

Better places to play: ACT Play Space Strategy



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Acknowledgement of Country

The ACT Government acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future of the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and where we conduct our business. We recognise the significant contribution of the Ngunnawal people and neighbouring Nations – the Ngambri, Ngarigo, Wolgalu, Gundungurra, Yuin and Wiradjuri – to the Canberra region. For thousands of years these Nations have maintained a tangible and intangible cultural, social, environmental, spiritual and economic connection to these lands and waters. We also recognise that Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people have been nurturing and teaching children on this land for thousands of years.



Minister's foreword

Play is essential to the cognitive, physical and social development of children and young people. It provides a means to explore the world and develop a sense of self and place – in our environments, our communities and our neighbourhoods.

The ACT Government recognises the importance of play in the lives of children, young people and their families. That's why we deliver and maintain a network of free public play spaces across the Territory, providing a diversity of play experiences for all age groups.

Play spaces are highly valued across Canberra's suburbs and districts. We want to ensure our play space network keeps getting better as changes in where and how families live see our city become more compact and efficient.

The ACT Play Space Strategy provides a strategic framework to guide future planning and prioritisation to continually improve the play space network. The strategy lays out a vision, objectives and actions to ensure our play space network provides great places to play across the ACT for people with a diversity of abilities and across the age spectrum.



This strategy has come about through a community-centred approach to planning for play. The ACT Government facilitated the citizen-led Better Suburbs Play Space Forum as a showcase project in deliberative democracy. This forum brought together 64 members of the Canberra community to collaboratively deliberate on priorities for the location, design, management and ongoing maintenance of our city's play spaces. Forum members developed the first ACT Play Space Priorities Framework, and identified the need for a play space strategy to oversee the framework's implementation.

This strategy also builds on extensive community engagement with Canberrans across a range of ACT Government-funded play space project consultations and research projects.

Play spaces improve quality of life, health and wellbeing and social equity in the ACT. The actions in this strategy therefore contribute to the goals and objectives of a broad range of ACT Government plans and frameworks, most notably the [ACT Wellbeing Framework](#). The delivery of this strategy will:

- » **Enhance** the liveability, accessibility, diversity, sustainability and resilience of this city – as set out in the [ACT Planning Strategy](#);
- » **Assist** in building strong families and communities that are inclusive, to support and nurture children and young people – in line with the [ACT Children and Young People's Commitment](#);

- » **Encourage** active living and active ageing – as set out in the [ACT Preventative Health Plan](#);
- » **Ensure** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can actively participate in Canberra's social, economic and cultural life – as outlined in the [ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement](#);
- » **Contribute** to the ACT's ambitious environmental targets – as set out in the [ACT Urban Forest Strategy](#), [ACT Climate Change Strategy](#) and [Living Infrastructure Plan](#);
- » **Foster** a city for all ages where older Canberrans feel safe, involved, connected and valued – as highlighted in the [ACT Age-Friendly City Plan](#).
- » **Support** social inclusion for people from all backgrounds and encourage the formation of strong community links in line with the [ACT Multicultural Framework](#).

The Government is committed to ongoing investment in play spaces for the benefit of all Canberrans. In planning for and implementing these investments, we will continue to collaborate and consult with Canberrans to ensure our city-wide play space network meets community needs and aspirations.

Chris Steel MLA

Minister for Transport and City Services

Our recent investments in better play spaces

The **Canberra community** has access to over **500 play spaces** in urban open space, among the **highest per capita** in Australia.



**\$5.8m invested
since 2018**

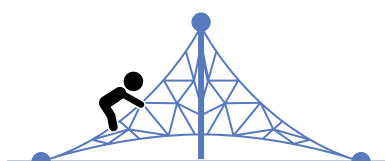
in delivering new and
upgraded play spaces



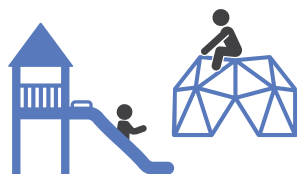
**\$1.3m invested
in safety audits
and works**
of play spaces



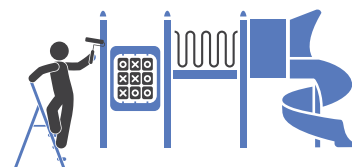
**\$2.9m spent on
routine maintenance
and management**
of play spaces



**5 new nature
play spaces
at Glebe Park,
Eddison Park, Farrer,
Kambah District Park and
Yerrabi Pond District Park**



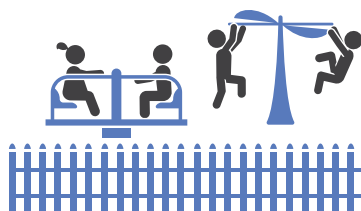
**5 new feature
play spaces**
and whole-of-suburb
masterplans for suburbs with
low play value at Richardson,
Waramanga, Torrens,
Narrabundah and Higgins.



**66 refreshed and
upgraded play spaces**
including painting, new
borders, soft fall refreshes,
access paths and benches



**12 shade sails added
to play spaces**
to encourage longer
and more comfortable
play stays



**2 more fully fenced
playgrounds**
at Kambah and Throsby
to create safer play spaces

Our vision

Canberra's play space network enriches our lives, makes our city more vibrant, and enhances community health and wellbeing.

Our play spaces are well used, valued and cared for by the ACT community. They are places where we enjoy time with friends, family and community and gain from the many benefits of play. They help us lead happy, healthy lives.

We seek to ensure the ACT has a diverse, engaging and accessible mix of quality play spaces for everyone.





Background and context

Key terms

Play is the experience that we have when we voluntarily engage in activities for their own sake and for the pleasure that these activities bring. Play can take many forms but tends to have elements of spontaneity, enabling us to safely trial new ways of being, thinking and doing, and helping us to explore our relationship with the world around us. Four key terms underpin the new direction in planning for play in this strategy:

Play space

A play space is an area that gives people the ability to play and provides an opportunity to participate in diverse structured and unstructured forms of play. A play space may include, but extends beyond, the playground to include the whole environment that is available for play – including the natural features, built environment and landscape, and amenities.

