

# Night Fairies: Creating a Safer Nightlife

Is it even conceivable that public sector organisations come together to design a service that relates to illegal activities? Yes — when it is a matter of life and death. Drugs have become an integral part of partying, controlling or eliminating their use is practically impossible. If we cannot reduce use, we must reduce harms.

Night Fairies are a new role in the Estonian nightlife. These trained individuals offer discreet advice, support and help to nightlife participants, enabling them to make safer choices.



Photo by: Alice Martin

## Context for the Design Project

Recreational drug use has become an integral part of partying and nightlife, making their use very difficult, if not impossible, to restrict. If we cannot reduce use, we must strive to reduce the associated harms.

In Estonia it has been difficult to open up a public discussion about the dangers associated with drug use and the potential solutions, as broader societal attitudes often equate any drug use with injecting and severe addictions. This leads to focusing only of overdoses or fatal incidents while the range of accompanying harms is much wider: health problems, signs of early addiction, broken relationships, declining performance at work or school, and worsening mental health issues. Unfortunately, violence is also very common in the nightlife – both within clubs as well as in the surrounding public space. In a vulnerable condition, it is easy to fall victim to sexual or physical violence, or street robbery.

The harsh truth is that despite various studies and monitoring activities, we do not have a detailed overview of which drugs are used, how much, how often, in what context or condition,

and with what types of consequences. What we can count, is only the tip of the iceberg. Just as speed cameras do not reflect the actual number of speeders, the medical system and police statistics only reflect the extreme incidents related to drug use. As these both report increasing numbers in recent years, it is reasonable to assume that drug use is a growing problem in our society.

In 2022, the "Safer Nightlife" project participated in the Public Sector Innovation Programme, with the team consisting of representatives from the National Institute for Health Development (TAI), the Police and Border Guard, and Tallinn's techno club HALL. Over the course of project, the team collaborated with many event organizers and nightclubs all over Estonia.

The Innovation Programme is an 8-month design thinking framework developed for the Estonian public sector by the Government Office's Innovation Team. In this programme, the entire service design process is undertaken, from problem exploration and user research to solution prototyping and testing.

## Key Insights

In the initial phase of the project, we interviewed event organizers, police officers, club and bar staff, as well as participants in nightlife. Together with the team, we conducted participant observations in Tallinn's nightlife (including underground venues) and at various festivals with different profiles (including those that are not public). We analysed interviews with drug users conducted by the National Institute for Health Development.

What insights did we uncover? First, there exists a striking conflict between societal attitudes and actual behaviour. Very often we encountered a statement: "Everyone is responsible for their own actions!" or: "No one pours alcohol down your throat!" In the society, we expect self-control from people, but interviews clearly show a desire to engage in the exact opposite in nightlife. People seek ways to relax, talking about "re-charging," "escaping," "freedom," "restart," etc. Crises have played a role, mental health problems are on the rise. Nightlife is precisely the time and place where people just want to „let go“.

It appears that many people do have some knowledge regarding how to avoid harms, but in an intoxicated state, the sense of danger diminishes, and risk behaviour increases. It is rational for us to just accept that with the first round of shots, people lose both reason and caution. A very concerning issue is the mixing of substances —party often starts with alcohol, followed by various drugs or prescription medications. In the party mood, it may seem "YOLO!!!!" (You Only Live Once), while in this context, "You Only Die Once" would be more fitting. A lot of impure stuff circulates on the drug market, and the user can never be completely sure what substance they have taken and with what level of potency.

The concept of Night Fairies was born out of the following key insights:

- A person who has over-consumed alcohol and/or drugs may feel ashamed of losing self-control. When a person feels unwell, it is more common for them to withdraw out of sight or isolate themselves in toilettes etc, making it much harder for friends to notice their need for help. It was frightening to learn how many places have a practice of throwing out people in an inadequate state.

- A major problem is that people do not seek help themselves. With drugs, this is caused by fear – since it is an illegal substance, its possession and use are punishable. This creates a difficult dilemma: whom to turn to? What to tell them? Will I get in trouble?
- This problem is even broader and more worrying: friendship circles admit to not calling an ambulance in a case of an overdose, fearing that the medical personnel will be accompanied by the police.

In summary, a paradoxical situation emerges: people are not afraid to use dangerous and impure substances, but they are afraid to ask and call for help.

## The Solution

There are various roles and positions in nightlife (e.g., face-control, security staff, bartenders, etc), but they often lack the knowledge to recognize signs of different narcotic substances and the skills to respond. They also do not always see it as their responsibility to help partygoers who have put themselves in dangerous situations due to substance use.

Night Fairies fill this gap. They are volunteers who undergo a training programme developed by the National Institute for Health Development. They provide discreet support and assistance to nightlife participants, creating a trusting relationship so that people feel more comfortable discussing these topics openly and seeking help if necessary. The Night Fairies accept people as they are and acknowledge that substance use can be a positive experience for many. They do not preach nor judge but instead promote safer choices and the minimising risks associated with substance use.



Photo by: Alice Martin

The Night Fairies can be recognised by their T-shirts which reads "KÕIK OK? All good?". At festivals, they are present with a tent featuring an eye-catching "Periodic Table": info matrix about the interactions of different substances and which combinations to definitely avoid. This often serves as a good conversation starter on the topic of safer use. At parties, they distribute various supplies – papers that can be rolled into straws, lollipops (for those who experience



uncontrollable grinding of teeth caused by ecstasy or cocaine), condoms, vitamins, etc. Night Fairies also have an Instagram account where, among other things, they share warnings about dangerous substances on the market.

