Contents

1. Executive summary ................................................................................................................................. 5
2. Introduction and scope .......................................................................................................................... 7
   A vision for play ..................................................................................................................................... 10
   Terminology and explanations of key concepts ....................................................................................... 11
3. Location of play spaces in Wodonga ................................................................................................... 17
4. Principles for planning play spaces in parks ..................................................................................... 23
   Parks for play - some fundamental planning principles and assumptions .............................................. 23
   Classification of parks for play .............................................................................................................. 30
5. Demand and supply overview ............................................................................................................ 35
   Introducing supply and demand issues .................................................................................................. 35
   Supply – the distribution of parks for play in Wodonga ......................................................................... 35
   Demographic factors and the demand for play opportunities ............................................................... 36
6. Play value, play space design and the play space assessment reports .............................................. 39
   Assessing play value ............................................................................................................................ 40
7. Key issues and recommendations ...................................................................................................... 65
   Key issues and recommendations ......................................................................................................... 65
   Actions and priorities ............................................................................................................................. 73
8. Endnotes .................................................................................................................................................. 74
1. Executive summary

This document builds on the previous Playground Strategy 2010 prepared by Wodonga Council, now completed, and the supplementary document Play Environments in Wodonga.

This strategy aims to guide the provision, development and management of outdoor play spaces in public parks across Wodonga from 2016 until 2020.

The strategy establishes a vision, a philosophy, and criteria and principles for effective play provision. It comprises of the following sections:

Section 1 provides the executive summary

Section 2 sets out a vision for play and explains the terminology and key concepts used in this report.

Section 3 includes Maps 1, 2 and 3 showing the distribution of playgrounds across the Wodonga municipality, and the classification of playgrounds.

Section 4 introduces some important planning principles applied to parks and play spaces, and sets out a classification system for play spaces in order to establish benchmarks for the provision of amenities and other design criteria expected for each site.

Section 5 briefly introduces demand and supply and the demographic factors affecting demand for play spaces.

Section 6 introduces the qualitative aspects of play space design, and the approach taken to assessing play value in play spaces. This section introduces the ideas underlying the concept of individual site assessments and illustrates some of the qualitative aspects of play value. It raises the issue of nature play and use of the landscape in play space design.

Section 7 highlights key issues, and makes recommendations for action resulting from the suburb assessments.
A snapshot of Wodonga

In 2015, 38,559 people lived in Wodonga. The city is located inland, on the northern boundary of Victoria, on the southern side of the Murray River.

Wodonga includes the central business district and suburban areas of Wodonga and Leneva, as well as the outlying areas of Baranduda, Bandiana, Bonegilla and Killara.

It has a population skewed towards younger age groups, with consistently higher proportion of people in the population for all of the five year age groupings under 35 years compared to the whole of regional Victoria.\(^1\)

Wodonga also is affected by higher levels of social disadvantage than both regional Victoria and Australia as a whole, as measured by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) index.\(^2\) It has slightly higher levels of unemployment, lower levels of education attainment and higher levels of renting.

In 2011, 17.6 per cent of the housing in Wodonga was medium density, which is much higher than the rate for regional Victoria as a whole, yet lower than that for the combined Albury-Wodonga figures. This figure has not experienced strong growth in Wodonga since 2006.

The demographic issues highlighted above have implications for play space provision, especially given the importance of outdoor play in child development and the importance of social interaction and recreation to communities.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in the year 2011 (years)</th>
<th>% of the population</th>
<th>% of the population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wodonga</td>
<td>Regional Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Play spaces in Wodonga

Wodonga has approximately 72 designated public playgrounds, categorised as local, neighbourhood or regional, distributed throughout the local government area in sportgrounds, parks and reserves.

Wodonga’s successful model for play provision, budgeting and management

Wodonga has a successful and unique model for play provision. It ensures that every step of the budgeting, procurement and maintenance process is aligned with strategic objectives agreed by a multi-disciplinary, in-house team, and that the community is engaged along the way.

Some key points are briefly outlined below:

- A strategic playgrounds group within the council is responsible for establishing strategic objectives for playgrounds, and ensuring that throughout the design and procurement process, each member of the group provides input. This also includes the new fitness equipment that is being added to playgrounds and reserves over the last two years and will continue into the future.

- The group comprises of representatives from planning, engineering and infrastructure, landscape architects, sport and recreation, family youth and early years, community planning and wellbeing, park and gardens and playground maintenance officers.

- The group holds regular strategic playground meetings.

- The budget for capital renewal funding and expansion for recreation spaces (including fitness equipment) is controlled by the Director Community Development and managed by the Manager Sport and Recreation.

- The budget for capital renewal funding and expansion for playgrounds is controlled by the Director Community Development and managed by the Manager Family, Youth and Early Years.

- The parks crews maintain the play spaces and parks and gardens, but their services are co-ordinated by a multi-disciplinary team and include the Manager Parks and Gardens, Manager Sport and Recreation and the Manager Family, Youth and Early Years.

- The Director Community Development is responsible for signing off each project.

- Effective communication and engagement with the community has built up a high level of trust when equipment needs to be removed or redesigned.

- The city’s playgrounds and fitness equipment are audited by an independent auditor annually.

A playground strategy for Wodonga

This strategy builds on the previous strategy prepared by the council from 2010 to 2016, now completed, and the supplementary document Play Environments in Wodonga.

Due to the economic pressure on planning, designing and maintaining these important assets, and the simultaneous need to also meet the outdoor play and recreation needs of the community, Wodonga Council has commissioned this playground strategy to guide future play provision and investment across Wodonga for the years 2016 to 2020.

These documents are also important to guide land developers so their developments are consistent with the Wodonga Council’s vision for play provision.