Play value

Play value is the value that a play space – its equipment, amenity and environment – contributes to the experience of play. Play value is an important term for this strategy because it introduces a user-centred view of play spaces and will serve as a benchmark that contributes to play space planning in the ACT at the suburb and district level.

High play value is found in play spaces where the available offerings enable people of all ages and abilities to engage in a range of play experiences, including their own unstructured and creative forms of play.

Low play value is found in play spaces where there is a limited range of play experiences on offer, aimed at a small number of potential users.

Play space network

The play space network in the ACT consists of all the play spaces within the Territory, with the geographical relationships between play spaces represented at the suburb and district level.

The concept of the play space network is important for this strategy because each play space in the ACT provides different play experiences for diverse ages and abilities. By recognising that each play space is part of a greater network of play experiences across suburbs and districts, we can work towards an equitable distribution of diverse and inclusive spaces with high play value and amenity across Canberra.

Play experience

Play experience reflects the types of engagement that we have when we play: active or passive; physical, cognitive, creative and sensorial; social or solitary; challenging, moderate or easy; inclusive; structured or unstructured; connected with nature or the built environment; for learning or for fun; and many different types of experience in between.

In the ACT we seek to provide a diverse range of play experiences that contribute to high play value across the play space network.



The importance of play

Why is play important?

Play is critical for the healthy physical, cognitive and social development of children and remains important to our health and wellbeing across the whole lifespan. Play fosters our physical and mental health and keeps us active; enhances our skill sets, confidence and capabilities; challenges our limits; facilitates a range of social encounters; stimulates cognitive functions and encourages the use of imagination, lateral thinking and problem solving.¹



Children and the right to play

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts”.² In the ACT we want to protect and promote the right of children to play, and our play space network is one of the key ways through which we do this.

Meeting the intent of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for designing play spaces for children and young people that:

- » guarantee equality of access by all children
- » are accessible and inclusive
- » are free from inappropriate hazards and close to their own homes
- » provide opportunities for exploration and creativity while enabling parents and carers to maintain oversight with measures to promote safe, independent mobility as their capacity evolves
- » are appropriate to the age of the child and that take into account the time afforded, the nature of space and environments available, the forms of stimulation and diversity and the degree of necessary adult oversight and engagement to ensure safety and security.

Changing demographics in the ACT

Over the past 20 years Canberra has undergone significant population and demographic changes which have changed how and where we live. These changes will continue to shape our suburbs and districts into the future.

The ACT population is **expected to grow from 430,000 to 582,000 over the next twenty years**. The ACT Government has outlined a plan to make Canberra more compact and sustainable by delivering **70% of new housing within the existing urban footprint**. In this context, our play spaces will serve an increasingly vital role as the backyards for our communities and serve a more diverse mix of needs than in the past.

The projected population growth ([Table 1](#)) highlights the importance of providing local public places for play across the generations. The actions in this strategy will be essential for fulfilling our commitments to children and young people and creating an age-friendly city for the growing population of older Canberrans.

Children and young people are the primary users of play spaces, however older adults aged 65 and over have much to benefit from physical, cognitive and social outdoor activity. They are increasing users of play spaces – both as carers of children and young people and in their own right. This cohort constitutes a rapidly-growing share of Canberra's population.

Table 1. Projected populations of children, young people and older adults in the ACT

Age group	2020	2030 projected population	2040 projected population
Total children and young people (0-14 yrs)	81,333	92,076	101,148
Proportion of ACT's total population	19%	18.7%	17.8%
Total older adults (65+ yrs)	56,524	75,790	93,319
Proportion of ACT's total population	13%	15.3%	16.4%

ACT Population Projection, ACT Treasury

Disability in the ACT

Nearly one fifth of the ACT population has a registered disability. This figure has grown in recent years from 16.2% in 2015 to 19.4% in 2018, which is an extra 18,000 members of the ACT community.³ The percentage of children and young people with disabilities has increased since 2012 across all age groups.

In the ACT we want everyone to have the highest quality of life and access to the widest range of services. That is why inclusive play space planning, delivery and upgrades is a critical priority of this strategy.

High levels of sedentary behaviour

Like many communities, the ACT faces a challenge in relation to levels of sedentary behaviour and consequent impacts on physical health and wellbeing, particularly among children.

Nearly half of children in the ACT aged 5-15 exceed the recommended amount of screen-based activity time, and only 22% are meeting the physical activity guideline for children.⁴

These levels of inactivity contribute to the ACT having one of the highest proportions of children aged 5 to 15 years who are overweight or obese in Australia, at 28.6%.⁵ Further, we know that obesity increases with age among ACT children – with one in six Kindergarten children and one in five Year 6 students being overweight or obese.⁶

A significant proportion of adults in the ACT also have highly sedentary lifestyles, leading to nearly two thirds of adults within our community being overweight or obese.⁷

These high levels of sedentary behaviour among children and adults provide a further impetus for improving the range of play experiences across our play space network and encouraging people across the lifespan to engage in physical activity and outdoor recreation.



Community use of play spaces

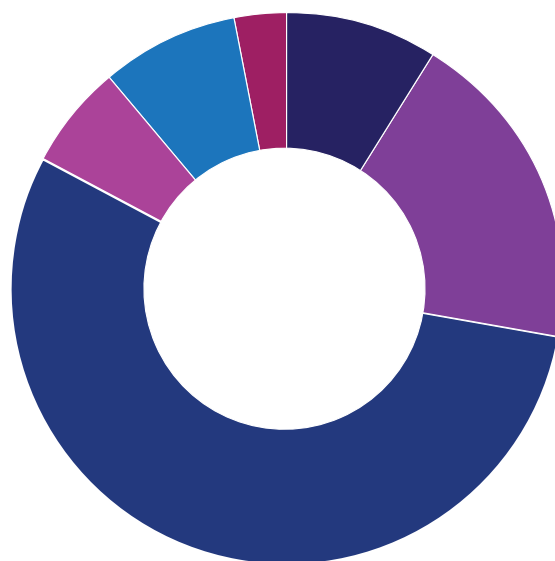
The Canberra community is passionate about play and play spaces. We know from our engagement with thousands of community members – including 350 children and young people – that play spaces serve a critical role in the fabric of our lives.