In addition to supporting a safer party culture, the activities of Night Fairies help to provide necessary information about the practices and needs of entertainment environments, thereby improving the safety and quality of nightlife in collaboration with other strategic partners.

## Testing out the solution

We tested the concept of Night Fairies in the fall of 2022 at Club HALL and Sveta Bar, and a few times at other clubs, including more mainstream places such as Hollywood and D3. The pilot validated our insights, and Night Fairies were well received in the clubs. Partygoers showed interest in their activities, and it was clear that they were distinguished from the other roles, such as security staff, and thus were more trusted. After the pilot, Night Fairies became one of the harm reduction activities for the National Institute for Health Development (TAI) and continues to be supported to this day.



## Night Fairies: current status

Today, Night Fairies operate as a non-profit organization, offering their services year-round in Tallinn and Tartu, with a network of approximately 40 trained individuals. The National Institute for Health Development has developed a basic training programme available as an e-learning course, and the follow-up training is based on the experiences of the Night Fairies themselves, including such methods as scenario simulations. Interest in joining the non-profit organization exceeds their capacity to recruit and train new members.



Annual collaboration partners have emerged, such as Club HALL and the Siilipidu event series. Their presence at summer festivals has grown year by year including such events as I Land Sound, Solstitium, KÕU, Valga Glow, Bling, and Beach Grind. This year, collaboration with the City of Tallinn was initiated.

## Impact

Quantifying the impact of Night Fairies is difficult. They can indeed count how many times an ambulance was called, how many hours someone was accompanied during a bad trip, or how many warnings about dangerous substances on the market were distributed. But this also is only the tip of the iceberg.

Year by year, the number of event organisers interested in Night Fairies has grown. Unfortunately, this interest has also been driven by past tragic incidents. Drug statistics are indeed worrying – wastewater studies show an increase in usage across Estonia, and surveys indicate that drug use among young people is increasingly common. The number of drug-related deaths has also increased over the last years.

Currently Night Fairies are highly appreciated by progressive organizers who prioritize making partying as safe as possible. We believe and hope that this attitude will spread over time, and Night Fairies will become an integral part of Estonia's party culture.



## Team members

The National Institute for Health Development: Mikk Oja, Aljona Kurbatova, Katri Abel-Ollo, Anneli Sammel, Merlin Mikk, Britt Viks

Police and Border Guard: Kirsti Hindreus, Margo Kivila

Techno Club HALL: Meelis Vili

Mentor: Helelyn Tammsaar, Public Sector Innovation Team, Government Office of Estonia

NGO Ööhaldjad was established and is being run by Marit Oja

## Recognitions and References:

The Night Fairies were chosen as the [most influential preventive deed](#) of 2023 in a public vote conducted by ERGO Insurance and daily newspaper Postimees.

Estonian Student Prizes 2024: [Best Societal Deed of the Year](#)

## Quotes from Partygoers:

*"It feels more secure when Night Fairies are also at the party. Night Fairies are a quality mark of a good party."*

*"It's good to know that if something happens, there's a place to get help from, but at the same time, I try to be more cautious because it would be embarrassing to need help."*

## Quotes from Organizers:

*"Their presence was practical, and they provided very detailed feedback on what they saw and what needed assistance."*

*"Thanks to the Night Fairies, we felt like a vigilant, wise, and caring parent was watching over the entire event. Night Fairies not only provide knowledge about substances but also care about safe interactions, reminding people to use sunscreen and drink water. Trained individuals who have good and subtle communication skills, who give advice, can notice, and help when needed - this is a huge safety net that has been missing in our event landscape. The presence of Night Fairies does not remove the organizers' responsibility for the event but significantly eases our role, allowing us to focus on other important issues and creating the knowledge that we are not hiding from the taboo of drugs that are prevalent in many people's daily lives."*

*"We are extremely grateful that an organization like Night Fairies has been created. The reason is that we pretend that most people do not use drugs, but the reality is the opposite. People still have easy access to substances and often like to use them at festivals. Therefore, it is extremely valuable to have an organization that provides people with the necessary information about the risks they are taking and how to deal with the consequences. Unfortunately, people tend to abuse substances, and it is crucial to have Night Fairies who discipline people and share recommendations on how not to use substances. Inevitably, guests come to the festival who cannot control themselves for unknown reasons, and it is very necessary to have people who do not neglect them but deal with them and do everything possible to help the person regain a sober state. The festival was much more mannered and*

*pleasant thanks to the Night Fairies, which did not go unnoticed by anyone. Everyone felt safer and more cared for because of them."*

*"I personally really appreciated the wide spectrum of your team members - you had both women and men of quite different ages. I was especially impressed by the healthy and strong-built gentleman, who personally gave me an indescribable sense of security, leaving an even more professional impression of the whole team and the feeling that you yourselves have some kind of safety net (a physically strong person who can carry another person if needed, keep them calm, bring them back to reality just with their presence, etc.). Strength and perseverance to you! I support and help as much as I can!"*

*"The security was created by the fact that if a guest who had overused substances appeared in the festival area, the Night Fairies immediately reacted, taking the guests under their care and helping them sober up. There was gratitude in the eyes of the guests, and many times I heard guests saying that thanks to the Night Fairies' awareness-raising work, they took care of their health. Additionally, the Night Fairies provided vitamins and water to people who needed it."*

