

Fitzroy Adventure Playground: Summary of Community Consultation

Consultation Overview

To gain a deeper understanding of the role that Cubbies plays in the lives of people from the local community a consultation project was undertaken during the months of November 2022 and January 2023.

This project generated data regarding how the site was currently being used and solicited suggestions for how the facilities/programs could be improved. Comment was also sought from community members who did not use Cubbies to better understand any barriers which prevented people from doing so.

This consultation targeted three distinct cohorts:

- Community members (both parents and children)
- Stakeholder organisations
- Other local councils who operate / fund adventure playgrounds

Method

Community members responded to a short questionnaire that was delivered as a vox pop at the following community events:

- Kids Own Publishing Book Launch event (at the Connie Benn Centre)
- Informal pop-up in the Connie Benn Centre lobby during childcare pick up and drop off
- Informal pop-up at Atherton Gardens Reserve
- Community basketball afternoon organised by Fitzroy Lions
- Yarra Youth Services Holiday program (at the Fitzroy Youth Hub).

Where possible, longer conversations were held with community respondents during the vox pop sessions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key organisation stakeholders in person at the Connie Benn Centre. The interview guide which scaffolded these conversations was adapted from the community vox pop questionnaires.

The service / contract managers of other adventure playgrounds in metropolitan Melbourne were invited to participate in short video calls to establish a benchmark standard for the management of adventure playgrounds. These conversations focused on the following:

- Council's role in the operation of the facility
- Budget and resourcing
- Staffing
- Programming
- Organisational partnerships
- Community involvement

Engagement Participation

Council officers conducted vox pops with 98 community members, including:

- 34 adults
- 64 children

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the following community organisations:

- Great Mates – (Program Facilitator)
- Fitzroy Lions – (President)
- Fitzroy Learning Network – (CEO)
- Fitzroy Primary School – (Principal)
- Young Assets Foundation – (Education Programs Manager)
- 54 Reasons (Regional Manager)

Benchmarking conversations were held with the following:

- Melbourne Council
- Port Phillip Council
- Stonnington Council
- The Venny (community operator, Melbourne)

Report Structure

The three sections which follow are dedicated to outlining consultation findings.

The first section provides a detailed discussion of the community's feedback. This section focuses on parents' and children's preferences and priorities for Cubbies. The discussion also aims to highlight key issues which community members feel need to be addressed.

The second section presents a discussion of stakeholder perspectives which focuses on the strategic management of the facility.

The third section summarises discussions with representatives from the other councils to outline a benchmarking standard for adventure playgrounds in Melbourne. This benchmark focuses on management models, resourcing arrangements and programming that Councils employ in the running of adventure playgrounds.

Community Feedback

Community feedback was analysed using an inductive coding method which allows themes to emerge organically from the data. This approach was used to ensure that the community's perceptions of Cubbies led the analysis process, opening up possibilities for new insights which might challenge and/or extend Council's understanding of the site.

This process revealed community priorities, preferences, and aspirations, as well as areas of concern that relate to the following aspects of Cubbies:

- Social Connection
- Programming
- Facilities
- Staffing
- Availability/Access

Social Connection

Community members regard Cubbies as a locus of social connection which brings children, parents, and families together. It enables residents from different communities within the local area to meet one another and establish new friendships which strengthen a collective sense of belonging. For children, Cubbies is a place to make friends outside of their schools and family circles. For parents,

especially mothers whose extended families reside outside of Australia, Cubbies provides a space for respite where they can meet other parents whilst their children are supervised by playground staff. The relationships forged between mothers not only satisfies their social needs but assists them in other more tangible ways. For example, first time mothers are able to get advice from more experienced parents and learn about navigating the various institutional systems that are central to raising a child in Australia.

This important role that Cubbies occupies within the local community is considered a longstanding tradition that stretches all the way back to the playground's inauguration in 1974. For many of the adult respondents this history holds a deep personal significance because they attended Cubbies as children prior to becoming parents. It should be noted that this cross-generational connection has produced a strong sense of community ownership exemplified by participants referring to Cubbies as their own backyard. For this reason participants were reluctant to consider other possibilities when asked:

"If Cubbies wasn't there, can you think of a different way to use this space that would suit the needs of your family or community better?"

