

Connecting Community through Children's play: A Collective Impact Research Project

2017

Research Report for the Campbelltown City Council and OPAL

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CAMPBELLTOWN CITY COUNCIL

OPAL is a joint program of State and Local Governments.

University of South Australia

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If reproducing this work please cite:
Webb-Williams, J. (2017) *Connecting Community through Children's play: A Collective Impact Research Project.* Research Report for the City of Campbelltown Council and OPAL.

Acknowledgements
The Community Connections through Children's Play: A Collective Impact Research Project (2015-2016) was a collaboration between UniSA, Campbelltown City Council (Council) and OPAL. By working together from the conception of the project, the research has successfully engaged with challenges faced by local government working in diverse neighbourhoods.

Particular acknowledgement is extended to Gavin Fairbrother and Shaun Li (OPAL), Tracy Johnstone (Manager, Community Services & Social Development, Council), Cathie Graham (Council).

Sincere thanks also to the local residents who provided consent for their participation and took the time to engage in this study.

Campbelltown City Council

The Campbelltown City Council, South Australia, is located between the River Torrens and the Adelaide Hills, nestled among three main creek lines in the eastern suburbs of Adelaide. The Council maintains 63 playgrounds and key open space assets which are valuable for balancing urban development.

OPAL

OPAL Campbelltown, a partnership of Council and state government, is a five-year community based healthy lifestyle programme supporting the community to eat well and to be active.

University of South Australia

UniSA is Australia's university of enterprise and is a globally-focused, locally-engaged institution established on the dual principles of equity and excellence. With more than 32,000 students, the university is South Australia's largest and was ranked 25th in the QS World University Rankings for institutions under 50 years old in 2015. UniSA is the youngest Australian institution in Times Higher Education's 'top 100 under 50' ranking. The 2015 national Excellence in Research for Australia evaluation reported that 97 per cent of assessed research was rated world-class or above.

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Executive Summary

Play is crucial for child development yet declining levels of play (particularly outdoor play) and societal shifts with regard increased technology use adversely affect the daily lives of children and alter the way people connect and interact with one another.

The Connecting Community through Children's Play: A Collective Impact Research Project was a collaboration between the University of South Australia (UniSA), Campbelltown City Council (Council) and OPAL. This research project investigated community views about play and public play spaces within the SA suburb of Hectorville and through 'playful' community space events such as Street Play examined the barriers to community connectedness within this diverse and multicultural community.

The research involved a three phase mixed methods action research design, with surveys and interviews being conducted by UniSA. A key factor of the research was the flexibility within the design to allow for findings within the first phases to inform new research directions within the subsequent phases. Phase 1 data collection began in December 2015 at the *Park BBQ*, Phase 2 *Street Play* was held in April 2016 and Phase 3 *Have Your Say Day* was held in October 2016.

In total 79 adults and 19 children attended the three events, reaching approx. 13.2% of the neighbourhood population. Findings revealed that outdoor play was perceived as being very important and all residents wanted their children to play outside more. Lack of appealing play provision, lack of social opportunities, lack of adult knowledge about *how* to play and negative attitudes towards particular types of play limit engagement in play.

The community events outlined in this report such as Park BBQ and Street Play are of vital benefit to the community in a variety of ways:

- Positive attitude change through attendance at events
- Increased self-efficacy
- Increased connection with community
- Developing trust
- A commitment to increased engagement in outdoor play
- Increased awareness of play and local play spaces
- Breaking down barriers

- Initiatives like those in this study successfully connect people and, even if fleeting, these connections are valuable. They help to achieve a sense of community and help people to feel they have a sense of control/input in their neighbourhood and in matters affecting their lives.

- The lack of social cohesion in the community can to some extent be tackled through active 'playful' events with families connecting through their child's play.

- Council can build on the positive perceptions of play in the community and work on increasing knowledge and understanding of *how* to play and the different types of play.

- Informal 'chats' between Council and residents are invaluable in many ways and in considering sustainability of events a community-led approach needs to be appraised alongside the benefits of staff involvement in a Council-led approach.

Introduction

This research project captures the voices of those living in the Hectorville community to provide a detailed understanding of engagement in, and perceptions of, active outdoor play in the area as well as an understanding of community connectedness and belonging. This research is aligned with the collective impact initiatives developed by OPAL and Council including 'Child Friendly SA', 'Neighbourhood Park Barbecues', 'Street Play' and 'Life Looks Brighter Outside'.

The overall aim of the project was to investigate community views, understandings and experiences of living within their neighbourhood.

Three main aims drove the research project:

1. To investigate community views, experiences and understandings in relation to sense of belonging and feelings of connectedness.
2. To investigate perceptions of play in the community
3. To investigate engagement in play in the community.

The above three aims of the research project link with the overall objectives of the OPAL and Council projects which are to:

- To increase community belonging and connectedness
- To promote and increase awareness of the importance of play
- To promote and increase active play in the community

Thus two key constructs drove this research: play and connectedness.

Why Focus on Play?

Play is crucial for child development. Research suggests that play contributes to emotional development (such as self-esteem, resilience and self-efficacy) social development (such as identity and relationships), cognitive development (such as thinking, concentration and language) and physical development such as co-ordination and motor skills (Fleer, 2017; Smidt, 2010). Outdoor play allows children to discover and engage with the natural environment, it promotes active physical play, children develop and refine locomotor skills, manipulative and stability abilities and it provides open-ended activities. Moreover neuroscience and animal play research is providing compelling research about the value of play for brain development (Hughes, 2010). We know that brain systems are shaped by experience and thus it is vital to provide a variety of rich experiences in the early years of a child's life to provide the foundation for future health, development and wellbeing.

The benefits of play are clear, yet children's engagement in play is declining. The 21st century has seen dramatic changes in political, economic and social structures across the globe and this rapid transformation has led to a fundamental change in the nature of society (OCED 2016). Societal shifts, for example, in terms of technology and the rise of the Internet, have had an impact on the daily lives of adults and children. This has led to a transformation of the ways in which people interact and connect and a transformation of childhood whereby children are spending increasing

periods of time using technology.

Differing attitudes to play, provision of play equipment and play spaces has an influence on the amount and type of play children can access. Moreover, modern issues such as density of housing and perception of safety add to the growing decline in outdoor play. Leading Early Childhood experts warn of the dangers of the decline in play and in particular outdoor play, not only in terms of the escalation of physical health problems like obesity but also mental health problems among children and young people and the long term impact on child development. *"If children are to develop the self-regulation and emotional resilience required to thrive in modern technological culture, they need unhurried engagement with caring adults and plenty of self-directed outdoor play"* (Whitebread et al, 2012).

This research focuses on outdoor play, a key factor in OPAL's 'Life looks brighter outside' campaign which identified the lack of time children and adults spend outdoors as a priority issue to address.

Why Focus on Connectedness?

Connectedness refers to the level to which people interact and come together. By examining the duration of relationships, the frequency of interaction and the closeness with others, the level of connectedness in the community can be established. Connectedness is an important part of community cohesion and thus plays a role in building mutual civility among different groups and in maintaining respect for diversity. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report (2013) showed that "Australians aspired to support each other and embrace diversity" and that "it was important for individuals to feel connected with, contribute to, feel included in and valued by their community beyond their family and friends".

This research aimed to understand the barriers to community connectedness and promote active citizenship through 'playful' community space events such as Street Play. With societal shifts changing neighbourhood communities, in particular community connectedness and belonging, this research examines how the move towards individualisation impact on adults and children in the community and how Council can respond to the impact of social transformation so that community have a voice and agency in the process of change within their neighbourhood so that they feel they have a say in matters affecting their lives.