Scope

This report therefore aims to:

- Establish a vision and philosophy for play provision;

- Develop criteria and principles for effective play provision, including play value, demand, supply and distribution;

- Review the current playground provision and distribution in the light of demographic data;

- Briefly assess existing play spaces for quality of play experiences (play value), age groups catered for, access, and improvement opportunities and make brief recommendations for each;

- Review the provision of inclusive/accessible playgrounds; and,

- Raise other issues as they affect play in Wodonga, and make recommendations.

This project is limited to the assessment of public play spaces and does not cover early childhood centre-based play spaces.
A vision for play

It is recommended that Wodonga Council adopts the following approach to underlie the provision of play opportunities for the Wodonga community.

**Wodonga respects the rights and need of children to play**

The establishment of the Wodonga as a child-friendly and inclusive municipality will benefit residents and visitors of all age groups.

**Wodonga Council is committed to the provision of high-quality play environments across the municipality. These will be appropriate, accessible, inclusive, stimulating and challenging, and need to be planned taking into account realistic budgets for provision and maintenance.**

**Play is significant in the development of all children.**

Play is critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, cognitive, emotional and creative skills. It is the process of a child's own self-directed learning, and as such, is valid for all ages of children. It is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not only for individual children, but also for the society in which they live. All children have the right to play, regardless of their abilities.

**The qualities of the physical environment have a significant impact on outdoor play.**

Play requires access to a broad range of environments and play opportunities. Decision-making at all levels of government should explicitly foster and support play. During general decision-making processes, the council will consider the impact on children's opportunities to play and the broader implications for children’s health and wellbeing. The impact of modern society on children’s lives has significantly restricted their opportunity to play freely and has impacted upon play opportunities in the general environment.

**Terminology and explanations of key concepts**

**Parks versus play spaces**

Most public provision for play typically takes place in parks. The location, size and distribution of parks determine the availability of many play opportunities, so the two cannot be considered in isolation. This document is therefore inevitably about both parks and play spaces.

**Play space**

In this report, ‘play space’ has been generally applied to any purpose built settings for children’s play. Play spaces frequently include play equipment and their accompanying areas of impact absorbing surfacing, but they may also include, or solely consist of, play elements such as trees, boulders and logs, sand, planting, earth-forming, sculpture, musical items or other natural or man-made elements provided for the purpose of play. The play space can also include open areas of lawn, a small forest, hard or soft surfaces for ball games, ping pong tables, and mounds or walls if these are provided in the context of a park or children’s play setting.

**Play provision**

‘Play provision’ is a term used throughout this document to encompass a range of ways of providing for children’s play in public spaces. It can include playground equipment, cubbies or sand play areas, ball courts and open grass areas, and may also include areas of planting and bush, water, hard surfaces, paths, art works and other landscape elements. These may have been purpose-designed or may be appropriated by children for their own purposes.

**Play elements**

‘Play elements’ include man-made items such as play equipment, as well as natural items such as boulders and logs, sand, planting, earth-forming and sculptures, which typically have other purposes and sources, but have been brought into a play space to support and enhance children’s play. In this context, they become play elements.
Play equipment

In this report, the term ‘play equipment’ has been used to mean purpose-designed structures intended to support children’s play. These may be custom-built or selected from a catalogue, but typically are recognised as purpose-designed and built for children’s physical, creative, imaginative or social/dramatic play. In this context, this category does not include fitness equipment.

Fitness equipment

Fitness equipment is being incorporated into play spaces, walking tracks and recreation reserves over the last two years, and this trend will continue into the future. This equipment is designed for adults and young people.

Nature play space

For the purposes of this document a ‘Nature play space’ refers to a purpose-provided outdoor space intended for play and social interaction. A nature play space:

• Includes natural materials (such as durable timber, logs, rocks/stone, grass, trees, and other plant materials) as well as terrain, paths and other components of the space;
• Is inherently open-ended and therefore adaptable for children’s purposes;
• Deliberately provides some loose materials with which children can engage (these may be sand, pebbles, dirt, flowers, gumnuts, twigs and small branches). Plants need to be selected for this interest;
• Encourages parents and carers to support and encourage children to develop their skills, self-reliance and adaptability and take on challenges;
• Possibly receives less intensive management (and commensurately reduces the expectations of the community for the more intense management found in other types of play spaces);
• Is managed with the expectation that children will interact with some loose materials and that this is an acceptable purpose of these spaces; and,
• Could be supported by an education and marketing program by Wodonga Council.

Community gardens

Wodonga has two community gardens that extend the recreation opportunities of both children and adults. These provide important ways for children and adults to interact with nature and enjoy hands on gardening experiences, while providing important social interaction and learning opportunities about food production. The two gardens are located at:

• Trudewind Rd Neighbourhood House; and,
• Wodonga West Primary School.

Amenities

Play spaces frequently also include amenities such as furniture, barbecues, bins, lights, shade structures, toilets, drinking fountains, vegetation, paths and paving, fences, and other items. These are typically provided for social amenity but some might frequently double up as play elements, such as:

• A path providing for hopscotch or toddler bikes;
• Boulders and logs providing for both seating and balancing, as well as retaining;
• Low walls for climbing and balancing, as well as for seating;
• Vegetation providing a source of play materials (such as gumnuts and flowers); or,
• A drink fountain providing a source of water for play in a sand pit.

The role of accessible, inclusive amenities, in supporting both play and social interaction and community building, should not be underestimated. The placement of furniture will affect how well these areas encourage social interaction.
Children, teenagers and adults

In general, this report aims to address the needs of children. The term ‘children’ is, however, used rather loosely and is not intended to exclude older children, teenagers or adults. Indeed, play between adults and children, and intergenerational play, is encouraged.

The needs and interests of different age groups vary as children grow up but they also overlap. Ideally, most parks and playgrounds should provide some spaces or activities that can be used by people of any age, including teenagers, adults and older people, regardless of the population profile that may currently dominate the age structure of the local resident community.