Most participants responded that it has always been Cubbies and that this is the only thing their community needs. Even participants who were quite critical of the current state of the program/facilities asserted that even a bad Cubbies was preferable to it not existing at all.

That said, it is important to recognise that despite this emphasis on social connection there are tensions within the local community which negatively impacts the sense of shared space, harmony and mutual support portrayed by respondents' stories. To begin with, there are some residents who do not feel safe sending their children to Cubbies because they believe other families let their children run wild. In addition, some participants talked about incidents where personal disputes between families have brought conflict onto Cubbies grounds. And lastly, there are some mothers who feel that since reopening post-covid 19 closures, Cubbies policy of not letting mothers stay onsite during programs has negatively impacted their sense of personal connection.

Programming

As part of the questionnaire both parents and children were asked how their families uses Cubbies, what activities they participate in and which of these they like best. Graphing these responses (see fig. 1) paints an interesting portrait of Cubbies which illustrates the range of different uses most valued by the community. Whilst the intended purposes of Cubbies as a space for children to engage in supervised free play on the equipment is by far the most popular use of the site, participant responses highlighted more diverse interests which should be considered when planning Cubbies programming.

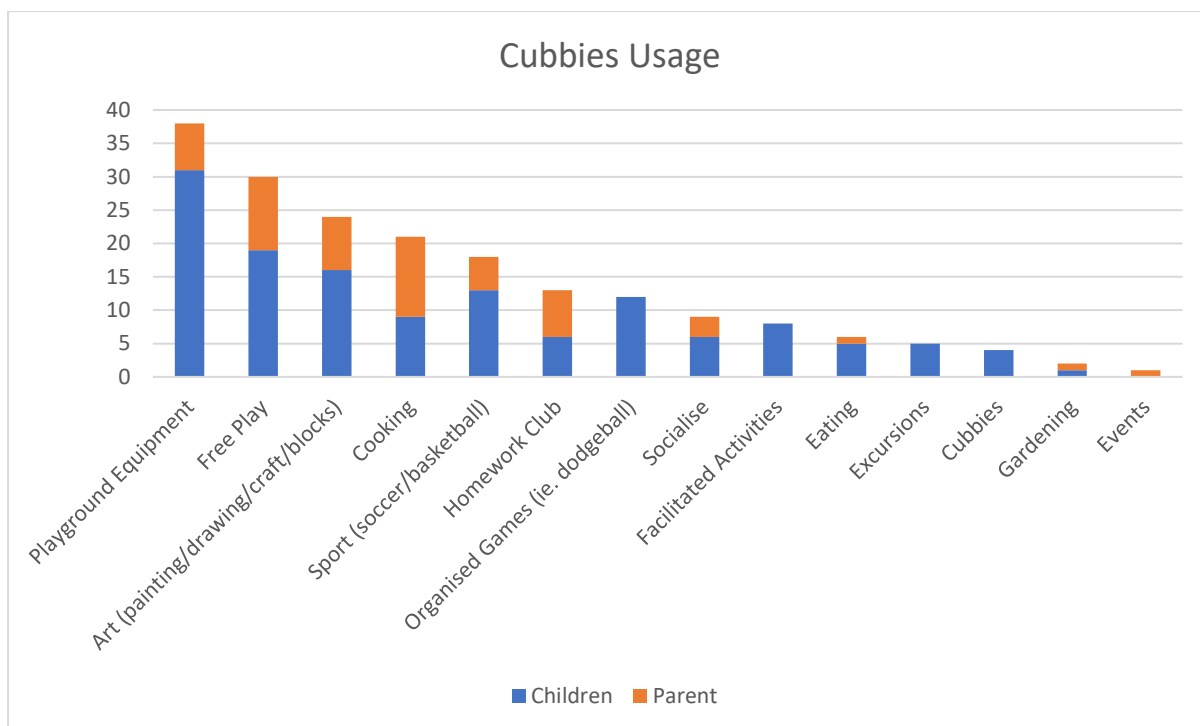


Figure 1: Cubbies Usage Graph

In terms of outdoor activities many respondents emphasised that Cubbies provides significant opportunities for participating in organised sport such as soccer and basketball. Respondents also enjoy playing less formal group games such as dodgeball, capture the flag and tiggy which are run by playground staff. Beyond these structured activities, participants also emphasised the importance of Cubbies as a space for hanging out and socialising without any specific program purpose in mind.

