intergenerational dialogue, and safer neighbourhoods

Develop and support programmes which strengthen social cohesion, reduce loneliness, and enhance neighbourhood safety for all community members. Such initiatives should foster mutual understanding, community engagement, and meaningful intergenerational dialogue.

3. Ensure equitable and sustainable healthcare across urban, rural, and remote areas

Access to preventive care, treatment, and support services should be comparable to that available in urban settings also under the healthcare reforms. Reducing travel distances, waiting times for health and social care, and service gaps is essential for maintaining older adults' health, independence, and quality of life.

Alignment with global and Nordic policy agendas:

- The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3), ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG 11), seeking to **make cities and settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable**.
- The World Health Organization's Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030, specifically its action areas focused on **creating age-friendly environments, delivering integrated care and primary health services**, combating ageism, and ensuring access to long-term care for older adults.
- The Nordic Council of Minister's Vision 2030, which aims to make the Nordic Region the world's most sustainable and integrated region. The recommendations support a socially sustainable Nordic Region by promoting healthy ageing through **coordinated action across health, social care, spatial planning, transportation, technology, and equality policies**, and thereby fostering inclusive and sustainable communities for ageing populations.

Project description

This Policy Brief was prepared by the NAPA-funded project "Arctic Healthy Aging communities: Safe and inclusive outdoor environment and public spaces (The Nordic AHA Communities)", 2023-2026 through collaboration among universities in Oulu (Finland), Luleå (Sweden), and Reykjavik (Iceland). It investigates how older adults who reside in communities perceive their lived outdoor mobility space, safety, participation in urban and rural Arctic settings, and the impact of environmental conditions commonly found in these settlements in the wintertime.

The project began with an analysis of national-level ageing policy documents and strategies in Finland, Sweden, Iceland, and Norway. It indicated that ageing policies were not sufficiently age-inclusive or context-sensitive for Arctic regions, and there was a lack of explicit knowledge of the outdoors and recognition of Arctic environmental risks and conditions (Emelyanova et al. 2024).

In 2024, a harmonised, cross-national, multilingual and context-sensitive postal survey (Larsson et al. 2026) was sent to 2000 randomly selected adults with aged 70 years or older in northern Finland (Lapland, Kainuu, Northern Ostrobothnia), northern Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten), and Iceland. The survey covered personal and housing characteristics, the residential and green space, life-space mobility, environmental influences, and open-ended questions. In total, 811 older adults responded (41%); mean age 77.7, half were women. The respondents broadly reflected the participating countries' population structures by age, sex, and geography, and they represented varying settlement types, from urban areas to rural and sparsely populated communities. This geographical diversity matters because opportunities for outdoor mobility, access to services, and travel distances differ substantially across Nordic Arctic settings.

This Policy Brief is based on the open-ended questions which participants were asked to respond to and freely articulate experiences on barriers and enablers (Emelyanova et al. 2026) and priority issues regarding outdoor environment and healthy ageing and identified directions for improvement.

Reflections of older adults on policy priorities in more detail

1. Improve outdoor environments to support healthy ageing

The primary concern among older residents is community-related barriers such as limited access to services, activities, and public transport. Many live in remote areas with long distances to essential services and limited transport options, with strong dependence on private cars and increased risk of isolation. A second challenge is personal barriers such as declining health and mobility, fear of falling, loneliness, and the lack of motivation, which can limit mobility outdoors, driving, reduce independence, and increase reliance on others. Older adults also highlighted the need for more age-friendly public spaces, particularly benches, resting areas, handrails, streetlights, and shelters from sun, rain, and wind along walking routes to support longer and safer outdoor activities. Finally, the respondents emphasized the need to improve the maintenance and safety of roads, pavements, and paths, especially during winter. Priorities include snow and ice removal, safer traffic conditions, lower driving speeds, and better walking, wheeling, and cycling infrastructure to support year-round mobility and independence.