Across all residential precincts, Wodonga Council will be most likely to ensure that as young children become teenagers, adults and older adults, the network of parks and play spaces will continue to meet their needs through the provision of:

- A diverse choice of activity types and settings for play and outdoor recreation;
- Varying degrees of challenge;
- Accessible and inclusive spaces that have a multitude of functions and possibilities; and,
- Design that encourages social interaction.

Multi-age demographics and provision for play in parks

Planning for the needs of specific age groups can be difficult because investment in parks infrastructure needs to have a shelf life of many years, during which time children grow up and their interests change. Information about age groups is therefore used with caution and while larger numbers of children may indicate the need for more play provision, a lack of children in other areas should not be used to justify the disposal of open space. Although communities may be planned with a particular demographic group in mind, times will change and there will always be blended families with multiple age groups, visitors and exceptions to the main predicted demographic group, whose needs still must be met.

Communities dominated by older adults and retirees still need a good framework of parks and play spaces. Grandparents have taken on an increasing role as child care providers, and play spaces which are accessible and inclusive are increasingly useful for this group, as well as for the general social and recreation activities of multi-age families and groups.

For these reasons, a basic framework of open space, parks and play spaces will always be required. They should be ready to be adapted if necessary, in small ways as waves of children move in, grow up and move on. Some details can be changed, and the specifics of play elements can be adjusted over time if required, but the parks and open space framework must remain in place.

Parks should never be disposed of just because the current wave of children has grown up and moved on, even if the play space in the park is removed or changed.
3. Location of play spaces in Wodonga

MAPS 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the location of existing playgrounds in Wodonga, Leneva, Baranduda, Bandiana and Killara and are supported by a playground reference list.
Parks for play - some fundamental planning principles and assumptions

This report is based on information, research, observations, experience, benchmarks and common practice sourced from municipalities across Australia. Some of the fundamental ideas that underlie the report and its recommendations are outlined below. This section also contains some important definitions that have been used in this report.

The role of play in the healthy development of children

Play provision as a system

Play in its many forms is significant in the healthy development of children and young people. The location, planning and design of parks have a significant effect on how they will be used. Parks and play spaces play a vital role in encouraging children and families and other community members to play out of doors and thus make a considerable contribution to community health and well-being.

Planning and designing places for play should not be seen as a one-off matter to be resolved on a single, park-by-park basis. Rather, each park and play space contributes to an overall ‘package’ available to the public across their residential precinct. These must be viewed as an overall system, with each individual park contributing to the diverse whole, and each complementing the other.
All residents should ideally have access to a park (of any category) within an approximate 10 minute walk, or approximately 500m. The distance must be measured by approximate actual walking routes (not by the radius of circles drawn on a plan) and should not cross a busy road or railway line. Where these distances are impractical, the quality and diversity of those play opportunities that do exist becomes more significant. Where residents only have limited options for access to parks or play spaces, those that are accessible need to be of a higher quality to make up for limits in choice.

There are many kinds of disability, each with its own implication for design. Numerically, there are far more people with intellectual disability than the other disability types. When the words ‘access’ or ‘inclusion’ are used in this report, these terms are frequently aimed at providing inclusive physical access to parks, play opportunities and social spaces. For example, a path and/or an accessible soft fall surface linking to the equipment. These will not only benefit users with mobility aids and especially wheelchairs, but also help define spaces and provide orientation for users with a vision impairment and/or intellectual disability.

A precinct is the basic planning unit that has been used in this report to map and plan play provision across the municipality. Precincts are residential areas contained by any physical or social boundaries or barriers such as busy roads, railway lines or water bodies, which might affect the easy independent movement of children on foot or bike. Refer to Maps 5-8 on following pages showing the location of precinct boundaries.

It is not intended that any park should be expected to (on its own) meet the needs of every resident. It is therefore assumed that residents will have some choice as to where they play, so they can select the setting that best suits their needs within their residential precinct. This also assumes that people will be able to move around their neighbourhood between a choice of parks and play spaces. It is therefore vital that there are safe routes for children to move around their neighbourhoods and between parks as they get older, via pedestrian and bike routes (preferably off road). Such routes are therefore an important factor in the assessment of the value and catchment of play spaces. The trails along creeks in Wodonga, such as along House Creek, are extremely valuable for such off-road movement.

Off-road connections

In some cases, a larger than usual population may depend upon just one park to meet all of their local play and recreation needs. Such parks are classified as ‘high dependence’ and will require higher quality provision than might otherwise be expected of a similar sized park elsewhere. Higher quality might, in such cases, mean catering for a broader range of age groups, activity types, and a higher level of accessibility than would otherwise be the case if there were more parks to choose from.

Diversity is a fundamentally important concept in the provision of places for play and recreation.

A diverse ‘package’ of play opportunities needs to be available within any one suburb or precinct. This includes, the parks, open spaces, play equipment, bushland, plazas, rivers or creeks, pedestrian zones and any other public spaces where children might play. This is critical in planning, design and management for play.

When a precinct contains more than one park or play space, the provision for play must be different in each park within that precinct so that children and families have access to a diverse range of play settings. As some children and families will not have opportunities to move far afield, within each park there also needs to be some choice of opportunities and settings. The design of individual parks and parcels of open space needs to take this into account.

Diversity for play within precincts and parks

All parks for play and social/ family recreation are typically classified according to their position in a hierarchy. The classification serves a number of functions, one of which is to determine benchmarks for design and for management and levels of service. The classification also establishes the likely catchment from which users will be drawn and the role of the park within the parks system. Refer to the more detailed discussion below.