Focusing on those living in the Hectorville community (see location details below), this research examines the complex inter-relationships between social, environmental, cultural and political changes in order to understand how to promote sustainable, citizen-led social innovation. The voices of community members are captured to provide a detailed understanding of children's engagement in, and perceptions of, active play as well as an understanding of community connectedness and belonging.

Background Context

Council maintains 63 playgrounds and key open space assets which are highly valued by residents and are particularly valuable for balancing urban development and access for children and adults alike to outdoor play and social connection. Council's Social Plan (2015) identified that neighbourhoods have changed, particularly relating to how childhood is experienced and the natural relationships that used to exist between neighbours.

> 'There is a genuine desire by people to know their neighbours better, returning to how neighbourhoods are remembered from years ago where people helped one another, children played in the street and everyone kept an eye on each other. Whilst people acknowledge the change, there is also a willingness to rekindle these relationships. For some streets in Campbelltown this occurs naturally, particularly where there are long term residents who know each other, but are also on hand to welcome any newcomers. However, for some areas the desire to connect at this local level appears limited with some people believing this is due to the design of their front yards, large fences, driving directly into garages and entering the house through an internal door, people being time poor and an unwillingness to connect in case the neighbours place unwanted demands on their time. The benefits people described in knowing your neighbours included feeling safer and more connected to the community, which impacted directly on their overall sense of happiness and wellbeing. (Campbelltown City Council Social Plan (2015), p.13)

Strong and connected neighbourhood's is a key aspiration of Campbelltown City Council's Social Plan:

> 'Well-planned, walkable, mixed-used neighbourhoods enhance trust of others, encourage relationships between neighbours, are more socially engaged and more politically involved. Poor safety and perceived poor safety of neighbourhoods has been linked to various detrimental outcomes for communities including physical inactivity, poor physical health, links to depression and other psychological problems, developmental setbacks, lower social cohesion and reduced opportunities for social networking.' (Campbelltown City Council Social Plan (2015), p.13)

In addition, there is an acknowledgment of the constraints that potentially affect how children in Australia play (Moskwa, 2016, p.156) including:

- adults not understanding the importance of play;
- reduced risk-taking and the physical challenge creating an 'over protection' of children;
- lack of independent mobility – perceptions of traffic and 'stranger danger, anxiety, technology, other family demands and organised activities absorbing time for unstructured play;
- lack of prioritised time for unstructured play;
- lack of tolerance for children and adolescents in public spaces;
- lack of access to nature; increasing populations and urbanised living with settlement planning designs limiting access to outdoor space suitable for unstructured and 'unsupervised' play.

This research project was designed to draw upon this contextual information to investigate play and connectedness within the suburb of Hectorville.

Study Location

The suburb of Hectorville in Adelaide was chosen as the location for the OPAL and Council initiatives for a number of reasons, including low socio-economic status, high number of non-English speaking residents and a high level of rental accommodation. Hectorville is the lowest earning suburb within Campbelltown.

The area is located in the inner eastern suburbs of Adelaide and is a multicultural neighbourhood with a number of public housing residents, new migrants and some young families. Melville Grove Park and the surrounding streets were selected by OPAL and Council as the focus site within the suburb of Hectorville. The park is equipped with a limited amount of traditional play equipment, mostly tailored for 5 to 7 years. The rest of the park is grassed with some shrubs and trees. The park is situated behind a number of houses and access is via two laneways. A path crosses the park leading from one laneway to the other.







Methodology

The mixed methods design of this research project captured quantitative data (numbers) and qualitative data (descriptions and understandings).

Quantitative

Quantitative data was captured via surveys designed to collect baseline data. This data provided a snapshot of the community's views and understandings *before* Council's and OPAL's initiatives were launched. Surveys were also completed at the end of the project (in Phase 3) to assess the overall effectiveness of the initiatives.

Surveys were constructed by Dr Jane Webb-Williams at University of South Australia, and Council staff distributed the questionnaire via their preferred methods. The completed questionnaires were then sent to University of South Australia for data analysis. All surveys were anonymous. Survey questions were also completed by telephone during individual interviews.

Qualitative

In addition to the surveys, semi-structured interviews provided essential descriptive data. Dr Jane Webb-Williams of the University of South Australia conducted telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews with a number of those who had agreed to participate. Interviews lasted from 15 to 50 mins.

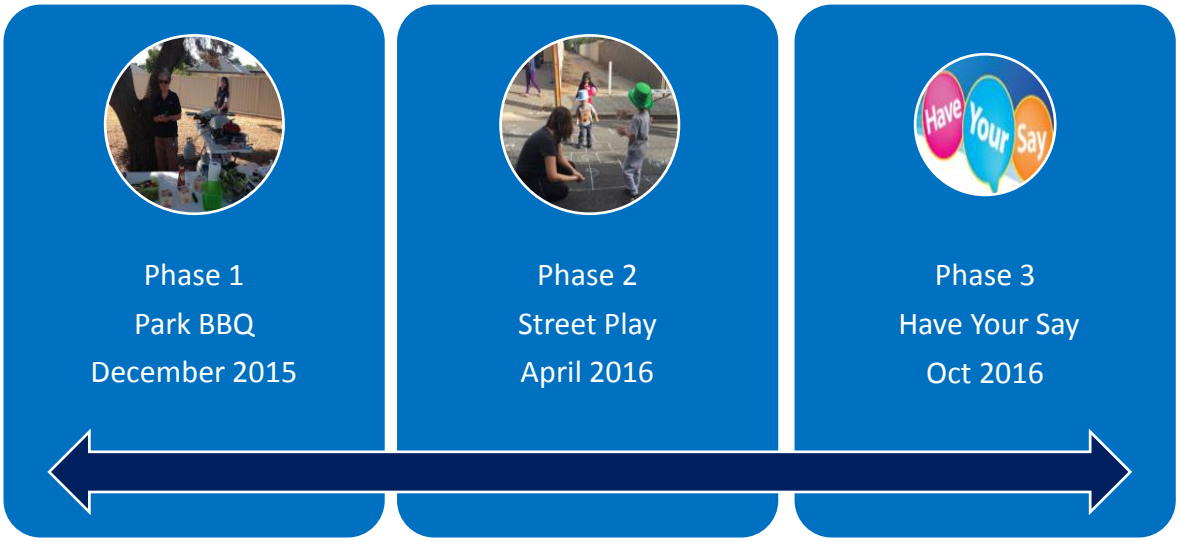
Interviews covered the survey questions and then allowed residents to freely express their own perspectives. Key topics involving experiences and desires regarding play, leisure and community were discussed with a view to developing an understanding of perceptions of, and engagement in, different types of play and leisure activities in the community.

Interviews ranged from semi-structured interviews conducted by telephone to informal 'chats' at community events. The original aim of the study was to capture the voices of both children and adults in equal proportions. However, as it transpired during the course of research, this was not possible. Few children attended the events (in comparison to adults) and as such it was decided that questioning and interviewing children would have focused attention upon them, potentially inhibiting the very engagement that was the subject of this research. In contrast, the adults were on the whole less actively involved in the activities at the events and so the 'interviews' and 'chats' were less intrusive to their engagement.

Repeated data collection within the neighbourhood was considered inappropriate and caution was exercised so not to intrude on the community.

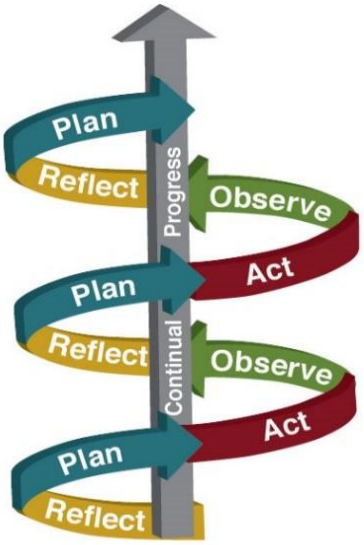
Data Collection

The research involved a 3 Phases of data collection over a period of approximately one year.