It is worth noting that indoor activities featured almost as prevalently as outdoor activities in participants' responses. Children stressed the importance of creative programs which encouraged them to express themselves through drawing, painting and other projects including craft activities. Cooking was another activity which proved to be popular with respondents along with homework club. That said, it is worth noting that when asked about the homework club parents placed a much higher importance on this program than their children.

The variety of contrasting interests represented in participant responses highlights a need to broaden the focus of Cubbies to be more than just a playground. Whilst the equipment is still the initial drawcard which brings people into the space, programming must provide a range of different options to cater for diverse interests by making use of all the different indoor and outdoor spaces that are available. This has implications for resourcing, especially for facilities maintenance and staffing (which will be dealt with later in this report), however, participant feedback regarding satisfaction with the current service indicates a need to consider ways to expand upon what is offered.

A significant number of respondents explained that whilst they used to go to Cubbies almost daily they are no longer attending regularly and some indicated that they have completely stopped attending. When asked why, these participants explained that they had lost interest in the activities on offer, in part, because they felt that these activities were for little kids and they had outgrown them. Based on these conversations it seems that after around 8 years of age, many attendees started to feel as though they are getting too old for Cubbies.

The issue of age appropriateness was raised with regards to the younger attendees as well, with some parents complaining that play sessions which mixed different age groups together were not safe for their children. These respondents felt that younger children were at a serious risk of injury because they often ended up precariously underfoot of older attendees. There was a suggestion that, to resolve this issue, it would be necessary for Cubbies to develop separate sessions for different age cohorts to tailor the program offering to their different needs. This approach would make it easier to keep younger children safe during play sessions whilst also making it possible to develop new activities which cater to the interests of the older children who appear to be losing interest.

Facilities

The facilities provided by Cubbies play an extremely significant role for residents of the nearby Atherton Gardens public housing estate. As numerous respondents explained, the mix of onsite facilities which include the playground, basketball half-court, soccer pitch, kitchen and indoor activity spaces compensate for the lack of available space in their apartments. According to these participants, Cubbies enables children to play in ways which would otherwise be inaccessible to them. These opportunities are not just important for the healthy development of local children but, as mentioned previously, provide parents with much needed respite from having to deal with energetic children who are constrained by the limited living space. With this in mind, Cubbies is valued as open space for the community and this sense of openness should be prioritised in any future plans for the site.

That said, there was widespread concern over the condition of these facilities. Participants felt that the main building was too run down and needed to be renovated. People were especially concerned about the toilets which they described as unclean. Outside this main building, the cubby houses were also singled out as needing urgent attention. Similarly, whilst many respondents talked at length about the value of the soccer and basketball facilities, there was widespread concern over the condition of the playing surfaces and the hoops/goals. In terms of soccer, participants mentioned that the soccer pitch was not level and that the grass was too high and unkempt.

When asked about the playground children were generally happy with Cubbies. Respondents liked the range of different equipment and were specifically complimentary of the slides which were often cited as the highlight of the entire playground. That said, there were other pieces of equipment that the children wished could be installed in the future, such as swings. Furthermore, despite the relatively high level of satisfaction with the playground, several significant safety issues were raised by respondents.

Weatherproofing of the playground was of particular concern. Many participants noted that due to the lack of available shade the equipment was exposed to the rain during the winter and the heat during summer. Consequently, the equipment spent close to half the year either too slippery or too hot to use safely. Several participants suggested this could be rectified by installing shade sails over the playground. Stability was also raised as a safety issue because some of the older equipment was quite shaky and did not hold still when children were climbing over it.. Finally, some participants raised the issue of accessibility, questioning whether the equipment was safe for the smaller children within the target age range and highlighting the lack of disability access in the playground.