Classification of parks

Definition of residential precincts

Walking distance to parks from residential areas

Access and inclusion for users with a disability

Dependence

Off-road connections
Classification of parks for play

Introduction to Tables 1 and 2 overleaf

As mentioned previously, play spaces in parks are part of a system of open space provision. Parks are typically classified into a hierarchy for planning and management purposes. The three levels of classification used for parks for the purpose of play and social/family recreation are:

- Local;
- Neighbourhood; and,
- Regional.

These are described overleaf.

Refer to Table 1 overleaf for the basic classification and description of parks for play in the hierarchy.

Benchmarks for planning, design and management can be attributed to various classifications in the parks hierarchy. Refer to Table 2.

The purpose of this classification system is that it can form the basis of a design brief, and can be used to manage community expectations regarding what will or will not typically be provided in play spaces.

Refer also to Map 1 showing the classification of play spaces across Wodonga, according to this hierarchy.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASSIFICATION</th>
<th>LOCAL PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>REGIONAL PLAY SPACES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition and significance</strong></td>
<td>The basic and possibly most important unit or building block of the open space and play space system. They serve homes generally within walking distance. They are unlikely to attract users from much further afield unless located on a trail.</td>
<td>They serve a whole residential precinct. They are typically larger and more prominent than the local play space, with a distribution similar to local primary schools.</td>
<td>These are destination playgrounds that provide play experiences for people from outside their immediate residential areas including visitors from outside the municipality. May also be located near another major destination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role and function</strong></td>
<td>The primary purpose is for play and social/family recreation. They are important for children old enough to walk or cycle to playgrounds independently. Local play spaces help make up for a lack of private space. They are important meeting places for local families, children and teenagers. Visits are likely to be of short duration.</td>
<td>The primary purpose is for play and social/family recreation. Visits are often connected to another attraction, for example to shops, school, kinder, sports and for meeting socially. The role as a community meeting place is a key feature. Visits will be of longer duration than local parks.</td>
<td>Regional play spaces provide special play experiences unlikely to be available in local or neighbourhood spaces. They provide for family outings to destination areas. Visits are likely to be of moderate or extended duration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distribution and catchment</strong></td>
<td>Residents should ideally have access to a park within approximately 10 minutes’ walk or up to 500m - whichever is the lesser distance. This should be measured by actual walking routes, not by the radius of circles drawn on a plan. Ideally, users should not need to cross a busy road to reach a park from home, though this is not always possible in the inner city.</td>
<td>Residents should have access to a neighbourhood park ideally within their suburb. Frequently located near a node such as a shopping centre, school or community centre, or a sports facility. They serve users living relatively close by. Travel to neighbourhood play spaces is by foot or bike as well as by car.</td>
<td>They attract visitors from across suburb boundaries and further afield by public transport, car, bike or on foot. Public transport to regional play spaces is very important.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**TABLE 2**

**Benchmarks for assets and amenities in play spaces by classification**

For new and upgraded parks that are provided for play and social family recreation, in addition to actual provision for play activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCAL PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>REGIONAL PLAY SPACES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Access and inclusion for people with disabilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within every local precinct, people with a disability must be able to access a choice of play and social opportunities in parks. Parks with a high level of dependence require higher levels of accessibility even at the local, and most important, level.</td>
<td>Neighbourhood parks are expected to provide a higher level of accessibility and social features than local parks. Parks with a high level of dependence require higher levels of access including to a choice of play opportunities.</td>
<td>Regional parks are expected to provide a very high level of accessibility to features including a wide choice of play activities, picnic settings, furniture, and natural areas. Accessible parking is desirable where possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Path system</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair accessible path is desirable linking shade, seating and play facilities to local footpaths.</td>
<td>A seamless, wheelchair accessible path system is required linking a good choice of social areas and key play areas to surrounding footpaths and car parks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seats and tables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required.</td>
<td>Required. Configuration of furniture needs to encourage and facilitate social interaction.</td>
<td>A choice of accessible seating styles and picnic furniture required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shade / shelter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree shade required over seating and play area/s.</td>
<td>Built shelter is negotiable. Tree shade required for seating and play area.</td>
<td>Built shelter/s required as well as tree shade, if tree shade is not effective in summer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOCAL PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAY SPACES</th>
<th>REGIONAL PLAY SPACES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drinking water</strong></td>
<td>Preferred.</td>
<td>Required. Should be an accessible model and placed on an accessible route.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rubbish bins</strong></td>
<td>Desirable.</td>
<td>Required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barbecues</strong></td>
<td>Not required.</td>
<td>Negotiable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toilets</strong></td>
<td>Not required.</td>
<td>Negotiable. They must be wheelchair accessible if provided. Ideally they are shared with other facilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Car parking</strong></td>
<td>Not required.</td>
<td>Desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bike racks</strong></td>
<td>Desirable.</td>
<td>Required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Signs</strong></td>
<td>Negotiable.</td>
<td>Required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fences</strong></td>
<td>Negotiable depending upon the site.</td>
<td>Negotiable. A choice of fenced sites within each suburb is desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maintenance access</strong></td>
<td>Required.</td>
<td>Required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Demand and supply overview

Introducing supply and demand issues

Play spaces should not all be the same. They are a purpose-provided setting for play, recreation and social interaction that should ideally respond to the needs of the local community, to the local context, and to the local physical environment, which will differ from location to location.

The purpose of this section is to provide a context and background for individual, site-by-site and suburb-by-suburb planning and design decisions. These decisions cannot be made in isolation, nor in an ad-hoc manner.

Supply – the distribution of parks for play in Wodonga

Walking distance and the supply of parks for play

It is a basic premise of this report that wherever possible, residents in urban and suburban areas should have access to a park or play space within walking distance, up to approximately 500 meters, from home. This is not always achievable but is the ideal. In more rural townships and hamlets, this principle will not be feasible.