Action Research Model

The research design employed the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model of Action Research as a framework. This model includes four cycles: plan, act, observe reflect; then in response to this, plan for the next cycle. Participatory action research helps people and communities to develop their practices and their understandings of their practices (individually and collectively). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p273) "three particular attributes are often used to distinguish participatory research from conventional research: shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action".



Responsive and Emergent

The ability to respond to the emerging needs of the situation is a key to the action research method which involves a continuous spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection. The flexibility to allow the findings from the earlier phases to inform new directions in the subsequent phases was a key factor of the research design.

The process is gradual and in this research takes place through three Phases over a period of one year. The early cycles in Phases 1 and 2 provided information on which to base decisions regarding Phase 3. Then in the later cycles of Phase 3 the interpretations developed in Phase 1 and 2 could be tested, challenged and refined. In this way review of, and reflection on, evidence was directly actioned in Phase 3 and was responsive to community views.

Critical Reflection

Continual reflection informed each stage of the process. This consisted of more than evaluation. It was a process of deep thought and analysis of each team members' experiences, thoughts and

ideas. By trying to interpret these understandings and attach meaning to the observations and reflections, each staff member pushed themselves to view things from different perspectives. This provided a different understanding of the neighbourhood and challenged staff to think about things in new ways.

Staff were open and honest about how they felt about the reflection process. Multiple perspectives existed amongst the staff involved in this research. For one staff member it was a difficult process whereas for others it was viewed as a vital step to decision making and yet for others it was viewed as a luxury to have such meaningful 'thinking time' that they don't normally get in their work.

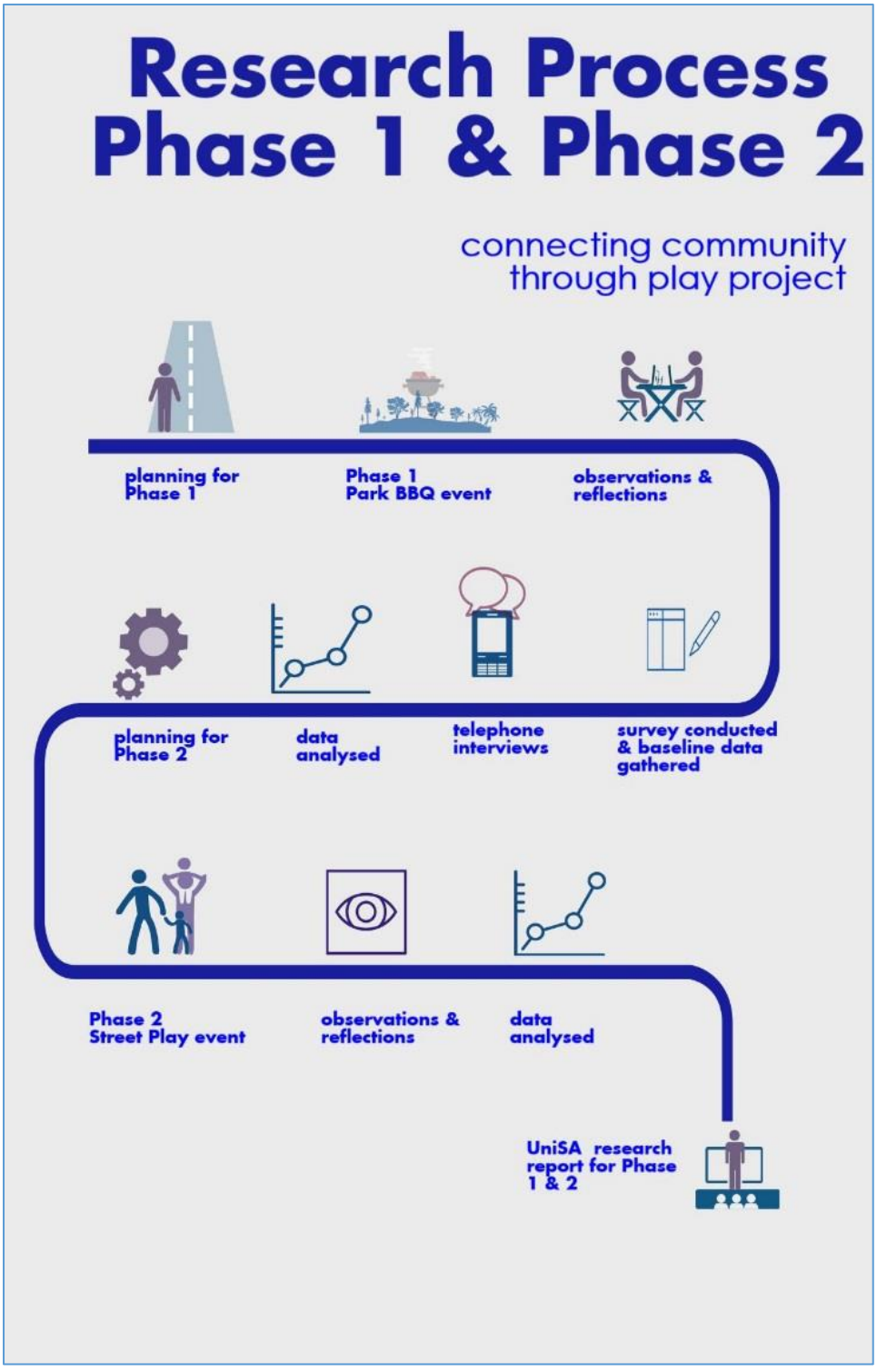
Participative

Staff from OPAL and Council were partners in this research with UniSA. By working together from the conception of the project, the research has successfully engaged with challenges faced by local government working in multicultural and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. By documenting observations and reflections and then trying to interpret these understandings each staff member pushed themselves to view things from different perspectives. Regular meetings ensured that as a team from different disciplines we developed a shared understanding and shared the same goals, vision and expectations.



Research Process

The research process for Phase 1 (Park BBQ) and Phase 2 (Street Play) was agreed upon by staff after a series of planning meetings. Phase 3 was left open, to be decided after feedback from Phase 1 and 2 had been analysed. In this way Phase 3 could be organic and respond to the needs of the community.



Phase 1: Neighbourhood Park BBQ

The Neighbourhood Park BBQ was held on 2nd December 2015 at Melville Grove Reserve. The event was held on a mid-week evening between 5.30-7.00pm. Four council staff members were involved in the event. Invitations were delivered to approximately 300 households in the streets surrounding Melville Grove, inviting residents to a free Park BBQ.

Of the 28 adults who attended the Park BBQ, 22 consented to be interviewed. Of the 22 people who consented, 15 were ultimately interviewed (seven residents were unavailable or could not be contacted). In addition to interviews, reflections and observations were captured. Staff members involved were encourage to reflect on their experiences as soon as possible after the BBQ so as to retain as much information as possible. This provided context to the behind scenes events, particularly the aspects that need to be successfully navigated in terms of setup, organisation and problem-solving.





Front and reverse of the invitation







Signage at the Park BBQ entrance to Melville Grove Reserve

Phase 1 Findings and Evaluation

Most of those interviewed or surveyed indicated that they had received the flyer for the Park BBQ. Given that there are approximately 300 households in the area, and assuming each household has at least two adults, then this equates to approximately 600 adults. 28 adults and 5 children attended the event which therefore represents 4.6% of the adult neighbourhood population.

85% success rate of getting leaflets to the intended audience (i.e. they were read and were not simply put in the bin)

Approximately 4.6% of the neighbourhood attended the free Park BBQ

Prior to attending the Park BBQ many residents viewed the invitation to the Park BBQ with, scepticism and wondered about the council's motives for such an event.