One thing that became apparent when discussing the Cubbies facilities, in particular the playground, was that there were community members interested in working collaboratively with the site operators to ensure the facilities were appropriately designed and well maintained. Children were not only highly engaged but also had a wealth of relevant lived experience which could make a

fantastic contribution to the design and running of Cubbies. Considering this, it would be valuable for the future operators of Cubbies to consider how co-design and community governance might be incorporated into the running of the site.

Staffing

The current staffing of Cubbies was one of the most concerning issues for parents who felt that there are issues with the supervision of children and a lack of authentic engagement with the local community. It is interesting to note that many parents who raised these issues made a point of mentioning that Cubbies had been run well in the past and that this drop off in quality was a very recent concern.

With regards to supervision, parents felt that the staff had less control of the situation than they had in the past. Several parents mentioned that they had stopped allowing their children to attend Cubbies because they felt that play sessions had become dangerously chaotic. The lack of effective supervision was evidenced by many of the children's stories relating to injuries they had sustained whilst playing at Cubbies.. Some parents commented that, to effectively moderate potentially dangerous behaviour, adult supervisors needed to build up a trust relationship with children. These respondents attributed some of the difficulties to the high degree of staff turnover which had eroded the sense of connection that many attendees had cultivated with the workers.

Some respondents felt that the supervision ratios added to this difficult situation because they were insufficient to provide adequate coverage. However, many participants argued that even with better coverage the current staff lacked the necessary training and professional experience to deal with the situations that arose during programs. Several parents elaborated, by explaining that there were lots of children with complex needs within the community who exhibited very challenging behaviours which required specialist expertise that staff at Cubbies lacked. Parents were concerned that the staff did not work constructively with families to establish behaviour management strategies. They criticised that rather than investing this time into developing positive relationships with children the Cubbies staff tended to ask parents to collect children early which marginalised them and made families feel unwelcome.

Some parents felt that this situation was indicative of a larger issue with Cubbies which, through the aforementioned staff turnover, had lost its connection to the community as a whole. Many respondents felt that to build these relationships Cubbies needed to find ways to involve the community directly in the running of the facility. This could be done by hiring community members as staff, engaging community members as volunteers or establishing community-led governance structures.

Availability

Cubbies lack of availability to the community was the most common issue raised by both parents and children. First and foremost, respondents felt that the opening hours were insufficient to meet the demand for their services and that this has flow on effects for program capacity which negatively affect the quality of services offered. Families also felt that the administrative processes required for registering children and signing up for program sessions were not suitable because they placed unnecessary barriers in the way of program attendance.

Additionally, families from the local area who were not attending Cubbies explained that a major hurdle to accessing the program was the lack of available information. Many respondents expressed an interest in signing-up but could not find any information about how to apply to attend programs. In some cases, families were not even aware that Cubbies was open to the public and were surprised

to learn that anyone can sign up to attend programs. Respondents suggested that this misunderstanding was rooted in the lack of promotional material advertising Cubbies services and the unwelcoming appearance of the external fence which gave many respondents the impression that Cubbies was closed.

Stakeholder Feedback

The stakeholders who were interviewed for this project represented community organisations who were interested in either being involved with running Cubbies directly or working in partnership with them to deliver joint programs/projects. All the organisations which were interviewed felt that operating Cubbies as an adventure playground was the right thing for the community. Respondents agreed that the unique mix of freedom and open space combined with secure grounds and active supervision was especially appropriate considering the living situation of the public housing tenants. Stakeholders cited community feedback that they'd received about the deep sense of connection and ownership that community members felt for Cubbies as evidence that it is a highly valued community asset. With this in mind, there was a lot of concern regarding the lack of maintenance and the general state of disrepair which, as one respondent cautioned, could be interpreted by community members as a reflection of how much (or little) their community is valued.

Respondents advocated for Cubbies to consider the community more widely and cautioned against any future directions that narrowed its focus to a particular demographic or specific interest group. Some respondents felt that there was a need to make a greater effort to appeal to a broader cross-section of the community. To ensure such wider appeal they argued that it is necessary to provide diverse options, balancing between different activities which incorporate both indoor and outdoor options. There is also a need to ensure a mix of both free-form, child-directed activities, and structured, adult facilitated programs. Some felt that to get this balance right it is necessary to bring community members (especially children) into programming decisions by introducing community governance structures and formal co-design processes.