They are a regular feature on the activity calendar, with 83% of families with children 12 and under visiting play spaces at least once a week for one to two hours.⁸ Families and carers take children to play spaces for a variety of reasons, including to entertain and engage children in a range of physical and social activities, to expose them to safe levels of risk and challenge and to enable them to interact with the natural and social world.⁹

Popular play spaces

The most popular play spaces in the ACT network are the district or ‘destination’ play spaces. This reflects the fact that these play spaces offer the highest play value and have the broadest and most inclusive range of play experiences. Canberrans spend more time at district play spaces than local play spaces and have indicated through community feedback that they are willing to travel further to visit these play spaces.

Figure 1. How often, on average, would you, your family or your child visit a playground in Canberra



- Daily - 9%
- More than three times per week - 19%
- Weekly - 55%
- Fortnightly - 6%
- Monthly - 8%
- Once or twice a year - 3%

The top 10 play spaces identified by the ACT community in the 2018 Canberra Destination Play Space Study¹⁰ are:



1. Boundless Playground,
Parkes (managed by NCA)



2. Pod Playground, The National
Arboretum Canberra



3. John Knight Memorial Park,
Belconnen



4. Kambah Adventure Playground,
Kambah



5. Weston Park, Yarralumla



6. Community Recreation Park,
Moncrieff



7. Yerrabi Pond District Park,
Gungahlin



8. Fadden Pines, Fadden



9. Chifley Shops Playground,
Chifley



10. Black Mountain Peninsula Park,
Acton

District play spaces like these are critical to the quality of our play space network. This strategy includes a number of actions that will strengthen their contribution to the network as we continue to invest in new district play spaces and boost the play value of existing ones over time.

Play spaces and wellbeing in the ACT

Play spaces contribute to several of the important domains within the ACT Wellbeing Framework, which comprises 12 domains of wellbeing, reflecting the key factors that impact on the quality of life.

Play spaces are critical sites for **education and life-long learning** during childhood because children develop their physical, social, imaginative and cognitive capacities by engaging in a range of play activities. Play spaces provide opportunities for developing social skills and we know that time spent in nature and outdoors improves environmental literacy and levels of compassion and care for the natural world.¹¹

Play spaces provide a raft of health and wellbeing benefits to our community, particularly fostering healthy child development including:

- » **Fine motor skills:**
developing capacity with fingers and hands
- » **Gross motor skills:**
using large muscle groups to improve strength and coordination
- » **Hand/eye coordination:**
developing hand/eye coordination
- » **Proprioceptive:**
developing spatial awareness and how to move in a space, and
- » **Vestibular:**
learning balance and coordination.

We know that there is a correlation between children's levels of physical activity and the amount of public infrastructure in their immediate vicinity.¹²



Play spaces contribute to positive **environment and climate** outcomes. The majority of Canberra's play spaces are located in green spaces which contribute to our tree canopy and biodiversity. We can take practical action to improve both the quality of play spaces and the environment more broadly, such as through tree plantings, landscaping and use of sustainable materials.

Our play space network contributes to a sense of **identity and belonging** in our neighbourhoods and to the city more broadly because they provide a place where we can engage in free activities in the public realm. We know that Canberrans travel longer distances to spend time in the district and newer play spaces, which builds connections outside their local area.

Play spaces also bring people together and create community, strengthening family bonds and establishing friendships and networks. Canberrans visit play spaces to spend time with friends and family, and to celebrate milestones and special occasions.¹³ Inclusive play spaces also provide people of all abilities with the opportunity to participate in public life in the ACT.

Play spaces contribute to the **economy** through strengthening the economic viability of our neighbourhood hubs. Studies show that play spaces co-located near shops bring increased foot traffic and spend in those shops.¹⁴ Proximity to quality play and green spaces can also increase property prices.¹⁵

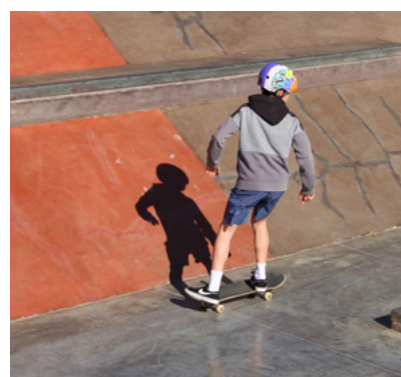
Play spaces in the ACT

There are currently 515 publicly accessible play spaces across Canberra that are owned and managed by the ACT Government. Canberra is also home to the Boundless Playground, an all-abilities playground managed by the National Capital Authority. Further playgrounds are located in rural or nature reserve areas, and many of Canberra's 136 public and private schools also have play spaces that can be accessed by the broader community.

In addition to traditional playgrounds, the ACT Government manages several other types of play spaces including:



10 nature play spaces
(generally associated with destination play spaces)



21 skate parks
(5 major skate parks and
16 parks with skate features)



43 local basketball courts
(half and full size)



46 fitness equipment sites/areas



4 learn-to-ride bike tracks



8 pump and bike skills tracks
(including community-built
bike tracks)



3 community recreation parks
(which serve as district and
central play spaces)



Our play spaces are complemented by other recreational facilities managed by government agencies or private organisations. This includes ovals and sporting facilities, pedestrian and cycle networks, swimming pools, dog parks, golf courses, nature reserves, national parks and mountain bike trails. Together, all of these facilities make Canberra a great city for play.

This strategy takes a district-level planning approach to the ACT play space network to achieve strategic and sustainable planning for play. A district planning approach focuses on developing policy, achieving coordination and implementing action at a community scale. It also provides an opportunity to understand and value the distinctive characteristics, strengths and desired future directions of Canberra's diverse districts.¹⁶

This district-level planning approach has been adopted across the ACT Government to assess the availability of services, infrastructure and community facilities across the eight Canberra districts mapped on page 16. Assessing the availability of play spaces at a district level helps to identify opportunities to improve equity and access across the entire play space network.

- » Bike tracks in open space areas add to the diversity of play spaces
- » The Eddison Skate Park at Woden is used by people of all ages to develop skills on wheels.
- » The Sanctuary at Tidbinbilla is one of our many natural outdoor attractions.