'Who is behind this?' *'What do they want from us?'* *'What is the council up to?'*

Despite the scepticism many residents also viewed the invitation with curiosity and interest:

'I hope I can meet other people with young children there'

'It will be nice to meet other people in the community'

'This is a nice surprise – it is free and in our area!'

Residents who attended the Park BBQ held positive views about it.

After the attending the BBQ, views of residents altered and comments became positive.

'Anything that brings local people together is of value'

'It is a noble effort by council'

'I really enjoyed it'

Attendance is the key

Once people had attended the Park BBQ they felt really positive about the experience and held slightly more positive views of the council. With an attendance rate of approximately 4.6% the question is why didn't more people attend? When asked about non-attendance many reasons where provided by residents:

- Demographic: language barriers
- Demographic: older Italian people who prefer own company
- Work: time-poor
- Timing: midweek more difficult to attend
- Distrust of council
- Invitation: didn't receive or couldn't read
- Food offered: grilled food is not eaten in some cultures
- Low confidence

'It takes courage to walk into a group that you don't know - it was such a closed area so there was no escape for people to 'take a look and pass by'' (female resident, age 50)

To some extent, the Park BBQ did facilitate connecting community. The examples below are typical of those experienced by many:

- A new resident who was interested in singing in a local choir met someone from the church who invited her to come along to a choir practice (she did not attend but she felt included and welcomed).

- An Indian family who had just arrived in the area with a young family enjoyed talking to people and making connections at the event. The family did not exchange contact details and so unfortunately these connections did not go beyond the event. They said '*it is a shame I don't know where they live as it would be nice to meet them again*'. However, it is possible that a future connection will occur because they recognise each other.

Some **connections were made** between residents at the Park BBQ. These may have been fleeting and not long-lasting but nevertheless benefitted the person at the time of the connection and made them feel welcomed by their neighbours.



Community views and ideas

Collating community perspectives regarding the event provided different ideas for modification of the Park BBQ event:

- hold the event at the bakery/coffee shop so it will attract all those passing by
- hold the event at the weekend
- include more signage to the event
- communicate the event in a different way – e.g. with photos, different languages
- have a translator at the event
- publicise the event through the community groups

Council and OPAL staff reflections and observations

Staff spent much time investigating the Hectorville area with a focus on Melville Grove Reserve as the site of choice. Prior to the event, concerns focused on logistics and setting up the event, and particularly on following three themes: (1) Portable BBQs, (2) Enough food and (3) Distribution of leaflets.

On reflection after the event, staff members were concerned about the low turn out, the low number of children and the potential low community perceptions of Council.

Despite the low number of people attending, staff noted the many postives of the event including the cultural diversity, engagement of those that did attend and residents desire to talk to Council.

Community Views

During the Park BBQ Council and OPAL staff gathered a list of residents in the Melville Grove neighbourhood who consented to be contacted by UniSA for involvement in the study. All those that agreed were telephoned, emailed and/or texted by Dr Jane Webb-Williams. Some residents could not be contacted due to incorrect details or did not respond to calls or texts. 68% of those who agreed to be contacted where interviewed. A cross-section of the community in terms of age, gender, socio-economic status and culture was included in the research. In addition 4 – 6 Council staff members provided observations and continual reflections. Analysis of the interviews and surveys produced the following baseline data.

The perceptions held by those involved in the study are that the community has the following characteristics:

- Multicultural with a number of public housing residents,
- A largely older Italian population with English that tends to be poor.
- Many new migrants from countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India.
- Australian people moving into the area tend not have families but are largely young couples without children.

Nearly all the residents said they were very happy living in the community and rated the neighbourhood as being good to very good. Despite this, the research data provided evidence of a low level of community connectedness.

Connectedness refers to the level to which people interact and come together. By examining the duration of relationships, the frequency of interaction and the closeness with others, the level of connectedness in the community can be established. Connectedness is an important part of community cohesion and thus plays a role in building mutual civility among different groups and in maintaining respect for diversity.

The reasons for lack of connectedness appeared to be partly due to the diverse demographic and partly due to the lack of involvement in the community by residents. A large majority of those involved in the study said that they rarely got involved in what was going on in the community. Reasons for the lack of involvement included preferring not to mix with others, doing things outside of the community or work commitments.

The data revealed three main reasons for people feeling positive despite the overall disconnection within the community:

1. There are many communities that exist within the community
2. People prefer to keep to themselves.
3. Different groups of people have different views



- Church
- Rotary
- Italian
- New migrant families
- Bakery
- School

Communities within communities

Many people within the Melville Grove area had significant community involvement outside of their neighbourhood. Some of these communities were stronger and more robust than others but what all did was to offer the person a sense of belonging. Thus, despite not having a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood in which they lived, a sense of belonging did exist in pockets within the wider community.

People prefer to keep to themselves

The disconnection within the community is not uncommon and is a global issue. The 21st century has seen dramatic changes in political, economic and social structures across the globe and this rapid change within society has led to a transformation of the ways in which people connect. For example, societal shifts—particularly in terms of technology and the rise of the internet—have had an impact on the daily lives of adults and children and have seen an explosion in online connectedness. Moreover, residents expressed a concern about working longer hours and spoke of becoming less inclined to get involved with others in the neighbourhood.

Different people, different views

When analysing the data a difference between groups was evident.

- Young people who have lived in the area for a long time and those people involved in community groups such as the Church feel deeply connected to the community.
- Older people who have lived in the area feel less connected than they did in the past.
- New residents feel connections growing but cannot yet describe themselves as feeling connected to the community.

Past and current experiences appeared to strongly influence all residents' thoughts and feelings about their community belonging. Those new to the community were very positive about the neighbourhood and community, whether this be new migrants or those choosing to live in the area. In contrast, residents who have lived in the area for a long time were less positive and held negative views of the community, despite enjoying living in the area.

New residents are making favourable comparisons with their previous locality (this makes sense given that these people of chosen recently to move into the area).

Residents that have lived in the area a long time are making unfavourable comparisons with how the community used to be and looking at the change in a negative light.

Community concerns

The main concerns held by the majority of those involved in the study fell into the following four categories:

- **Inappropriate parking by parents accessing private school**
  This appeared to be a point of tension for a number of residents who voiced their unhappiness with regard to the large volume of traffic and number of cars using their road to access the school. They described daily issues such as blocking of driveways, parking haphazardly and disrespecting those who live in the street. A few residents said that they had raised the issue with Campbelltown Council but they did not see any action and felt that the issue was not taken seriously.

- **Nature and volume of housing development in the area**
  All residents talked about the changing local landscape and the majority did so with negativity. Residents described how blocks of land with one house were being developed into high density developments with eight residences. There was an acknowledgement that development of an area is inevitable, however 73% of those interviewed were concerned about the density. Indeed, 40% of those interviewed said that they may move house in the near future if the development continued. Some residents were concerned about the changing demographic; others commented on the streetscape, while a further concern was the loss of privacy due to new multi-level housing.

- **Maintenance of local parks and playgrounds**
  The majority of those involved in the study mentioned lack of maintenance of recreation and access spaces as an area of concern for them in their neighbourhood. Descriptions included poorly maintained walkways, footpaths and—in particular—open spaces such as parks and playgrounds. Poor weed management and lack of watering of grass areas were common themes. Melville Grove Reserve (the site of the Park BBQ) was viewed by all residents as needing redevelopment.

- **Lack of amenities and outside space for young families**
  Residents were concerned about the lack of existing amenities for young families, describing the lack of appealing and inviting play spaces for children of all ages. Concerns were raised about the impact of new high density development in the community, particularly on the ability to adequately provide for the increased number of people and families moving into the area.

Race and faith are often seen as the most frequent friction points within communities and there was some evidence within the data to suggest that this was a point of tension for some residents, however it did not appear to be widespread.