It is important to note that the distance of 500m cannot be drawn as a circle on a map. A more detailed analysis is required, because the circles do not take into account:

- Barriers that children cannot be expected to cross in order to reach a park for play; and,
- The actual walking distance due to the subdivision design and layout of streets.
Demographic factors and the demand for play opportunities

Significant social indicators

Some particular demographic characteristics affect the demand for, and use of, play spaces. Three key factors that are typically of great significance are:

- The degree of social disadvantage;
- The density of housing; and,
- The percentage of children as a proportion of the population.

These factors are explained below.

As mentioned elsewhere, there are other factors that need to be considered when planning a network of parks and play spaces. The discussion below is purely about the demand for play spaces.

Social disadvantage

Disadvantaged groups are assumed to have fewer opportunities to travel to alternative play, social and recreation opportunities further away, and there is therefore a higher level of dependence on locally provided play areas. Play spaces are also assumed to be important in disadvantaged areas because of the role of play, creativity, early childhood development and social/community development in determining children’s future outcomes.

How housing density affects play

In areas of medium and higher density housing it is assumed that residents have:

- Fewer (or no) private, backyard or outdoor opportunities for outdoor play; and/or.
- Fewer opportunities for certain kinds of play and activities which typically in the past have taken place in backyards.

This affects play space provision because public parks may need to accommodate activities that often take place in backyards, such as gardening, sand play, bike riding, ball games, tree climbing and cubby building.

Access to nature, opportunities to obtain respite from hard urban spaces, or opportunities to engage with natural materials, plants, sand, soil or wildlife also become increasingly important, for both children and adults as urban density increases.

Children in the population

Play spaces, parks, open space and other outdoor recreation opportunities are particularly significant to the healthy development of children. It is therefore valuable to note where populations of children in various age cohorts are concentrated and are changing. These demographics become especially interesting when the population of children increases in areas that are also increasing in housing density, and or in areas lacking in open space and play provision.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, a lack of children in the current demographic is also no reason to dispose of land used for parkland or play spaces once the children grow up and move on. There is always a demand for open space and parkland, and this valuable resource will become increasingly precious as housing densities increase.

Priority areas with multiple indicators

Residential areas that have high levels of social disadvantage, increasing housing density medium or high density housing, and a higher proportion of children in the population - especially those where all factors apply - are of particular general concern with regard to provision of play opportunities.

Areas where these factors are also coupled with a lack of access to quality play spaces, and areas where there is a high level of dependence upon an individual park, are considered to be of the highest priority.
6. **Play value, play space design and play space assessment reports**

**Rationale for assessment reports**

The principles within this strategy will assist council in the preparation of assessment reports for each play space across Wodonga. The objectives of these regular and ongoing assessments and the resulting reports are to communicate:

- Suggestions as to how to improve the play value of the park and play space, in line with the vision and philosophy discussed in this report;
- Priority for the renewal process of play spaces and the development of capital budgets;
- How to better meet the changing needs of the community; and,
- Occasionally, where some spaces might be considered redundant.

The information that contributes to these assessments should be gathered from the following sources:

- Reference to council maps;
- Reference to detailed demographic data for each suburb as outlined previously;
- Inspection of the aerial maps, Google Earth and Google Street View;
- Review of audit information for each site; and,
- Reference to site photos.

The assessments will then take into account the ‘big picture’, starting with:

- An overview of each suburb or precinct and how easily residents can access parks for play from their homes;
- Identification of areas which do not have easy access to parks and play; and,
- The level of dependence upon a particular park.
• Focusing on the immediate neighbourhood around a park and identifying the context and whether there are schools, early childhood centres, shopping centres or sports facilities nearby that may suggest a natural usage pattern and user group;
• The location of other parks nearby;
• The relationship of the park to the fronts of houses and the prominence of the site in the neighbourhood; and,
• Footpaths and means of access.

The park itself should then be investigated with the following parameters taken into consideration:
• The physical character of the site;
• What the park itself actually offers in terms of play activities and their value;
• The overall amenity of the site, for example shade, furniture and access paths;
• Play opportunities offered by the landscape; and,
• Play equipment lists and condition or audit reports.

The latter group will then describe the play value offered by each site. Naturally this can be a subjective assessment.

In order to make some of these subjective ideas more transparent, the discussion overleaf attempts to capture some of the nuances that need to be considered as background to the site assessments.

Assessing play value

What do we mean by ‘play value’?

It is vitally important to convey the idea that quality play provision is not simply about play equipment.

Some play activities seem to be of an inherently higher quality than others. They engage children at a deeper level and contribute to their development through the use of communication and language, social and physical skills, cognitive engagement and problem solving, creative and sensory exploration, and testing resilience, persistence and other personal qualities.

This play behaviour (simplistically described) frequently:
• Is complex, involving physical activity as well as imagination, exploration, role play, social interaction, fantasy or creativity;
• Extends over time and sometimes on repeat visits to the same place;
• Involves more than one child (though not always);
• Flows between spaces;
• Incorporates some loose elements/tools/materials or props;
• Changes and develops during the play; and,
• Is child directed – that is, the ideas are developed by the children and not by an adult designer.

Play value is more than the purely mechanical (though nonetheless valuable) activities such as swinging, sliding, spinning, climbing or rocking - although each these activities can easily be converted into more complex play by children adding their own games.

Spaces that stimulate this quality play can be described simply as providing good play value. Frequently, the juxtaposition of some open-ended features close to a more prescriptive item opens up possibilities for play that don’t occur when these items are placed on their own. This is the reason for emphasising (in the discussion overleaf) the importance of:
• Loose or open-ended items;
• Beneficial relationships between items; and,
• Spatial complexity.

These three aspects open up possibilities for children to develop more complex play on top of what has been provided by the designer or manufacturer. Detailed attention to the design of the landscape is required in order to achieve these three important aspects affecting play.