The ACT's play space network consists of a range of play experiences with differing levels of play value. Our play spaces are categorised into one of three levels:

1. District (destination),
2. Central (community)
3. Local (neighbourhood)

These classifications determine the type of facilities and level of amenity that are provided in different play spaces. They also guide the budget allocations provided to support safety inspections and routine maintenance.



Canberra play spaces map



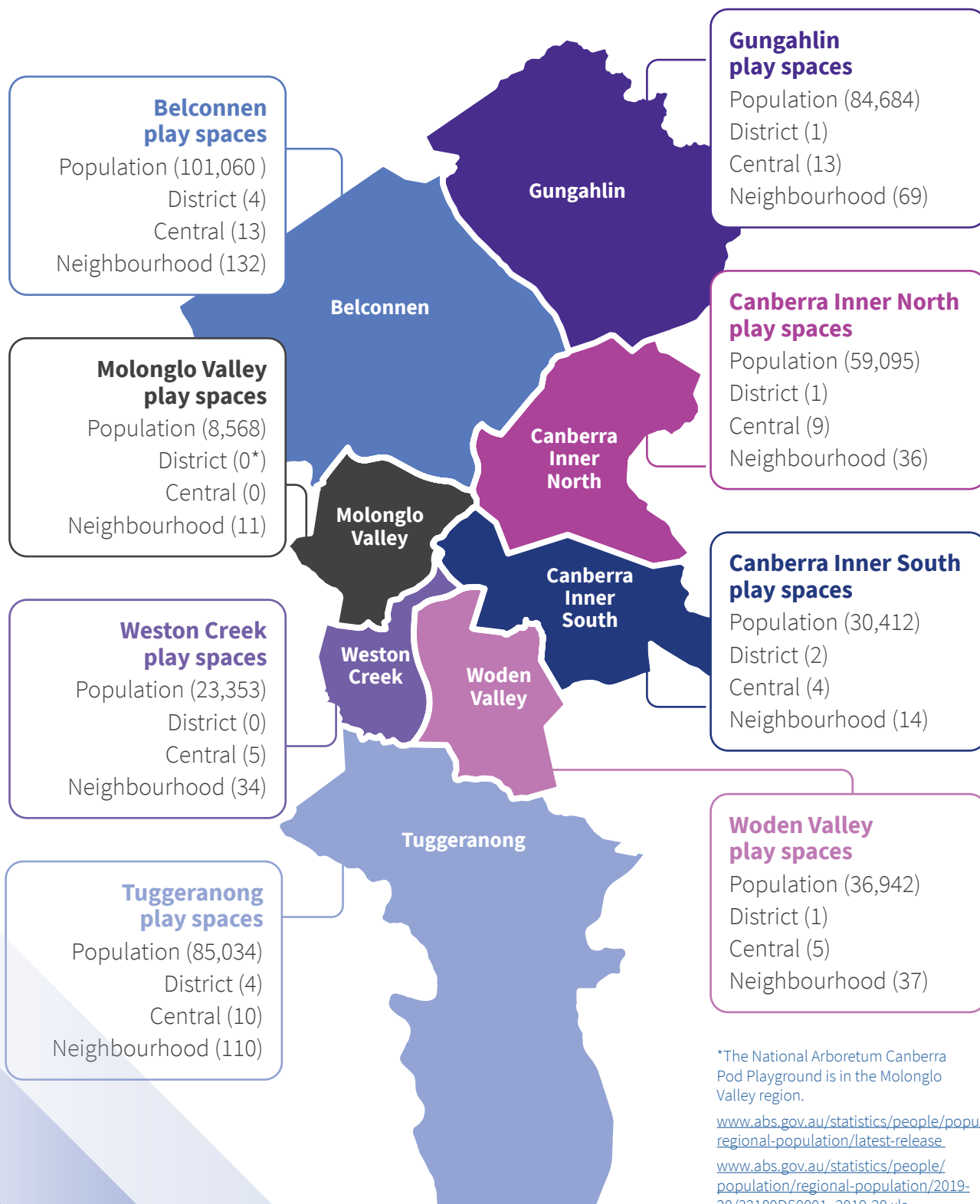
District

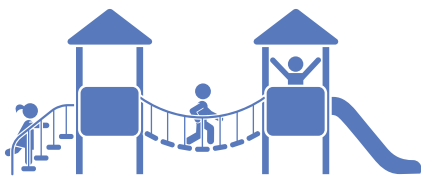


Central



Neighbourhood





District play spaces

WHAT: Play spaces that provide play and outdoor recreation facilities for a large part of Canberra, catering to a significant number of children and their families, and offer the greatest number of play experiences and amenities for a wide range of users. Facilities are designed with multiple play areas that cater to different age groups. They will generally include structured play equipment, nature play, open space, barbeques, picnic shelters, toilets, car parks and landscaped areas to encourage large group gatherings and longer visits. District play spaces are the kind of facilities that families may make a dedicated outing to on the weekend, making them a 'destination' play space.

WHERE: Under this strategy there should be at least one district play space per district, once these reach a significant population size. This recognises that community infrastructure is generally delivered over time in new parts of Canberra as districts are developed. These play spaces are often located in district parks with features such as higher-level sporting facilities, lakes, rivers or nature reserves.

WHO: District play spaces aim to meet the needs of toddlers (0-4), juniors (5-9), pre-teens (10-13), teenagers (14-17) and adults.



Kambah Adventure Playground offers multiple play experiences for all ages and abilities at a range of sites throughout the park, including nature play. There are also toilets, barbeques, seating, tables and other amenities that enable community to spend quality time in the park.



Central play spaces

WHAT: Play spaces found throughout a district that function as community hubs. Central play spaces are often located near community facilities, sports fields, parks or suburban shopping centres. Preferably they are well connected to pedestrian and cycle networks for accessibility.

These play spaces provide a diverse range of equipment and amenity with play experiences including nature play, traditional play and open space. Amenities include path access, seating and/or picnic shelters, shade and drinking fountains. Central play spaces are the kind of spaces that families may visit alongside of other activities, such as visiting their local shops, playing sport or meeting with friends after school.

WHERE: Ideally, there is one central play space per two or three suburbs. However, this depends on the availability of suitable space and community facilities, as well as geographic size and population of the suburbs.