A few people expressed major concerns that they were perceived negatively by others in the community and that they felt powerless. A number of residents (particularly those in public housing) felt their voice was not heard at all and that they had no control over issues that affected their lives. Some residents described issues that had a major impact on their wellbeing; for

example they felt that they were viewed as troublemakers by those within and outside the neighbourhood, and they felt disrespected.

Throughout the conversations, a distrust of local council's motives and lack of responsiveness by local council was evident. 60% of those interviewed talked about their requests and complaints falling on 'deaf ears' saying that 'they don't do anything'. 40% of residents perceived this lack of responsiveness from the council as a lack of care and not wanting to help. On the whole, the residents viewed the local council as one entity rather than separate departments. Council was described by a few residents as being motivated by money and not caring about the community at all.

Community positives

Despite the negative comments and concerns, over 75% of those involved in the study enjoyed living in the area. Residents talked positively about some of the council-held events such as the 'moonlight markets' (which involved a large number of retailers setting up stalls and events during the pre-Christmas festivities) and remarked about feeling safe in the area.

- Located near to City
- Good neighbours
- Relatively safe
- Local council events

People on the whole tended to regard themselves as having good neighbours. In some instances strong neighbourhood relationships were formed, particularly amongst those living within a community title area or amongst new migrant families. In other instances, people waved or exchanged a few words with their neighbours on a regular basis. A couple of residents reported that they had not met their neighbours despite living in the area for a number of years, however this was not viewed negatively.

'The area is accessible, is reasonably affordable and visibly is a good neighbourhood'

The proximity to the city was one of the main reasons that people gave as to why they moved to the area, along with the affordability of housing.

In contrast to the distrust of the local council, 50% acknowledged the difficult task the council has and the efforts of the council to make improvements. These improvements were welcomed but most respondents felt that more was needed. The upgrade to the park by the bakery was mentioned as being one sign of investment into the area and it was suggested that the council should widen the community consultation for future developments/redevelopments so that all community members can have a say in matters affecting their neighbourhood. As one man put it '*the council shouldn't underestimate the constituents, they are intelligent, global people who can make informed decisions'.*

'Council have made a good effort here but I would like the consultation area to include more than a couple of streets. We should all be able to input our opinions into development in our neighbourhood'.

Phase 2: Street Play



The Street Play event was held on 3rd April 2016 at Melville Grove. The event was held on a Sunday afternoon between 2 to 4 pm. Three Council staff members were involved in the event. In a similar way to the Neighbourhood Park BBQ, leaflets were distributed by hand into letterboxes. Of the 300 households who received invitations, 22 adults and 8 children attended the event which represents approximately 3.6% of the neighbourhood population.



Community feedback about the Street Play flyer suggests that uncertainty over the event was one of the reasons for the low turnout.

- Am I invited? I thought it was for residents of that street only.
- No map attached so I don't know where it is.
- Am I invited? I don't have any children.
- I can't read English very well and I didn't know what it the leaflet was about.
- All words and no pictures of the event.

In addition the word PLAY may have furthered confusion regarding the suitability of the event for different ages. For example, one 14 year old boy said *'I am too old to go to play events'.*

Phase 2 Findings and Evaluation

The Street Play event was visibly enjoyed by everyone who attended. At the Street Play event residents were involved in:

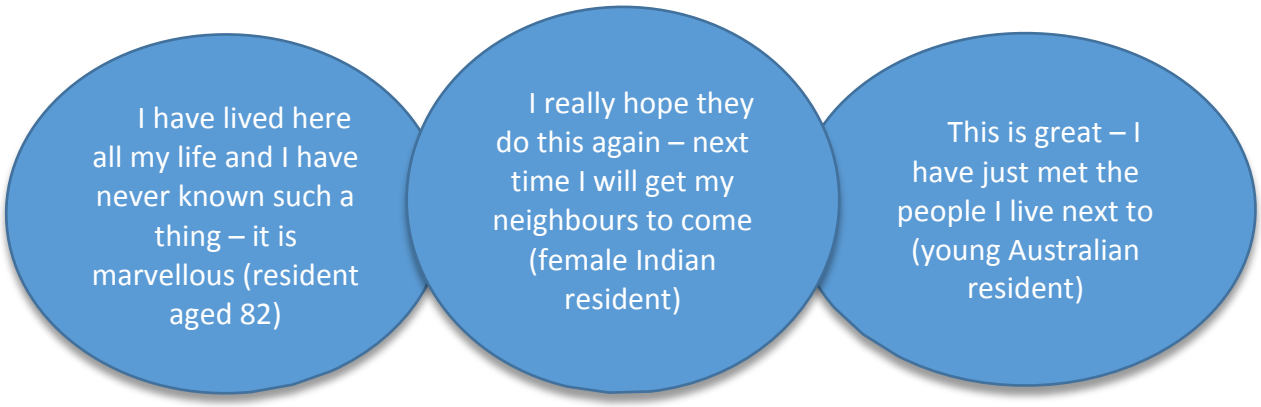
- Playing cricket
- Drawing with chalk on the road
- Hopscotch
- Riding a bike and scooter
- Playing Frisbee
- Throwing and catching balls
- Interacting and talking with others
- Meeting neighbours
- Observing others



The game of cricket was enjoyed by all adults. Young children enjoyed the chalking, however there was less attendance and involvement by older children (10 to 18 years). To encourage this age range, invitations could be adapted to appeal to all ages. Team games which encourage people to connect, such as soccer or an obstacle course, could be considered for future events. Challenges could be considered such as 'how many times can you bounce the ball?' or handball into a target or 'how fast can you complete an obstacle race'?

Attendance is vital to the success of such initiatives – if people attend then attitudes change

All those who did attend thoroughly enjoyed the event and were full of praise for OPAL and Council for putting on the event in their neighbourhood.



Perceptions of play and engagement in play

Analysis of the data showed that people in the community perceive play to be vital, and outdoor play to be extremely important, with nearly all those surveyed and interviewed marking it at the highest point on the scale.

Table 1

Question/Statement	Most frequent response
How often do you think children should play outdoors?	89% daily
At what age do you think play is important for all children?	100% all ages
Outdoor play is vital for child development	77% strongly agree
Amount of active outdoor leisure your family is involved in	33% far too little
What stops you from being involved in more outdoor leisure	67% work or time
How important is active outdoor leisure for adults?	89% very important
How important is active outdoor leisure for children?	100% very important

Residents were of the opinion that children need to play outdoor daily. 66% of respondents talked of the negative aspects of indoor technology play and the lack of outdoor play in comparison to their own upbringing.

When asked about *where* children play there was a perception that many were playing indoors because they tended not to be visible playing outdoors in streets or parks or playgrounds or front/back yards. There was a perception that a larger number of younger children lived in the community compared with older children. Many commented on the lack of amenities for families.

Most adults agreed that outdoor play was vital for child development and that play was important for all ages. Most residents with children said that their children played outdoors two to three times a week or daily. However, one resident stated that her children played outdoors only once a month. All those interviewed said they would like their children to play outside more.

Adults control what young children can and can't do, what events they attend and also what outdoor play they engage in. In theory, parents can control the amount of time their children spend watching TV or using technology for play, but in practice they aren't doing so. Many reasons were forwarded for this. Lack of time was seen as a major barrier, with adults describing working longer hours and not having the time or inclination to play with their children outdoors when they come home from work. Proximity to good play areas was also a key factor mentioned.



Outdoor play was perceived as being very important and all residents wanted their children to play outside more.

Lack of appealing play spaces was given as a key reason why children aren't playing outdoors.