As resources are limited, Wodonga Council aims to obtain the best value from its investment in play. Unlike other investments, where a monetary return provides an obvious measure of success or not, the value obtained from investment in play provision is not as easily measurable. It accrues to the user and only indirectly back to the provider. It does not show up in accounting spreadsheets, and the value obtained from any play element varies widely from person to person and varies over their lifetime.

This is therefore a grey area at best and remains somewhat subjective. The discussion overleaf is an attempt to tease out the essence of what play value means and how to assess it in a useful and succinct way.

Basic functionality

The following are considered entry level requirements for most play spaces, depending upon their level in the hierarchy and some other important factors about their location and role in their precinct.

They are based upon what is commonly known about children’s play behaviour and are intended to assess whether the most basic of children’s needs are being provided for. The following questions apply:
• Do people with disabilities have general access to parks and facilities?
• Is there a choice of types of amenities for users?
• Which ages and abilities/skill levels have been catered for?
• Is there a choice of settings for play, ranging from man-made or synthetic to the very natural?
• Are the elements placed in a way that encourages the play to flow naturally from one item to the other?
• Is there a choice of types of play activities, experiences and materials for play? For example:
  - Does the space provide for important forms of movement and physical activity?
  - Does the space encourage social/role/imaginative play?
  - Does the space have any loose elements for creative use by children?
  - Does the space encourage cognitive activity during play?
• Are design elements and furniture placed in a way that encourages people to meet and interact?

The other subtle qualities that make play spaces work

Good play spaces rarely succeed because of equipment alone, but because of some qualities about the whole space that are often difficult to quantify.

Gibson introduced the term ‘affordances’:
“Clues in the environment that indicate possibilities for action.”

These are the clues that invite children to play with the empty box rather than the Christmas gift, to dance on a low deck that feels like a stage, to gather up the loose mulch and use it to ‘cook’ with, to climb a rocky embankment rather than use the steps, and to balance along a wall rather than use the path.

They are the subtleties in spaces that create interest to children and enhance usability and play value. They are rarely connected to how a space looks to adult eyes.

The qualities of the space itself are also important – large and small, open or contained, up and down, complex and inviting, or dull and exposed.

The more children depend upon any space for all of their regular outdoor play experiences, the more important these subtle qualities are in any design.

Vital design attributes

The following attributes add this more subtle layer to the play experience and contribute to the value that can be derived from any play area:
• Loose materials that enable children to manipulate the environment;
• Inclusive, physically accessible design that stimulates social interactions;
• Multi-purpose or adaptable items that can be used by more than one group (age/abilities) and for more than one purpose;
• Beneficial physical relationships or connections between elements;
• Spatial complexity;
• Opportunities to explore and discover beyond the boundaries of a designated play space and extend the play; and,
• The overall quality of the landscape setting.

The concepts described above are further illustrated below.
GENERAL PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

Paths organise a space and provide physical access and orientation

A RANGE OF AGES, ABILITIES, SKILL LEVELS AND INTERESTS

As children develop, their play interests and capabilities change too. Different age groups can be targeted through the choice of materials and play elements.

It is valuable to provide a choice so that children can still find interesting things to do as they grow and develop.

Many play activities can be used by multiple age groups.
Children gain satisfaction as they master challenges.

Some play elements can be used by children of any age or ability and deliver good value to the community.
A CHOICE OF TYPES OF PLAY ACTIVITIES, EXPERIENCES AND MATERIALS

There is a very wide range of options for providing for play and recreation for all ages and abilities.

A diverse range of materials and design ideas broadens children’s experiences.
DESIGN THAT ENCOURAGES PLAY TO FLOW BETWEEN AREAS

Pathways, stepping stones, surfaces, decks and bridges provide links within play spaces that add play value.

A CHOICE OF MOVEMENT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TYPES

Children benefit from a rich choice of movement types that help skill development, strength and sensory integration.

Some activities need to be provided at a range of heights and degrees of challenge so that both younger and older children can use them comfortably.
SOCIAL, ROLE OR IMAGINATIVE PLAY

Small spaces with additional seats, shop counters, open ended elements that children can adapt for their play benefit from the availability of loose materials such as mulch or leaves, pebbles, sticks or flowers to add to the play.

INCLUSIVE DESIGN ELEMENTS AND FURNITURE PLACED TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO MEET AND INTERACT

A choice of accessible seating, shade, and furniture welcomes social interaction in play spaces.
INCLUSIVE, PHYSICALLY ACCESSIBLE DESIGN THAT STIMULATES SOCIAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN USERS

The intention is to provide some play elements that an able-bodied child, or a child who uses a mobility aid such as a wheelchair or walking frame can access easily, use front on, and play alongside/with others. Critical issues are ease of access and the fact that the space is somewhat multi-purpose and the play can be adjusted according to the players and their imaginations.

These examples:
- Are located on a wheelchair accessible route with;
- Knee-in room for front-on use; and,
- Can be played with by a group together, or an individual on their own.

AVAILABILITY OF LOOSE MATERIALS THAT PROVIDE CHILDREN WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO MANIPULATE THE ENVIRONMENT

Loose materials such as leaves, grass clippings, sticks, sand and flowers make excellent play materials for self directed play.
MULTI-PURPOSE/ADAPTABLE ITEMS THAT CAN BE USED BY MORE THAN ONE GROUP (AGE/ABILITIES) AND FOR MORE THAN ONE PURPOSE

These items can typically be used by quite small children as well as older children or adults who can physically fit on them.

They can be used for purely physical movement, or as part of a game.

BENEFICIAL PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIPS/CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ELEMENTS

The cubby and shop front under this play structure has been purposefully located facing the sand play area in the background to encourage role play and interaction between the two.

The juxtaposition of this stone horse and the rustic shelter/cubby enables children to link the two in their play.

