VISIONARY NATURE-BASED ACTIONS FOR
HEALTH, WELL-BEING & RESILIENCE IN CITIES

Policy Brief

Standardisation for Greener, Healthier Cities

Through its activities, VARCITIES has explored a number of key topics linked with the **improvement of health & well-being in urban areas,** identifying existing **shortcomings, knowledge gaps** and the **opportunities** available for **policy stakeholders** to address them. In our series of policy and technical briefs, we present recommendations that we think most critical. This policy brief on Standardisation for Greener and Healthier Cities prepared by VARCITIES' project coordinator, **Technical University of Crete (TUC),** and **Institute for Urban Excellence (iUE),** gives policy stakeholders interested in the question key recommendations on the topic.

This policy brief explores the role of standardisation in advancing nature-based solutions as a mainstream and operational approach for healthier and greener cities, and highlights the potential of standardisation to enable more effective implementation, replication, and funding of nature-based solutions. It draws on VARCITIES' experience with the CEN Workshop Agreement to provide concrete policy recommendations and support municipalities and urban practitioners with the development of sound urban innovations for greener and healthier cities.

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Why standardisation matters for greener, healthier cities

Standardisation is the process of developing consensus-based technical guidelines to ensure consistency, safety, and interoperability in products, processes, or services. It enhances the effectiveness, comparability, and replicability of urban innovations, such as VARCITIES' Visionary Solutions, and is increasingly recognised as a lever for scaling impact and securing investment.

Cities are increasingly integrating urban innovation based on nature into their sustainability agendas. Yet, the implementation landscape remains fragmented, due in part to:

- lack of shared methodologies and definitions across cities, disciplines, and sectors,
- barriers to funding, where the absence of recognised guidelines limits eligibility and investor confidence,
- and difficulties in scaling and replicating due to insufficient technical clarity.

VARCITIES pilot site in Dundalk (Ireland).

VARCITIES pilot site in Novo Mesto (Slovenia).

Efforts to address these include:

- The IUCN Global Standard for NbS (IUCN, 2020).
- The ISO 14002-3 (in development), offering guidance on incorporating NbS into environmental management systems.
- The work of CEN-CENELEC, including coordination with ISO efforts and the CEN/TC 465 on Sustainable and smart cities and communities[1].

Still, gaps remain in terms of practical and operational guidance tailored for European urban contexts.

1 Including committee CEN/TC 465/WG 1 - Nature Based Solution

The **EU's 2022 Standardisation Strategy** (European Commission, 2022) underlines the strategic value of standards in achieving the goals of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), the Climate Adaptation Strategy (European Commission, 2021), and the Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (European Commission, 2020). In this context, standardisation can enable the **mainstreaming of Visionary Solutions and their nature-based, socio-cultural and digital components** as operational tools to improve urban health and well-being, resilience, and ecological value.

VARCITIES pilot site in Gzira (Malta).

VARCITIES contributed to this effort by developing a CEN Workshop Agreement (CWA 18237:2025) titled "Visionary Nature-based Actions for Health, Well-Being and Resilience in Cities".

VARCITIES approach: from piloting Visionary Solutions for health and well-being to a CEN Workshop Agreement

Across seven pilots, VARCITIES developed a portfolio of interventions that integrated nature-based, digital, and socio-cultural innovations to promote health, well-being, and urban sustainability, conceptualized as Visionary Solutions (VS).

Image: VS in Leuven (Belgium). Photo by Bart Wierinckx.

Image: VS in Castelfranco Veneto (Italy).

Each Visionary Solution (VS) was co-created with local communities and tailored to the pilot-specific needs and challenges of each city, covering a wide range of applications such as:

- Urban greening and biodiversity enhancement (such as the restored urban green park in Skelleftea).
- Public realm upgrades and inclusive space design (such pedestrianisation, new access paths in Castelfranco Veneto, the sensory gardens in Dundalk).
- Environmental monitoring and digital twins (such as sensor systems for thermal comfort, noise, air quality deployed in all VARCITIES' pilots).
- Community health and wellbeing engagement tools (such as the GoNature VR Game, Health & Well-Being Platform available for all VARCITIES' pilots).

The implementation and evaluation of these solutions provided a rich evidence base, including quantitative and qualitative indicators (e.g., urban accessibility, environmental comfort, social interaction, citizen perception, and digital engagement). This empirical foundation enabled VARCITIES to test, refine, and validate the technical feasibility, policy relevance, and replicability of the VS as integrated solutions for healthier and greener cities.

VARCITIES standardisation process through a CEN Workshop Agreement (CWA), coordinated by the Technical University of Crete, aimed to:

- translate VARCITIES' Visionary Solutions into standardised guidelines,
- provide technical specifications, methods, and indicators for urban nature-based solutions,
- and create a practical tool for policymakers, planners, and developers.

The open and participatory nature of the CWA process allowed stakeholders across disciplines to collaboratively shape the framework, supporting long-term usability and uptake. The CWA also lays the foundation for future harmonisation with emerging standards at EU and global levels.

The resulting CWA "Visionary Nature-based Actions for Health, Well-Being and Resilience in Cities" (CWA 18237:2025) distills the lessons learned from the pilot sites into:

- A methodological framework for the design, implementation, and evaluation of VSs.
- A set of practical guidelines and criteria for selecting and monitoring interventions.
- A vocabulary and typology to facilitate communication across stakeholders.
- A toolbox for cities, planners, and decision-makers to align VSs with health and sustainability goals.

The CWA contributes to bridging the gap between innovation and implementation, and supports policy efforts at local, national, and EU levels to embed Visionary Solutions into urban transformation strategies for healthier, greener cities.

Image: VS in Chania (Greece).

Image: VS in Skellefteå (Sweden).

Policy recommendations

Building on this work, we develop recommendations aim to guide policymakers and urban developers in embedding standardised, scalable approaches for healthier, greener, and more resilient cities.

At the EU level

- Support harmonisation between IUCN, ISO, and CEN frameworks.
- Embed standard-compliant nature-based solutions into EU funding programmes (Horizon Europe and the NEB Facility, LIFE, ERDF) and recognise compliance with standardised nature-based solutions guidelines as a criterion for funding and evaluation.
- Invest in training and capacity-building for city stakeholders.

At the national and local levels

- Support the incorporation of standard frameworks into urban planning, procurement, and local development policies.
- Follow standardised indicators for monitoring and evaluating nature-based solutions performance.
- Foster interdepartmental cooperation to align public health, environment, and urban development goals.
- Develop pilot projects as replicable models based on CWA-compliant methodologies.

For urban project developers and practitioners

- Adopt the CWA framework as a tool for project design, evaluation, and scaling.
- Leverage standardisation to build trust with citizens, funders, and authorities.
- Use standard-aligned KPIs to monitor health, well-being, and resilience impacts.
- Engage in future standardisation efforts to influence guidelines relevant to urban nature-based solutions.

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