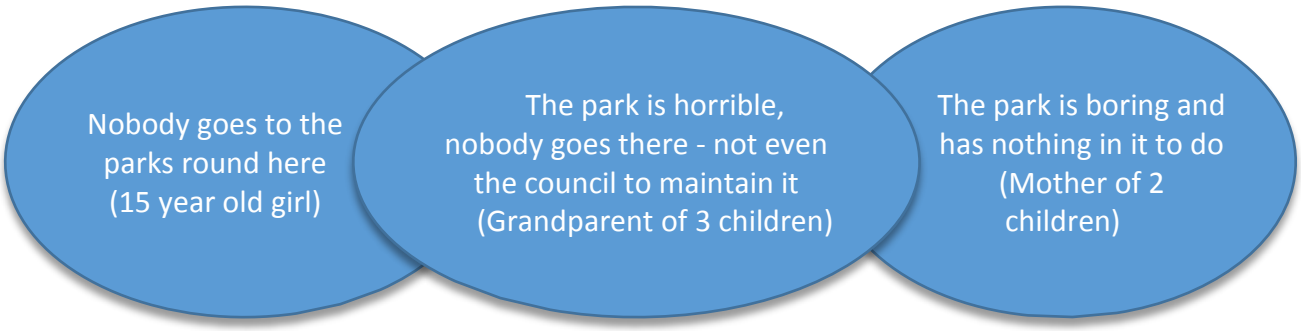
Active outdoor leisure was rated as being very important yet a third of residents admit to being involved in far too little.

People encourage more people

Many respondents commented that they or their children did not want to go to the park or playground or play outdoors because there is no one there. This implies that if more people went to the park it would encourage others. It could be a family and community meeting point were children and adults of all ages can enjoy a picnic or barbeque and outdoor play. Young people interviewed said that they wanted to meet friends and people with other children yet didn't have this opportunity within in their community. As one boy commented, *'Nobody is at the park when you get there'*. Indeed, at the Street Play event, residents expressed their overwhelming support for the event and, as one person put it, '*It is a good way to get everyone together outdoors, this is a quiet area and you never really see many people'.* Improving the local parks was seen as a way to attract more people to go outside and play.

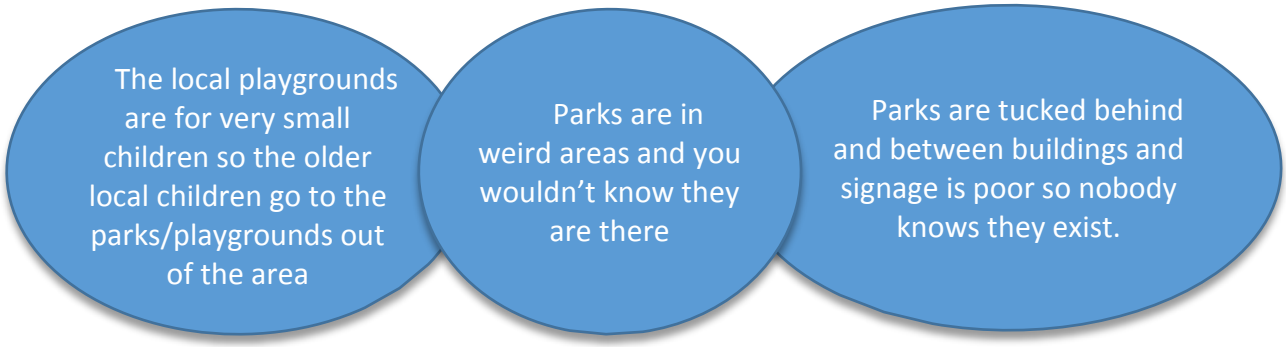
Limited play spaces

The area was seen by many as having limited places for children to play and those places that are available lack sufficient maintenance or appeal, and/or are in need of redevelopment. Moreover, many residents mentioned the lack of nearby play places for families *'without getting in a car'*.



Awareness and communication

Not knowing about the services, amenities, community events and groups that are available in the area appears to be an issue. Furthermore, residents talked about the play spaces and how people don't even know parks and playground exist. Indeed, on arrival at the Park BBQ in Melville Grove, one resident said *'I live just round the corner and I never knew this park was here.'* Lack of adequate signage was considered an issue.



Lack of confidence and connectedness

People feel uncomfortable going to public places due to lack connections within the community: *'I am not that confident about going to places on my own.'*

Ideas from the community:

- Introduce a community vegetable garden
- Maintain/upgrade walkways and parks (even just weeding and watering grass)
- Redevelop Melville Grove Reserve and other parks to make them more appealing
- Introduce a mothers club community group
- Invite community to have a say and be involved in consultation about the area so they feel they have input into their locality
- Take residents on a park walk and invite them to discuss their views on development
- Provide a map of parks in the suburb with a list of facilities (e.g. toilets)
- Introduce a council staffed outdoor area so that children of time-poor parents can play under supervision
- Upgrade old-fashioned and worn signage within the community and add park signs

Planning Phase 3

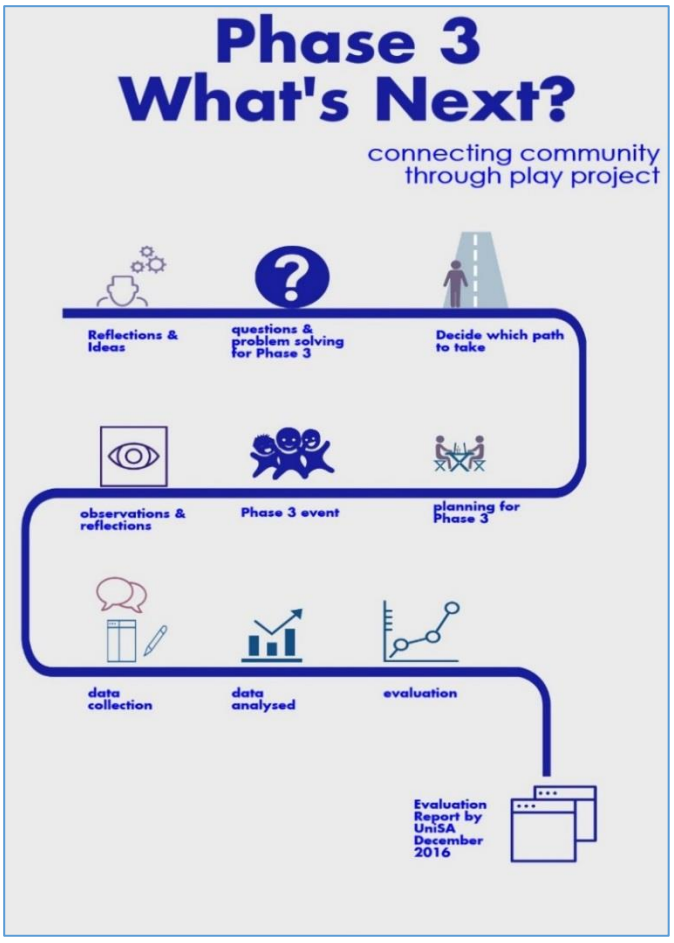
A planned milestone of the project was to review phase 1 and 2 findings to inform direction of phase 3, as per the action research methodology. Reflection on the baseline data (see Appendix 1) and the findings of Phase 1 & 2 provoked consideration to:

- Ongoing and informal relationship building with a diverse community to build trust
- Identify community strengths and leaders to build informal word of mouth networks
- Translation for non-English speaking residents as well as suitable design for promotional material for low literacy are all considerations for future engagement
- Residents need to see that council act on feedback or at least acknowledge the value of their community input
- Many different communities exist within the neighbourhood. This adds complexity when Council considers how it meaningfully engages and avoids a 'one-size fits all approach'
- Different people have different views and all need to be respected
- Misperceptions perpetuate due to a lack of information - communication is vital

Key senior and operational staff of Council were invited to a presentation from UniSA – a process built into the Project Management to inform Council. From this a key opportunity evolved that led to a review of initial project objectives and broadening of the scope of work.

