A2: Turn healthy-ageing targets into preventive action

Europe is underusing prevention as a tool to reduce future long-term care needs. BB-Future evidence suggests that strengthening preventive measures, including health literacy, physical activity, and age-friendly housing, could delay functional decline and substantially reduce the future care gap, especially in countries with relatively low levels of prevention.

Recommendations:

- **Expand access to proven preventive measures** that can delay or reduce functional decline, including health education, physical activity, falls prevention, and home adaptations.
- **Prioritise early action in countries with the largest prevention gaps**, where uptake of physical activity, health literacy, and age-friendly housing is lowest and future care pressures are likely to be greatest.
- **Integrate prevention across health, housing, and long-term care policies**, rather than treating it as a narrow healthcare intervention.

Why this matters

Europe is underusing prevention

Policy Recommendation A1 highlighted the importance of health trajectories in shaping future long-term care pressures. This recommendation identifies several preventive measures that could help improve those trajectories.

Some of the most important predictors of functional impairment in older age, including chronic disease, multimorbidity, frailty, and physical inactivity, can be prevented, delayed, or partially modified. This creates significant scope for reducing future care needs through healthier behaviours and more supportive living environments.

BB-Future examined several cost-effective levers for addressing these modifiable risk factors: health literacy, physical activity, and age-friendly housing. Across all three dimensions, Europe appears to be falling short.

Fewer than one quarter of Europeans aged 65 and over meet the World Health Organization recommendation of at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week. Moreover, fewer than one in five homes have basic adaptations that support safe and independent living, pointing to considerable room for improvement.

There are also large differences between countries. Poland and Italy exhibit comparatively low levels of physical activity and home adaptation, while Germany and France perform considerably better on housing adaptations. Sweden, however, performs particularly strongly across the prevention indicators examined.

Prevention can meaningfully reduce future care needs.

Most importantly, the BB-Future simulations suggest that prevention can make a meaningful difference to future care needs. Combining improvements in health literacy, physical activity, and age-friendly housing could substantially reduce the projected care gap. In Poland, the simulated reduction reaches around one hour of care per person per month under the scenario without morbidity expansion and 1.6 hours under a strong morbidity expansion scenario.

The effect grows over time and is strongest in countries that currently lag behind on the preventive measures considered, such as Poland. This finding highlights the potential gains from closing existing prevention gaps.

More broadly, the results support a lifelong approach to prevention rather than waiting until functional impairment increases and long-term care becomes necessary. Prevention should begin well before old age and continue throughout later life, combining health education, physical activity, chronic disease management, rehabilitation, falls prevention, and appropriate housing adaptations.

Countries should therefore act earlier and more intensively where impairment tends to emerge sooner and where prevention gaps are widest.

The analysis in this policy recommendation is based on the following BB-Future sources:

- Börsch-Supan, A., H. Horton, A. Bahí and M. C. Louro (2026) 'How far prevention can go in reducing Europe's care gap', BB-Future Digest 7, 3 July, BB-Future, available at: https://www.bb-future.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/BB-Future-Digest-7_03072026.pdf
- Horton, H. (2026) 'The state of the care gap in Europe', BB-Future Digest 5, 19 June, BB-Future, available at: https://www.bb-future.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/BB-Future-Digest-5_19062026.pdf
- Horton, H. and A. Börsch-Supan (2026) 'The future of the care gap in Europe', BB-Future Digest 6, 26 June, BB-Future, available at: https://www.bb-future.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/BB-Future-Digest-6_26062026.pdf.