WHO: Central play spaces aim to address the needs of toddlers (0-4), juniors (5-9) and pre-teens (10-13).



Chifley's central play space has high play value with a range of diverse and challenging activities. There is also some amenity including tables and seating, toilet and BBQ facilities. It is used by community members of all ages and abilities.



Local play spaces

WHAT: Play spaces found within close proximity to homes. These play spaces contain basic structured play equipment, nature play – or a mix of both. They also feature core amenities such as seating, and open space within a park setting. These are the kinds of play spaces that families with small children may visit multiple times a week to spend time outdoors and get active during early developmental years.

WHERE: Ideally every residential area should have a local park or play space within approximately 10-15 minutes' walk of most residences.

WHO: These play spaces cater to toddler (0-4) and junior (5-9) age groups.

The ACT currently has significantly more play spaces than the national average, at 6.7 playgrounds per 1,000 children under 15 compared with the Australian average of only 5.2.¹⁷ Most residences in Canberra are within 400 metres of a local playground and this ease of access to a play space and the surrounding green space is highly valued by the community.

However, many local play spaces in Canberra's older suburbs have low play value because they cater to limited age ranges and lack the quality of play experience available in newer, larger play spaces. This strategy will help guide a strategic approach to investment across the entire play space network to ensure Canberrans have equitable access to a mix of district, central and local playgrounds.



This local neighbourhood play space at Weathers Place, Gowrie has basic play value including two swings, a slide and fort, but few supporting amenities.

Involving Canberrans in planning for play spaces

The ACT community takes a keen interest in our play spaces. In recent years the ACT Government has undertaken a range of community engagement initiatives to understand what Canberrans value about play spaces and their priorities for the future of the play space network. Over 5,500 community members have contributed to play space studies and extensive community engagement across multiple projects as part of the Play Spaces Improvement Program.

Based on these significant community engagements we understand that the ACT community wants a play space network that provides:

4. More features that cater to the whole of lifespan
5. More inclusive play spaces
6. More diverse play experiences with higher play value
7. More encounters with nature
8. More challenge and risk
9. More amenity that facilitates social connection and longer time in play spaces
10. More creativity and unique features





Children want

- » More challenging climbing structures or courses
- » Water play
- » Equipment and landscapes that create 'play journeys'
- » More engagement with nature, including flora, fauna and nature play
- » Play spaces that cater to all ages and abilities

Young people want

- » More challenge, including bike tracks, basketball courts, ninja/obstacle courses and flying foxes
- » Hang out spaces, and spaces for quiet and for study
- » Food and drink outlets

Adults want

- » More engagement with nature and nature play
- » Challenges like bike tracks and basketball
- » Spaces to hang out, be quiet and study
- » Shade, seating and path access
- » More diverse and challenging (equipment and) experiences for older children



Our plan for improving play spaces in the ACT

“In the ACT we want our communities to live well by having the opportunity to lead lives of personal and community value – with qualities such as good health and time to enjoy the things in life that matter in an environment that promotes personal growth.”
ACT Wellbeing Framework.¹⁸

Play spaces are crucial for achieving this wellbeing goal in the ACT. They are free, accessible public spaces that can enhance health and wellbeing, strengthen the social fabric of our communities and contribute to environmental outcomes.

As our population grows and the ACT Government strives to make Canberra a more compact and sustainable city, communities will increasingly rely on play spaces to fulfil a wider range of everyday health, wellbeing and social needs.



Our objectives

We want to ensure that the ACT has a diverse, engaging and accessible mix of quality play spaces for everyone to enjoy.



This strategy sets out six objectives and eight actions to help achieve this vision for play spaces in the ACT.

These objectives are built on the aspirations for play identified by the ACT community.

Develop play spaces for better health, wellbeing and connectedness

Our play space network improves physical and mental health by bringing people outdoors and enabling them to engage in physical, cognitive and social activity. Our play spaces provide community hubs where Canberrans can spend time outdoors with friends, family and community. Our play spaces contribute to our city's high standard of living and the vibrancy of our neighbourhoods. They encourage connection with nature, provide opportunities for engaging with Canberra's local heritage and culture and enhance a sense of identity, place and custodianship.

Keep play spaces safe and welcoming

Our play spaces are safe and welcoming places for all. Our play spaces are maintained to relevant Australian standards and kept clean and inviting. Local communities are our partners in achieving this level of safety and care through effective feedback mechanisms and community programs.

Make play spaces for everyone

Our play space network is accessible and inclusive so that people of all ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds can participate in, and gain from, the many benefits of play. There is an equitable distribution of play value close to homes throughout the ACT, with all Canberrans having access to a diverse range of quality play features and amenity in their districts. Our play spaces strengthen communities by fostering cohesion and connection.

Improve the quality and diversity of play experience

We offer diverse and unique spaces and play experiences across the lifespan. Our play spaces provide the many benefits of play and outdoor activity and are built with high play value and design excellence. We prioritise quality over quantity in accordance with community feedback. With our research, industry and community partners we ensure that Canberra's play spaces are developed for better community outcomes.

Foster sustainable play spaces that are resilient to a changing climate

Our play spaces contribute to a more climate-wise, resilient and bio-diverse environment. We use more sustainable materials that are better suited to the ACT climate, and our play spaces set an example for the sustainable use and reuse of resources. Our play spaces contribute to strengthening Canberra's green canopy and living infrastructure.

Partner with community to make better play spaces

We engage and collaborate with the community in making investment, planning and design decisions about play spaces. We partner with the Ngunnawal communities in the ACT to promote and preserve the cultural and natural heritage of play space sites and we seek Ngunnawal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidance and participation in play space site selection, design and delivery, enhancement and maintenance.

Our action plan

To achieve the vision and objectives of this strategy, the ACT Government will progress eight actions to improve the ACT play space network and make Canberra an even better place to play.



ACTION 1: Deliver better quality play spaces equitably and sustainably across the play space network

Equity is a cornerstone of the ACT Government's planning for services and infrastructure delivery, and reflects the values of Canberrans. Our play space network must provide an equitable distribution of quality play experiences so that everyone in our community has access to the many benefits of play.