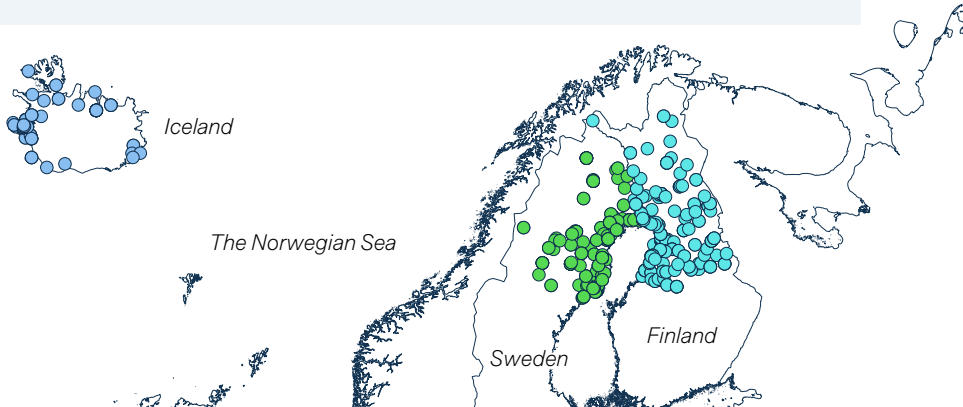
2. Promote social participation, intergenerational dialogue, and safer neighbourhoods

Older adults in sparsely populated Nordic Arctic areas highlighted limited opportunities for social interaction, particularly for the oldest age groups (80+). Respondents expressed a need for more meeting places, communal spaces, and accessible recreational facilities, including libraries, exercise centres, and outdoor activity areas that support healthy ageing and wellbeing. Participants also emphasized the importance of strengthening connections across generations through shared activities and community platforms that bring together older adults, young people, and families. At the same time, they noted the need to address age-related tensions in neighbourhoods by creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and raising awareness of behaviours that may unintentionally disturb older residents. Policies that foster inclusive community spaces and everyday interactions between generations can strengthen companionship, social cohesion, and safer and more supportive Arctic communities.

3. Ensure equitable and sustainable healthcare for ageing populations

Older adults identified equitable access to healthcare as a fundamental prerequisite for healthy ageing. Respondents highlighted the need for stronger preventive healthcare throughout the life course, regular monitoring of physical and mental wellbeing, and timely access to services such as dental care, diagnostics, specialist treatment, rehabilitation, and social care. Concerns were raised about long travel distances, waiting times, service gaps, and the limited availability of local services in rural and remote areas. Participants stressed that access to preventive care, treatment, and support services should remain comparable to that available in urban settings, including during healthcare reforms. Expanding community-based services, such as home visits for those with limited mobility, and improving the accessibility, availability, and continuity of healthcare across the Nordic Arctic would support older adults' health, independence, quality of life, and ability to age safely in their home communities.

Map of the geographical distribution of respondents





Healthy ageing in the Nordic Arctic and other remote northern regions is not only an individual health issue. Older adults need safe, accessible, well-maintained, and attractive outdoor spaces that enable year-round mobility, including during challenging winter conditions, as well as communities that support social participation, frequent and safe outdoor activity, and equitable access to essential services and healthcare regardless of where they live.

Project publications: **1.** Emelyanova, A., Blix, B. H., Larsson, A., Olafsdottir, S. A., & Rautio, A. (2024). Age-inclusive Arctic outdoor spaces: a policy review in four Nordic countries. International Journal of Circumpolar Health, 83(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/22423982.2024.2339561; **2.** Larsson A, Olafsdottir S, Rautio A, Emelyanova A. Methodological approaches to studying outdoor mobility and ageing in the Nordic Arctic context: Inclusion, rurality, and challenging environments. Social Sciences & Humanities Open (in press); **3.** Emelyanova A, Ólafsdóttir S, Rautio A, Larsson A (2026) Perceived Barriers and Enablers of Outdoor Mobility among Older Adults in Nordic Arctic Areas. Journal of Population Ageing. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12062-026-09576-2.

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Note. Map created by the authors in QGIS. Sources: study data, GeoNames, Nordregio, and Eurostat/GISCO. Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics.

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