The positioning of complex larger and smaller spaces next to each other and underneath a structure enables children to create more interesting games.
SPATIAL COMPLEXITY

A complex landscape for play encourages children to explore, stimulates a variety of games and activities, and provides children with elements to hide behind and use in chasing games. It provides a variety of scales of space that suit a more complex range of play behaviours.

Complexity can be created with planting, terrain and site levels, and by including some solid sections of equipment and structures.

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE AND DISCOVER BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF A DESIGNATED PLAY SPACE AND EXTEND THE PLAY

Landscape treatments outside the equipment areas can extend the value of the play space by inviting children to explore the nearby environment.

The play space itself may need to include ‘designed’ nature play elements to familiarise urban children with the appeal of natural settings.
The interface between the designated play space, and the surroundings, can be used to encourage children to link their play into the broader environment.

**THE OVERALL QUALITY OF THE LANDSCAPE SETTING**

The qualities of the environment affect the play value and the overall amenity of the space; a pleasing landscape will encourage adults to bring children outdoors.

Poor quality settings, like the one pictured, do not invite users into the park and limit the possibilities for play.
Diversity from site to site—a choice of character, settings and activities

This section has explained that there are many ways that parks and open space can be planned to deliver quality play settings for children and families.

In many cases the play space assessment reports have recommended that play spaces complement rather than duplicate one another. This is an important concept, and it means the council should avoid choosing the following for sites adjacent to each other or where the same users might be expected to go:

- The same suite of activity types;
- The same materials, products and design ideas; and,
- The same type of character or setting.

Generally, it is unlikely that any one park can, on its own, meet the needs of every resident, as peoples’ needs and interests vary from time to time and from person to person.

It is assumed that residents need to have some choices as to where they play, so they can select the setting that suits their needs best within their residential precinct. This also assumes that people will be able to move around their neighbourhood, between choices of parks and play spaces.

A diverse spectrum of types of spaces for the purposes of play and recreation, as well as for habitat and amenity, will allow children to experience a range of types of space. The examples above indicate some of the many different ways play spaces could be developed for different communities.

EXAMPLES OF DIVERSE PLAY SETTINGS

A choice of settings for play, ranging from manmade or manicured, to the more natural and wild.
7. Key issues and recommendations

Issues arising from play space assessments

The following section briefly discusses some of the issues that have arisen as a result of the suburb assessments, and makes a series of recommendations for Wodonga Council to consider.

Getting better value from play investment

At present, Wodonga does not maximise the value it could obtain from its investment in play spaces. For example, in a many of the older parks and play spaces, freestanding slides and rockers are common. This former approach, of providing single items of equipment in each park, represents only a very narrow view of how children play. The risk is that when children tire of such limited activities, which they inevitably do, there is little else to do.

By linking the design of equipment into the landscape, as described in Section 6, there is more scope for children to extend their games. They can do this by using their imaginations and broadening the types of play. Examples of this include bringing in loose materials from the surroundings (for example leaves and flowers) in creative/sensory activities, using the terrain for chasing and hiding, and using interesting features of the space for fantasy, role play and pretense.

Play structures can enhance all of these activities for both small and large groups by creating interesting and complex spaces. These spaces comprise of more than one fast exit (such as slides and slide poles), with ups and downs of varying degrees of challenge, and small-scale intimate cubby spaces, high lookouts and shop counters for role play and imagination. All of these work better when they relate well to other features in the landscape that can be brought into the play at will by the children themselves.

RECOMMENDATION: Getting better value from play investment

It is recommended that less emphasis is placed upon freestanding items of equipment such as slides and spring toys, and that play equipment and landscape elements be designed in a more complex, connected manner, in a way that relates to the surroundings, in order to enhance the play value of the whole space.

Some items of equipment such as swings need to remain freestanding to avoid injuries to users. Section 6 expands on this topic.
Diversity and the spectrum of play opportunities

Section 6 discussed the principle of diversity, and sites of varying character, settings and activities complementing one another within the same residential catchment. A diverse spectrum of types of spaces for the purposes of play and recreation, as well as for habitat and amenity, is most likely to meet the diverse needs of community members.

Provision for play doesn’t have to provide swings, slides and rockers. These are popular and offer valuable experiences to many children but they are only a small selection within a wider array of options.

Some examples of settings other than the more ‘standard’ play equipment include:

- Open grassy spaces;
- Urban/hardscape plazas;
- Programmed spaces;
- Wild and less manicured spaces and bushland areas with wildlife;
- Formal garden settings;
- Sculptures;
- Urban water play zones;
- Bike play spaces;
- Playground trampolines;
- Skate facilities; and,
- Hard courts and active ball play areas.

**RECOMMENDATION: Diversity and the spectrum of play opportunities**

*It is recommended that each precinct should ideally have a choice of play spaces and opportunities.*

*The settings for these play spaces should ideally vary to maximise the diversity available to residents and visitors.*

*Together spaces such as these contribute to a diverse mosaic of outdoor play and recreation and social experiences.*

Physical challenge

It has been noted that some key parks need to offer some higher degrees of physical challenge. Many play spaces offer low degrees of interest and little variety in types of challenge, such as height, different types of challenging movement, and degrees of difficulty climbing. There is not much variety from park to park.

**RECOMMENDATION: Physical Challenge**

*It is recommended that the council investigates the wide range of more challenging opportunities for play spaces and incorporates a diverse choice of graded opportunities into play spaces.*

Creative, imaginative, social play

There are few opportunities in Wodonga play spaces for children to incorporate loose natural materials into their play, or for cubby like settings, for them to build engaging dramatic play scenarios.