The ACT community supports a 'quality over quantity' approach to improving the play space network. In the Canberra Destination Play Space Study, 84% of participants said they would prefer fewer but higher quality play spaces in their suburbs. This support for quality reflects how play spaces are used across Canberra, with many more people visiting district and central play spaces than local play spaces. The citizen-led Better Suburbs Statement 2030¹⁹ concluded:

“The focus should be on quality over quantity in play spaces and... we should use the existing budget to concentrate efforts on a smaller range of better facilities.”

This recognises that simply seeking to maintain all ageing, under-used play spaces does not enhance the play value within our network or help us to meet community aspirations for quality play experiences.

New and upgraded play spaces are delivered through two mechanisms. The ACT Government can consider funding for play space projects as part of the annual Budget process, and provide capital funding to build new play spaces or improve existing ones. Construction being undertaken in delivering greenfields residential estates also provides opportunity to encourage the building of new play spaces for management by the ACT Government ongoing. Over time, this strategy will guide a shift in how investment decisions are made across the network, in line with the key focus areas.

Key focus areas

- » We will prioritise district and central play spaces for refresh and major upgrades because these have a higher play value. This will include:
 - continuing to strengthen the quality and availability of public amenities around district play spaces
 - prioritising delivery of central play spaces to older suburbs that currently do not have these.
- » We will generally direct investment in local play spaces towards safety maintenance and minor refurbishments. When play equipment reaches the end of its safe and useful life, it may be replaced with different amenities or the green space provided for alternative community uses depending on how frequently the play space is used (see Action 2 below). Equally, as Canberra continues to become a more compact city, some local play spaces may be identified for upgrade or conversion to a central play space to support the broader district.
- » We will investigate the provision of complementary facilities for play spaces as part of other upgrade programs undertaken for local shops and sportsgrounds, for example the installation of drinking water fountains at district and central play spaces.
- » We will encourage private builders who are delivering play spaces to be gifted back to the Territory to design in accordance with our Municipal Infrastructure Standards and this strategy so that new play spaces contribute to the quality and equity of the network.

ACTION 2: Make underused play spaces available to the community for more play uses

The ACT has among the highest amounts of open space per capita in Australia compared with similar jurisdictions, much of which is protected from development through Territory Plan provisions. Green open space is highly valued by the ACT community, regardless of the level of amenity or facilities provided. There are many green spaces across Canberra which are currently under-used as well as sites where play spaces may be reaching the end of their intended design life. The Better Suburbs Statement 2030 recommended that local play spaces where play equipment has reached end of life should be protected and retained as public green spaces for community use.

There are many community-led examples of open green space being used in ways which add amenity and strengthen facilities within local neighbourhoods, such as:

- » Bike trails and pump tracks
- » Microforests with play experiences
- » Nature play
- » Outdoor classrooms
- » Community gardens
- » Community or small-scale commercial activations

Such community-led initiatives often reflect the changing demographics of an area. For example, a growing cohort of teenagers may no longer have an interest in using neighbourhood play spaces, but may wish to participate in designing, constructing and using bike tracks in their local area. There is an opportunity to support these initiatives in a consistent and transparent manner which increases the use and community value of open green spaces.

The ACT's public and private schools also feature green open spaces – including play facilities – which may be able to support a wider range of community uses as Canberra continues to become more compact. There will be value in ensuring school play spaces and ovals are available to the community outside of school hours where this is suitable and appropriate in light of security and infrastructure requirements.

Through our work in this action area, we will ensure that open green spaces are protected and put to their best play uses.

Key focus areas

- » We will strengthen and promote processes for establishing and managing social infrastructure on public land.
- » We will work with stakeholders and communities to adapt underused green spaces into valued community assets which support a diversity of play uses.
- » We will take a collaborative approach to identifying where school and public recreational, open space and play facilities can be better aligned so that more facilities are available to the community.

CASE STUDY: Community-built bike tracks

The ACT has seen growing demand in our neighbourhoods for community-built bike tracks. These pump or bike skills tracks are constructed by the community in public spaces using existing topography and imported certified soil that is shaped into free-flowing circuits. The tracks usually include features such as smooth mounds, banked turns, natural elements and jumps or ramps. They are suitable for all ages and skill levels, though are most typically used by older children (6-9) and young teen (10-14) age groups.





ACTION 3: Strengthen the quality and diversity of play experiences for children

We want the ACT play space network to provide children and young people with a wide range of quality play experiences so they can share in the benefits of play and outdoor activity.

Diversity of play helps children to reach their full potential and develop a range of cognitive, physical, social and creative skills that contribute to their health and wellbeing. Providing safe levels of challenge and risk in play spaces strengthens coordination and orientation skills, allows children to learn about acceptable risk-taking and to successfully navigate their world. Time spent in nature and engaging with the natural environment also provides children with many long-term benefits including improved environmental literacy and children's level of care for the natural world, and offer physical, cognitive and social play benefits.

People of all ages benefit from engagement in play and outdoor activity. While addressing the play needs of children is a key priority, the play space network also needs to cater to older children and adults to encourage engagement in outdoor activity and create more opportunities for intergenerational play.

The ACT community understands the importance of play and wants to see higher quality, more diverse play experiences across the play space network. Community aspirations relating to the quality and diversity of play experiences include:

- » Provide more nature and water play to foster creative and unstructured play
- » Provide more modern and interesting play equipment with challenge and risk
- » More play journeys within a play space

- » More places to climb, hide and imagine
- » More play for toddlers and older children
- » More places to ride bikes, scooters
- » More opportunities for intergenerational play (basketball courts, cricket nets)

We will progressively seek to fulfil these aspirations through the ACT Government's ongoing investments across the entire play space network.

Play spaces also provide opportunities to incorporate artistic elements that provide play and social value as well as visual interest, while promoting engagement between play space users and artists. There may be particular opportunities for partnerships with young artists and those whose work with mural or street art to give expression to their creativity.

Key focus areas

- » We will continue to improve the diversity of play experiences across the network with a focus on types of play experiences which are less common within ACT play spaces – like more risk based, challenging play activities (slides, climbs etc) and nature based activities.
- » We will focus this investment towards increasing the diversity of play experiences at district and central play spaces, in line with Action 1.
- » We will examine best practice play space design in other jurisdictions and countries and seek to incorporate learnings and innovations which strengthen the quality and diversity of play experiences.