Staff felt that through good relationships, advocacy and communication across Council, an emerging priority was to improve the quality and quantity of public realm and open space in the study area. The next step to achieve this improvement, was to involve other key staff of Council who lead formal Community engagement procedures (a formal regulatory requirement of all Councils).

It was clear future council activity in this diverse study area should consider a community development approach where Council takes the time to work with the community rather than a more traditional approach of delivering, and arguably, imposing services and decisions on them.



Staff reflecting on this milestone talked about the pros, cons, benefits and tensions of cross-department collaboration. The opportunity to use this project to inform, influence budget and design decisions in an identified area of need was deemed to be too good an opportunity to refuse by staff and led to the decision to create 'Have Your Say Day' in Phase 3.

Phase 3
Have Your Say Day

The event was held on 18th September 2016 at three sites within the Hectorville suburb.

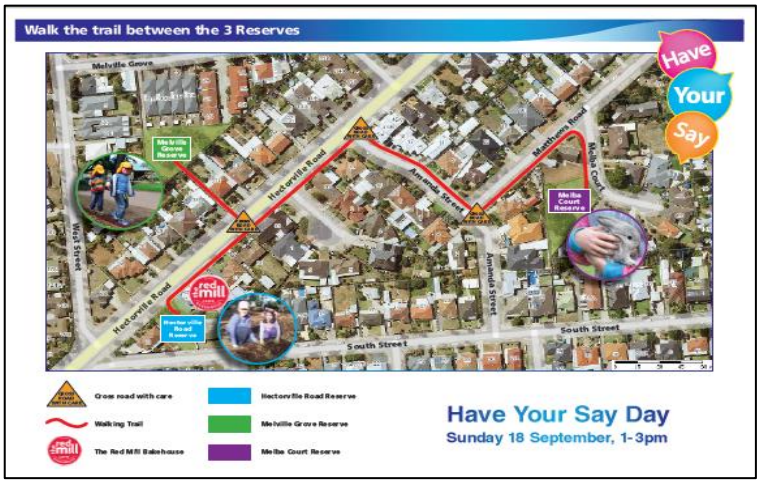
In a similar way to the other two events, leaflets were distributed by hand into letterboxes. Leaflets included information about the day and a feedback form with regards improvements for Melville Grove Reserve. Some feedback forms were posted to the Council by residents and others were completed during the event.

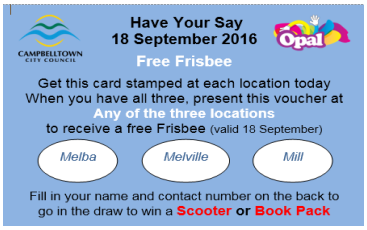
Of the 300 households who received invitations, approximately 35 adults and 10 children attended the event which represents approximately 5.8% of the neighbourhood population (based on the assumption that there are 2 adults per household).



This was a much larger event occurring simultaneously at Melville Grove Reserve, Melba Court Reserve and Hectorville Road Reserve. More Council staff members were involved than in the previous events and considerably more time was spent planning and co-ordinating the event. An Operation Manual produced by Council and OPAL for all those involved clearly identified roles and risks for the event. A pocket guide was also produced for staff to refer to on the day of the event.

The event encouraged people to walk the trail between the three parks and get involved in activities at each site. At Melville Grove, play materials were set up and local artists were active in the laneway that leads to the park. At Melba Court children could pet animals and at Hectorville Road people were encouraged to plants shrubs. All those who attended were given a coffee voucher and a Frisbee voucher which they could redeem once they had visited all three sites.







Survey and informal interviews were conducted by UniSA at the event, followed by individual interviews conducted with residents over the telephone. 22 surveys were completed, 9 informal interviews were conducted and a number of residents involved in Phase 1 interviews were contacted by telephone.

Phase 3 Findings and Evaluation

Community Consultations

The community development/consultative aspect of the event was extremely successful in gaining residents ideas for improvement of Melville Grove Reserve which could directly contribute to the Council's strategy for its future improvement.

Feedback from the community was unanimous in that the park was in desperate need of an upgrade and were **full of praise for the Council** in identifying this and taking the steps to consult with community about its improvement.

A small number of residents had experiences of the park being used late at night whether for rubbish dumping or as a short cut and this, together with perceptions that the Council are not adequately maintaining the park, created negative feelings and the perception that Council don't care. In addition, the lack of social cohesion in the area is evident in a small number of residents' discussions. Comments, although mostly positive, do refer to issues within the community. When you start to unravel the attitudes you see that there are multiple layers and some tension within the neighbourhood as identified in the previous Phases.

Given the above context it is easy to see why asking for feedback about improvements to the park was so important to residents. Indeed, the majority of residents welcomed the opportunity to have a say and praised the Council for holding such forums. Only one resident held a negative view stating '*What is the point in going – they don't really want to know what we think, they are just going to do what they want'.* However this was a minority view.

Suggestions for improvements fell into three broad categories:

1. Physical improvements to the park: seating, lighting, paving of pathway, irrigation
2. Welcoming improvements: signage, laneway upgrades
3. Park activities: fruit trees, more diverse play options for a variety of ages

100% of residents that attended the event said they would like their children to play outdoors more and the lack of well-designed appealing play provision was cited as a main reason for not visiting Melville Grove Reserve.

95% of residents said that improving Melville Grove Reserve would increase the amount of outdoor play for their children.

Community Voice and Self-Efficacy

Residents were very positive about Council enabling the community to voice their views and opinions and in comparison with Phase 1 and Phase 2, many more comments involved reference to having an 'input', 'being listened to' and a sense of 'power'. Indeed it was important for residents to feel that they had a say in matters affecting their lives and it appears that the Council initiatives has been successful in conveying this message to residents.

'They [Council] really seem to care about what we think and I suppose I now feel I can have a say on the changes in my neighbourhood'.

Residents perceived themselves as having greater capability to influence their community. Increasing resident's opportunity to have a voice increased their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is important because it helps to determine our thoughts, feelings, motivations and behaviours (Bandura 1997). Giving residents the opportunity to express their opinions and to have their feedback valued was meaningful for many residents. The increased feelings of self-efficacy as a result of this means that these residents will be more likely to sustain their involvement. Indeed, residents passionately expressed the importance of having a say in matters affecting their lives. Although some people choose not to get involved, having the opportunity to was the key. They were given the choice and that was what was important.

Playful Activities

In addition to the consultative aspect of the event, free family activities were offered. At Melville Grove staff set up a range of inviting play materials to add to the existing fixed playground equipment. Pots, pans, spoons, sand, water, spades and buckets as well as a range of natural 'loose parts' play materials such as acorns, hay, pieces of wood and cardboard boxes.



Loose parts are materials that can be moved around and allow open ended possibilities.

This means there are multiple ways of interacting and playing with the materials which allows children to use their creativity and imagination.







Written single word provocations on sticks were placed around the materials to support and encourage play as well as to provoke ideas, questions and discussions.

The play materials were a great success, with children of all ages thoroughly enjoying playing with them. As one Grandmother said **"the children have enjoyed this the best".**

The benefits of providing such materials and opportunities were:

- Encouraged adults to spend some time outdoors with their children
- Allowed families to witness their children deeply engrossed in outdoor play
- Encouraged conversation about play and its benefit
- Connected families through shared activities

The engagement in play at Melville Grove showed that some **adults lacked knowledge of how to play with their children**. Many adults at the event tended to accompany their children to play materials and then stand and watch them. Few adults picked up or 'played' with the materials and objects themselves. The provocations, although read out loud by the adult, tended not to be acted on. Of the adults who did get involved **it was the fathers that became active and encouraged their child to play**.