**RECOMMENDATION: Creative and imaginative social play**

*It is recommended that the council investigates the wide range of more creative play opportunities for play spaces and incorporates these, where appropriate, into play spaces.*

*This could require more landscape design in play spaces and incorporation of landscape features which will extend the play value.*
Landscape elements for play requiring less intensive maintenance

As in many municipalities, the cost of maintenance of ‘formal’ play spaces in Wodonga is high. Due to the requirements of the playground Safety Standards AS 4865 to regularly inspect, monitor and repair play equipment and surfaces, they require more intensive care than some other forms of park development that also provide for play and recreation.

**RECOMMENDATION: Landscape elements for play requiring less intensive maintenance**

Where resources are limited, it is recommended that for some spaces, Wodonga Council considers the use of a broader palette of design elements that require less intensive inspections and ongoing maintenance. For example:

- Large boulders;
- Bike paths;
- Hardcourts for ball games;
- Ping pong tables;
- Lawns surrounded by beautiful trees;
- Large mounds;
- Low elements that don’t require impact absorbing surfaces;
- Ground level cubbies;
- Mazes; and,
- Trees planted in interesting configurations.

The design should take into account the whole park and while saving money it is also quite likely that the community will benefit from the variety added to the spectrum of play and recreation opportunities.

Paths, access and social amenities in parks and play spaces

Many of Wodonga’s play spaces comprise a group of freestanding items of equipment on a mulched surface, with possibly a seat. Sometimes there is a path through a park or reserve, but this is rarely connected to the play space or to the seating space. They are therefore less conducive to adults accompanying their children, meeting other local families, and especially are not inviting for families living with disability, for whom physical access to play spaces is vital.

Social interaction leads to community building and makes a positive contribution to people’s lives. The importance of parks and play spaces as social meeting places should not be ignored.

**RECOMMENDATION: Promoting access and social inclusion in play spaces**

It is recommended that where feasible (and especially where there is already a path in a park or play space), more care is taken with the inclusion and design of accessible social gathering space/s in play spaces.

They should ideally be connected seamlessly to a path to improve access and be inviting and amenable places where a group of parents might gather while their children play.

In new designs, they can be the centre of a play space with the play area wrapping around it ‘donut style’. Such design elements are especially valuable in parks and play spaces near schools and early childhood centres where they can encourage meeting and social interaction before or after school.

Shade and shelter

Wodonga has hot summers and shade is an important factor in play space design. A lot of attention has been paid to tree planting in Wodonga’s parks in recent years and this is the best and preferred form of shade. Some parks have shade sails over equipment, and these can be effective but do have ongoing maintenance costs and can be easily damaged.

**RECOMMENDATION: Improving shade in parks and play spaces**

Where more immediate built shade is necessary, it is recommended that a wider range of alternatives to shade sails be explored. These could include:

- Pergolas;
- Slatted structures;
- Structures with vines;
- Fully roofed shelters; and,
- Would add to the amenity and value of parks and play spaces.
Promoting nature play

Section 6 described numerous issues related to the benefits to children of playing in natural environments, and many issues affecting their access to such settings for play.

RECOMMENDATION: Promoting nature play

It is recommended that the council considers undertaking a strategic promotion of the benefits of play in natural settings.

Play space designs that deliberately incorporate natural materials for play should be introduced.

Marketing and promotion of the ideas behind such activities, explaining the reasons for these designs, will need to play an important role to engage the community and bring them along the journey.

To this end, it is also recommended that any groups already promoting play (such as local early learning centres and schools, play networks advocacy organisations) be engaged to back any such program advocating for quality play for children in Wodonga.

Programs engaging children in outdoor activities in parks and helping to activate spaces should also be explored.

The implications for in-house planning, design and maintenance all needs to be explored and discussed so that Wodonga Council officers present a unified vision to achieve this goal.

Removal of play equipment

A few playgrounds have been recommended for removal in this report. This is recommended where:

- The playground is poorly located with no surveillance, poor access, and no local prominence;
- The play space is not in a high priority area;
- The cost of maintenance exceeds the value to the community; and,
- Observations by council officers indicate that the play space is not used by the community or is used only rarely.

RECOMMENDATION: Removal of play equipment

It is recommended that in such cases if the equipment is cleared by the auditor to be safe enough, it should be retained until the end of its useful life and then removed.

All underground footings, edging and other remnants should be fully removed and disposed of. Note these items may not be re-used (by anyone) if they do not comply with existing or previous AS Standards 4685 and/or are in poor condition.

The parkland itself should always be retained and never divested. Any alteration to this recommendation will require a council resolution. It is advisable to create a new landscape design for the park itself (without the equipment), recognising that most sites still offer major recreational and play value to the local community.

It is advisable to engage the community in the process as it progresses.
Actions and priorities

In the preparation of the councils playground assessment reports for each precinct, priority levels need to be established. These levels allow council to plan and set annual forecast budgets, maintenance services and upgrades. Three indicative levels of priority are recommended:

**High Priority**
- Play spaces that need the most urgent attention due to demographic or demand factors, high levels of dependency, and/or those where the quality of the play space do not meet the needs of the community.
- TIMEFRAME: 1-4 years

**Medium Priority**
- Play spaces where the current design is poor, where there is a relatively high level of dependence on the space and where an upgrade would make a big difference to users.
- TIMEFRAME: 5-9 years

**Low Priority**
- Areas where there is less urgency to re-design the play space except for minor improvements as described in the play space assessments and in the audit reports following safety inspections.
- TIMEFRAME: 10-15 years
As per its obligations under Article 31 (U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child).

The provision of open space guidelines, as contained in the GAA Precinct Structure Planning Guidelines include, in summary:

- Local parks within 400m safe walking distance of 95 per cent of all dwellings.
- Active open space within 1 km of 95 per cent of all dwellings.
- Linear parks and trails within 1 km of 95 per cent of all dwellings.

Gibson, J.J. 1977 The Theory of Affordances  (add publication details i.e. publisher, and pages/section used...)