ACTION 4: Ensure play spaces are accessible and inclusive for a diversity of users

The ACT Government seeks to promote access and inclusion in all community services, facilities and infrastructure.

In the context of the ACT play space network, access refers to how people of diverse abilities can get to, enter and safely move through play spaces. Ensuring play spaces are accessible increases opportunities for participation and improves everyone's experience of play.

Inclusion refers to the provision of play spaces with facilities and amenity that enable all users to feel safe, included and able to participate in play and recreation. Inclusion ensures that our play space network caters to the needs and aspirations of our whole community.

Accessible and inclusive play spaces provide:

- » a variety of play experiences that cater to a range of ages and abilities – including supporting wheelchair access, sensory play, differing levels of risk, challenge and social encounters
- » amenity that enables people to be safe, comfortable and spend time in a play space – such as fencing, shade, seating and toilets
- » an environment with opportunities for passive and active engagement – including the availability of quiet spaces.

We want the ACT play space network to cater to the broadest range of users. While every play space in the ACT cannot provide for every community need and aspiration, across the network as a whole we can provide a quality mix of accessible and inclusive play experiences.

The Better Suburbs Statement recognises that prioritising investment in our district play spaces will help to achieve a more inclusive play space network, because these play spaces enable increased usage and enjoyment by a broader range of Canberrans. With their diverse facilities and amenities, these playgrounds can best cater for people of all ages and abilities – with particular focus on children, their parents and carers as the main users of play spaces.

Key focus areas

- » We will continue to prioritise the delivery of accessible and inclusive play spaces across the ACT play space network so that everyone feels welcome and can participate in play – including people with physical and psychosocial disabilities, neurodiverse people and people across the age spectrum.
- » We will prioritise investment in areas with low levels of inclusive play by adding inclusive play activities and places, fencing, shade, seating and other amenity.
- » We will continue to expand the number of fenced playgrounds so that these are more available across district and central play spaces.
- » We will improve accessible features such as paths and lighting in play spaces that contribute to better play value in districts in need.
- » We will continue to strengthen the quality and quantity of play experiences for older children and adults, prioritising investment in play spaces that have capacity for increased levels of all-ages play.

Case Study: Boundless Playground

Boundless is Canberra's first all abilities play space. It is a fully enclosed playground that caters to a range of abilities and features inclusive play opportunities and on site amenities for children and their families to play, socialise, explore and challenge physical limits. The play space is inclusive of all children and their carers, incorporating innovations from playgrounds in Australia and internationally to provide structured and unstructured play opportunities, including:

- » equipment that is accessed by children of all ability levels without being identifiable as 'disabled access' items;
- » natural and sensory play zones using natural features to stimulate exploratory play;
- » flexible play spaces, including open grassed areas that allow for opportunistic play;
- » opportunities for creative, physical, social and cognitive play;
- » zoned spaces that cater to a range of different age and developmental levels; and
- » a fully accessible toilet facility within the play space.



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ACTION 5: Assess play value and use this to improve delivery and maintenance of play spaces

The ACT Government is progressively transitioning to a more strategic approach to maintaining and improving play spaces across the network. This approach focuses future investment decisions for new or upgraded play spaces on areas of highest need, while prioritising maintenance activities to ensure all play spaces remain safe. This is consistent with the Play Space Priorities Framework established through the Better Suburbs Play Spaces Forum.

Currently, decisions about where to invest across the network are strongly informed by safety compliance audits. There are opportunities to improve and augment this approach by including assessments of play value to help identify where there is a need for improved play experiences.

A Play Value Index can be used to assess play value across the ACT play space network. This benchmarking tool can focus on the value of the play experience to the user – including the equipment, amenity and environment – at a suburb and district level. This will help us better distribute and improve the play experiences across the play space network. A Play Value Index directly incorporates community aspirations for play into the planning process in a manner that complements essential safety considerations. Combining safety compliance audit and Play Value Index data will identify:

1. Play spaces that require immediate repair so they are safe and fit for purpose;
2. The play value of a play space and the potential for improvement.

Examining this data at the district level will enable identification of areas with low play value and the greatest levels of community need for improved play experiences. It will help identify gaps in the quality, diversity, accessibility and inclusiveness of play experiences, and also support identification of play spaces at the end of their useful life which could be re-purposed for other play uses.

The play value of an individual play space can be improved by:

- » Increasing its scope by catering for additional age groups; providing extra play equipment or catering for all abilities;
- » Upgrading its standard through replacing play equipment or adding support infrastructure which improves the quality, condition and safety of the play space.

Key focus areas

- » We will continue to regularly inspect and maintain play spaces to ensure they are safe and fit for purpose.
- » We will develop a Play Value Index to complement safety audit information and better inform investment priorities.





ACTION 6: Ensure play spaces are sustainable and resilient to a changing climate

The ACT is recognised as the world's most sustainable city. A key reason for this is our community's shared commitment to protecting our significant levels of public green space and enhancing our living infrastructure. The ACT's play spaces are a critical part of this living infrastructure and contribute to a more resilient and biodiverse environment. The ACT community also wants more play spaces that provide a range of opportunities to engage with and learn more about nature.

The most common request by the ACT community for play space enhancements is for more shade. Shade is a critical amenity for play spaces. It provides comfort and respite from hot conditions, improves play space usability during hotter months and enables longer visits. While artificial shade structures offer an instant shade solution, planting trees in play space sites, or incorporating existing trees into new or upgraded play spaces, increases canopy cover and provides a range of other environmental benefits.

The ACT Government is working to grow the ACT's green canopy coverage to 30% by 2045. Our current and future play spaces will play an important role in meeting this target, as sites for additional planting of more climate resilient trees.

In addition to providing more shade, we will also consider our environment when designing and delivering new or upgraded play spaces. This includes planning to make play space infrastructure resilient to extreme weather events and useable in a broader range of temperatures, as well as using materials which contribute to sustainable outcomes such as recycled plastics.