Attitudes about 'acceptable' types of play were evident through children's engagement in, and discussion of, their play at home. Attitudes can restrict the type and form of play that children are able to access, thereby potentially limiting the benefits of play for children. Indeed, older children appeared unsure about what they were 'allowed' to do and expressed their parents' attitude towards outdoor play *'I am not allowed to play like this at home. My mum doesn't like me getting my shoes dirty*'.

Differing attitudes to play, knowldege about play, provision of play equipment and play spaces has an influence on the amount and type of play children can access.

Given that increasing outdoor play is a key priority for Council and OPAL, the findings from this research provide an indication that providing 'playful' community events are an important part of achieving this goal. Knowledge, attitudes and practice are related which means that increasing ones knowledge of play could increase ones engagement in play. Workshops aimed at educating adults about children's play could be considered in the future.

Laneway Art Activities



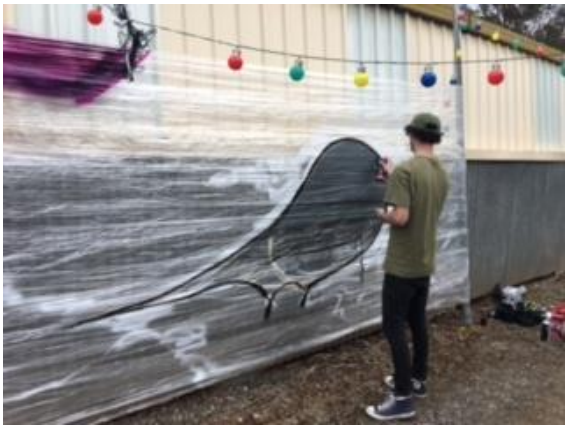
The park at Melville Grove is unseen from the road and is accessed via two laneways. Residents discussed the laneway's lack of appeal and safety concerns. As one resident put it, *'it is dirty and creepy'***.** One resident commented that she lacked the confidence to walk down the alley to the park because of safety concerns and '*not being able to see what it is going on in the park until you are actually in it".*

Council staff highlighted the need to tackle this issue and as a consequence during the Phase 3 event the Council employed two local artists to be active in the laneway.

The perception by all those involved was that the laneway art was a success in a variety of ways:

- It was “active” and provided a talking point which broke down barriers to participation by having a common topic to discuss.
- It provided a positive improvement to the aesthetic of the neighbourhood and at the same time altered perceptions of safety.
- It encouraged residents to think about the improvements they would like to see to the laneway





The laneway holds significance in the community. It appears to be an important symbol of the neighbourhood’s prosperity (or lack of) in the area and its appearance is a barrier to the community’s sense of local identity and sense of place. Given its dominant position in relation to Melville Grove Reserve, the laneway needs to be considered as part of the park improvements to provide for a safe, efficient and pleasant walkable neighbourhood.

Event Success



The drive and passion of staff are the sole reason for the success of the events. Council and OPAL staff members were deeply invested in the events and wanted them to be successful. Staff had a good understanding of the community and were able to make residents feel valued. They went to great lengths to ensure that everyone’s voice was heard. Every person who attended was approached in a friendly, caring and non-judgemental manner. Staff made it clear that they were there to listen. Residents commented that *‘The Council actually listened to me – I am amazed’.*



This raises the question about how to sustain such events. Community-led events rather than Council-led events could be the answer. The challenge here is in identifying resident “champions” who can organise their own events with support through resources provided by OPAL and Council. Moreover, some of the key benefits of the Council-led events would be lost including developing trust, respect and understanding through informal face to face conversations with staff. Any strategy would therefore need to factor this into the planning.

Phase 3 Staff Reflections

Prior to the event staff concerns focused on set up, managing the activities across the three sites and managing the consultative aspect of the event together with the family activities offered.

After the event staff reflections fell into three broad themes:

1) Resident participation

- Positive: 1) Children actively engaging in play 2) Receiving ideas for improvement directly from residents 3) Positive feedback from residents about being given the opportunity to share their views
- Negative: 1) Low attendance 2) Lack of residents from previous events 3) Lack of diversity

2) Event Decisions

- Positive: 1) Visual appeal in laneway created by Artists 2) Idea to offer free coffee
- Negative: 1) Sustaining momentum of the event over three sites 2)Greater focus on talking rather than activities

3) Aura (the distinctive atmosphere or quality that is generated by a person, thing, or place).

- Positive: Team spirit
- Negative: Lack of atmosphere at the event



Conclusion

This research clearly demonstrates that 'playful' events are of vital benefit to the community in a variety of ways:

- Positive attitude change through attendance at events.
- Increased self-efficacy
- Increased connectedness
- A commitment to increased engagement in outdoor play
- Increased awareness of play and local play spaces
- Breaking down barriers

All events across the three Phases of study were very well received by the community and were successful in connecting with residents even if in a small way. Given few adults attended more than one event, the cumulative attendance across the 3 Phases was 13.2%. In such a diverse community, this represents an important contribution.

The Park BBQ and Street Play initiatives in particular facilitated community connections and the Street Play and Have Your Say Day activities promoted active outdoor play. All those that attended talked positively about the events and appeared to hold slightly higher perceptions of Council because of the event. Attendance at the events is therefore the key to positive change.

The community are largely disconnected due to the diverse demographic. Most residents, however, did not express concern regarding the disconnectedness within the community. Many viewed the lack of community connection as a reflection of 21st century living rather than a cause of concern. Indeed, many expressed their wish to retain their privacy and to keep to themselves. There was, however, a section of the community who expressed a lack of connectedness within the community alongside feelings of isolation and alienation. Lack of control makes people feel powerless to enact any change within their lives and makes them vulnerable to depression and anxiety. This was not a widespread issue since the majority of residents felt positive about living in the neighbourhood, however it is evident that some people in the community are struggling.

The findings give a sense of the barriers to building connectedness and cohesion within the community: mistrust of different groups, particularly those new to the local community and those who are of a different culture; a perception that local authorities are not listening and don't care, indicated by failure to perform adequate maintenance and provide appealing spaces for interaction and play. The lack of play spaces for young families was seen by many as a concern, particularly given the impact of technology in children's daily lives.

Residents were keen to talk and wanted to be involved. This strong theme influenced the planning of Phase 3 to include a community engagement aspect to the events. Residents highly valued the opportunity of providing ideas for the local park improvements, giving rise to increased feelings of self-efficacy and control over matters affecting their lives. The cross–department collaboration was a noteworthy endeavour and all feedback from residents was extremely positive. Future events may need to emphasise their focus on active 'playful' events as these events in particular successfully built trust, involvement and promoted connectedness.

- Initiatives like those in this study connect people and—even if fleeting—are valuable. They help to achieve a sense of community and help people to feel they have a sense of control/say/input in their neighbourhood and in matters affecting their lives.

- Community can be connected through play. Adults come together with other adults at play spaces and immediately share a common link with their neighbour – to take their children outdoors to play. In all phases of the research, the chatting of adults who had not previously met was observed. When bonds form between children at play, this helps build connections between adults. The lack of social cohesion in the diverse multicultural community can therefore to some extent be tackled through active 'playful' events. In this way children's play becomes the vehicle through which families can connect, thereby increasing community connectedness.

- Children tend not to play outdoors because of the lack of social opportunities, the lack of adult knowledge about *how* to play and negative attitudes towards particular types of play.

- It is clear that the events have been successful in raising awareness about the importance of play, with residents viewing play as being extremely beneficial. Council can now build on this and work on increasing knowledge and understanding of the *how* to play and the different types of play. Council could consider workshops in additional to playful community events aimed at educating adults about children's play.

- Informal 'chats' between Council and residents are invaluable in many ways: reducing barriers, visibility, getting to know residents, residents genuinely feeling listened to, reaching those that would not normally attend events such as those with poor English, socially isolated, disadvantaged. Sustainability of events needs to be considered. A community-led approach needs to be appraised alongside the benefits such staff involvement in a Council-led approach.

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