Stakeholders acknowledged that the level of investment required to better maintain the site and expand the current service offering was far greater than what current resourcing would allow. To overcome this barrier many felt that whoever operated Cubbies needed to be more proactive in brokering partnerships with other service providers and community organisations that might be able to bring additional funding. Establishing such partnerships could also benefit in other ways, such as bringing in professional staff with diverse expertise to deliver different sorts of programs and providing access to additional facilities, which could increase Cubbies delivery capacity. Furthermore, by coordinating multiple-organisation partnerships, Cubbies could address the under-utilisation of the facilities which are currently only open to public between 10 and 12 hours a week.

It should be noted that all interviewees identified collaboration as a weak key weakness of the current Cubbies operators. They observed that, outside of program hours when program staff are on site, it is extremely difficult to contact anyone. Furthermore, Cubbies have made very minimal effort to reach out to other organisations of their own accord, resulting in what respondents described as a very insular and inward-looking service. The respondents cautioned, considering the resources required to ensure that Cubbies is sustainable in the medium to long term there is an urgent need for future operators to cultivate a more open and collaborative approach to running the site which should be founded upon mutually beneficial strategic partnerships.

Benchmarking

There are currently 5 adventure playgrounds operating in metropolitan Melbourne, three of which are operated by local government with the remaining two operated by community organisations. All adventure playgrounds have been operating long term, and began as community-led ventures.

The adventure playgrounds are on either council owned land or Crown land. Each Council funds programming and maintenance at the sites to various degrees. City of Stonnington provides the greatest amount of funding (\$510k per annum) for an individual site. The City of Port Phillip provides the greatest amount of funding in total (\$650k plus maintenance) but this funding is used to operate two sites. The City of Yarra provides the least amount of funding by a significant amount (\$150k).

All councils currently provide maintenance of facilities (the additional amount of investment per site for maintenance is unknown). Councils also maintain the grounds of each adventure playground, other than at The Venny where the operator is responsible for maintaining most components of the yard.

Other recent significant investment in adventure playgrounds include City of Port Phillip committing nearly \$3.5 million dollars over 10 years in investment into their adventure playgrounds. The City of Melbourne have funded a new purpose-built green building for The Venny. The Venny has also been able to offer outreach services through accessing additional government and independent funding sources.

Each adventure playground has a combination of permanent full-time staff along with permanent part time or casual staff to ensure staff to participant ratios are met (either 1:10 or 1:15) and depending on specific programming needs.

Opening hours across the sites varies depending on school term, daylight savings and occasional extended opening hours/programming. City of Port Phillip has the highest opening hours of the adventure playgrounds of up to 55 hours when taking into account the two sites, weekend opening hours and additional programming of a breakfast club each morning at one site and evening programs at both sites. The other adventure playgrounds have relatively comparable opening hours during school terms.

All adventure playgrounds require registration of participants, other than the Port Phillip adventure playgrounds which are open to the public. The young people who register in Port Phillip have access to planned activities and some additional opening hours. The Venny seeks to have all participants registered but do allow young people to drop in and access the site without being registered (so as not to deter young people from engaging with the service).

Programming across the adventure playgrounds is similar, with a mixture of free play and structured activities such as art, craft, dance and sport. Whilst the adventure playgrounds don't encourage regular on-site visits from family members some do utilise parents as volunteers (none have a hands-on role with young people). Each adventure playground holds regular events that are open to all family members.

Stonnington differs from the other adventure playgrounds as they operate a comprehensive case management model for the young people and families that access the service. Other adventure playgrounds work with local agencies and provide referrals, and The Venny utilise their staff with social worker qualifications to occasionally provide individual counselling.

All adventure playgrounds reflected on the need to recognise and negotiate the complex needs of many of the children and families that access the adventure playgrounds, the importance of child-led play (not too many structured activities); the benefits of forming relationships with local stakeholders and the social benefit of maintaining access to these community assets for families living in high density social housing.