Key focus areas

- » We will prioritise tree planting to provide shade around play spaces while supporting the ACT's green canopy targets. Where artificial shade structures are provided, we will prioritise larger and more popular sites where they will benefit the most users.
- » We will ensure play spaces incorporate permeable surfaces that absorb stormwater.
- » We will preserve ecologically sensitive environments within and near play spaces.
- » We will link district and community play spaces with public transport connections and active travel networks to reduce emissions.
- » We will use recycled and repurposed materials in the construction of play spaces and associated amenities wherever possible.



ACTION 7: Regularly assess and maintain all play spaces to relevant safety standards

All ACT public play spaces are designed, built and inspected to comply with relevant Australian Standards.²⁰ These standards are a set of agreed technical specifications and guidelines that support best practice in the design, manufacturing, installation, maintenance and operation of play spaces, including play equipment, surfacing and amenities.

The Australian Playground Standards represent the interests of all community members and stakeholders who use, plan, develop and maintain play spaces. They aim to reduce the likelihood and severity of injuries that occur in play spaces, rather than making them 'risk-free'. These Australian Standards have been incorporated into the ACT Government's own Municipal Infrastructure Standards (MIS) 21 Recreation Facilities.²¹

Table 2. Each type of playground safety inspection, as defined in the Safety Standard AS/NZ S 4486.1:1997

Level 1: Routine Inspection (visual)

Aimed at identifying the obvious hazards that can result from vandalism, general use, faults with equipment or weather conditions. Basic repairs, litter collection and raking of bark into heavy use areas are undertaken. Conducted by qualified Level 2 Playground Safety Inspectors.

Level 2: Operational Inspection (maintenance)

A more detailed inspection than Level 1, used to check on equipment operation and stability, especially for wear. Testing of equipment for operation, wear and tear, deterioration and other faults is conducted in addition to Level 1 inspection. Conducted by Level 2 Playground Safety Inspectors.

Level 3: Comprehensive Inspection (Safety and Compliance)

A more detailed inspection than Level 2, carried out annually by an independent, qualified specialist with extensive professional experience to inspect play spaces against the current Australian Playground Standards. Maintenance requirements are identified. To avoid any conflict of interest this inspection is carried out by a Level 3 qualified inspector independent of the playground maintenance provider, designer, manufacturer and installer.

Table 3. The frequency of safety inspections for each play space classification in the ACT

Play Space Category	Level 1 Routine inspection (visual)	Level 2 Operational inspection (Maintenance)	Level 3 Compliance inspection (Safety & Compliance)
District	Twice weekly	Monthly	Annually
Central Community	Weekly	Monthly	Annually
Local Neighbourhood	Fortnightly	Bi-Monthly	Annually

We undertake three levels of play space safety inspections, as outlined below.

To ensure that all play spaces in the ACT remain safe, fit for purpose and compliant with the Australian standards, the ACT Government conducts regular inspections. In the ACT a total of 26,000 safety inspections are conducted each year. The frequency of safety inspections for each play space classification is shown in [Table 3](#).

Maintenance of play spaces can be reactive or planned. Reactive maintenance is unplanned repair work that is carried out in response to service or community requests. These minor works are undertaken to make an area safe by repairing play equipment that is broken or vandalised.

Planned maintenance is identified through proactive site inspections and audits to assess condition and schedule works to extend their useful life and maintain the play experience on offer.

Key focus

- » We will continue to ensure safety is given the highest priority through regular inspections and remedial maintenance of play spaces across the ACT's network.
- » We will review implementation of safety inspection processes to ensure they remain compliant with Australian standards.



ACTION 8: Align play space developments and enhancements to community aspirations

The ACT community is passionate about play spaces and has shown a strong and ongoing desire to contribute to decision-making about them. As outlined in this strategy, the ACT Government has gained a solid understanding of community aspirations through a variety of consultations and engagements, including the Better Suburbs Forum and the Canberra Destination Play Space Study. We also regularly receive valuable feedback directly from community members through the online Fix My Street tool and other correspondence.

Genuine engagement requires two-way communication whereby the Government hears from Canberrans about their aspirations and priorities, at the same time as members of the community have an opportunity to understand the influences, costs, benefits, risks and opportunities involved in government decision-making about play spaces. We will continue to seek ways to strengthen community engagement in the delivery and ongoing development of the play space network, including seeking advice from the Children's and Young People Commissioner about effective ways to engage with young people.



Artwork by Ngunnawal artist Julianne Fleury in the Yarning Circle, Haig Park

The management and development of play spaces can contribute to larger strategic objectives such as mitigating the impacts of climate change and helping create a more equitable and healthier community.

Play spaces are also an important means to further our community's shared desire for reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by deepening understanding of local Indigenous cultures. Our play spaces will demonstrate respect to the Ngunnawal people and the surrounding Aboriginal nations.

We will approach engagement with the community on play spaces in a manner which recognises both the central role they play in the fabric of local communities, and the diverse ways they can contribute to broader shared priorities for our city.

Key focus areas

- » We will continue to undertake comprehensive engagement with community stakeholders to inform investment decisions as well as ensure the outcome of specific projects such as play space upgrades are aligned with community needs and expectations.
- » We will further enhance the availability and quality of information on play spaces to support informed discussion and consideration of priorities.
- » We will seek Ngunnawal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidance in play space site selection, design, delivery and maintenance.
- » We will seek to align the delivery of the play space network with the aspirations of the Canberra community for highly liveable suburbs and regions with great local amenity.



Next steps

The ACT Government seeks community feedback on this draft strategy as part of refining our approach to strategic investment in play spaces.

Members of the community and stakeholders are invited to consider the following issues to help shape the final strategy:

Do the identified key actions address the priority areas of activity to strengthen and improve Canberra's play space network?

Are there further ideas or priorities we could consider to increase the play value of spaces across the network?

Are there further ideas or priorities to improve inclusivity and accessibility for people of all abilities and ages?

Are there under-used green spaces which should be prioritised and protected for play purposes as Canberra continues to become a more compact city?

To provide feedback please visit the ACT Play Spaces Strategy YourSay page at:
www.yoursay.act.gov.au/playspacestrategy.

Consultation on the draft strategy will remain open until 14 December 2021.

Endnotes

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