

MyPlace Green Square Community Survey 2020

Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

Green Square is the largest urban redevelopment project in the southern hemisphere (COS 2017a:84). It stretches across 278 hectares in the City of Sydney Local Government Area, between the Central Business District and Sydney Airport (COS 2020). It is one of the fastest growing areas in Sydney with 30,500 new residential dwellings being built and 61,000 people expected to live in the area by 2030 (COS 2020). The City of Sydney's Community Strategic Plan (COS 2017a) recognises that urban renewal sites such as Green Square provide the opportunity to make significant improvements to the social, economic and environmental performance of the City and Sydney region.

The City of Sydney has a vision for Green Square: it will be a vibrant, sustainable and connected community in which to live and work (COS 2020). In order to support resilient and inclusive local communities, the City is working to ensure that residents and workers in Green Square have the facilities, resources, capacity and confidence to adapt to changing circumstances (COS 2017).

The City of Sydney's vision for a socially sustainable city is a socially just and resilient city – a city for all (COS 2016a). One of the major pillars of this vision is that “our city is a place where people are welcomed, included and connected” (Objective 6.2, COS 2017). So that the City can identify how it might best support communities' social wellbeing associated with environmental, economic and social changes, it is essential to collect information about the experiences and desires of residents and workers. This includes their satisfaction with, and feelings of attachment and belonging to, the places they live and work, the nature of their social interactions and social cohesion, and their plans and desires regarding their local areas. To this end, this report presents the results of a community survey of residents and workers in the Green Square Urban Renewal Area in Sydney, Australia. This survey is undertaken on a recurring basis every 2-3 years, to monitor changes to the social fabric over time as the urban renewal area develops.

Research aims

The study was undertaken by researchers at UNSW Sydney, with the assistance and support of the City of Sydney Council.

The aim of this research was to develop a survey tool for on-going assessment of social interactions and social cohesion at a large-scale urban renewal site that could be used to:

- Measure the nature of social cohesion and social interaction and identify opportunities and barriers residents face in contributing to social cohesion and community development.
- Understand the wellbeing of residents and workers, including their satisfaction with and attachment to the area, their local area preferences and desires, and their plans for the future.

Background

Urban renewal in brownfield areas is an important component of broader compact city policies in place in Sydney, around Australia, and elsewhere in the world. Local and state governments have an interest in understanding how well urban renewal areas are performing, including the satisfaction of residents and workers with these areas.

Understanding the satisfaction of residents and workers with these areas includes understanding resident and worker wellbeing, desires, patterns of facility and service use, social interaction and social cohesion. Social interaction is related to levels of neighbouring and refers to the nature and quality of interactions

between people. Social cohesion is related to psychological sense of community and includes affective components of neighbourhood social life, including shared emotional connections, place attachment, membership, influence and sense of place.

Most neighbourhood studies on urban renewal areas have focused on the renewal of areas identified as disadvantaged, often in suburban areas, and less attention has been paid to urban renewal in brownfield sites, or to areas dominated by private medium and high density housing. There are few systematic post-occupancy studies of social outcomes of these areas, which make up a large component of urban growth in central and inner areas of cities. This is a significant gap in knowledge around planning for these very important growth areas.

Information collected in a tailored survey of social interaction and social cohesion in higher-density urban renewal sites, such as the survey presented in this report, can inform local land use planning, community development interventions, infrastructure investment and open space and public domain planning.

Survey development

The survey was designed as an on-going assessment tool for large-scale brownfield urban renewal sites dominated by private medium and high-density housing.

The survey focuses on the attitudes and behaviours of residents and workers. Information collected can be used to assess existing usage of services and facilities and to plan for new services and facilities provided by local council in regard to their influence on social interaction and social cohesion. The survey is also designed to provide information on the influence of other factors (beyond the provision of services and facilities by the City of Sydney) on social interaction and social cohesion, which can inform changes and improvements in other areas such as adapting design requirements, responding to social issues or concerns, and encouraging grass-roots initiatives.

The survey tool was developed from a comprehensive research process, which included a pilot survey. Full surveys were run in 2014, 2017 and 2020. The survey was amended between 2014 and 2017 in response to consultations undertaken with a wide range of City of Sydney staff, with the main change being a reduction in the number of questions asked. In 2017 the boundaries of the survey were also expanded to incorporate surrounding areas, including the Ashmore Precinct and adjacent neighbourhoods – another significant urban renewal area. The 2017 and 2020 surveys are identical except for a change to allow different areas within the Ashmore Precinct (results from this precinct are presented in a separate report) to be identified.

In total, 1,157 people completed the survey in Green Square in 2020, including 1,104 residents and 177 workers (124 people both lived and worked in Green Square). The body of this report presents the findings for residents. With a weighting for age applied, the results for residents of Green Square can be understood as broadly representative of the total resident population of Green Square (the resident population of the Green Square urban renewal area is estimated as 32,910), with a margin of error of less than 3%. The survey somewhat under-represents private renters and men and significantly underrepresents people speaking a language other than English at home (19% of survey respondents compared to 45% of residents at the last Census).

Key findings

The results of the 2020 survey demonstrate the following:

Wellbeing of residents

- The majority of residents (90%) agreed that the area was a good place to live, but fewer agreed that it was a good place to raise children (37%) or retire (32%). Two-thirds of people (62%) in households with children agreed the area is a good place to raise children and the majority of people aged over 50 (61%) think the area is a good place to retire.
- The most commonly selected reasons for moving to the area were proximity to the Sydney CBD (70%) and proximity to public transport (47%). These were also the most commonly mentioned reasons in 2017 and 2014. However, the third most common reason in 2020 was availability of an appropriately sized property (43%), while it was 'lifestyle' in 2014 and 2017.
- The things people most commonly said that they liked about living in Green Square were the proximity to the Sydney CBD (82%), convenience of the location (73%), access to public transport (58%), and parks and green spaces (47%). People also liked that there are good facilities and services like shops and schools in the area (44%).
- The things people most commonly said that they disliked about living in Green Square related to the impacts of construction on the area (49%) and its overall density (46%). Many people were also concerned about traffic (48%).
- People were less likely to feel a part of the community in their local area (26% 'strongly' or 'very strongly') than at larger geographical scales (57% 'strongly' or 'very strongly' for Sydney and Australia, 39% for inner city and surrounds), and least likely at the scale of their street (23%). The exception being the building in which they live (41%) where, in contrast to all other geographical scales there was an increasing sense of connection between 2017 and 2020. These results are lower than for the City of Sydney area as a whole (44% of City residents were satisfied with feeling part of their community in their local area in the 2018 City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey), and reflect the lower score found in the Green Square sub-sample of the 2018 City Wellbeing Survey (39% satisfied), which has decreased over time.
- The majority (72%) of the residents who completed the survey had lived in Green Square for 5 years or less and the majority (70%) planned to remain residents in the area for a number of years.
- Only one-third (32%) of residents were satisfied with the level of social interaction they have with other people who live and work in Green Square, with the remaining 68% all wanting more interaction, including 29% who currently had no interaction with other people in the area. The vast majority (86%) of new residents who have lived in the area for less than one year would like to have more involvement with others in the area.
- The most commonly mentioned group of improvements residents wanted in Green Square related to socialising opportunities, including the variety of cafes, restaurants and bars (65%) and the availability of evening activities (46%), especially amongst younger people. While remaining important, improvements to traffic management and better public transport connectivity were less important in 2020 than in 2017.
- Most Green Square residents travel to work or study using public transport (58%), and most walk (74%) and/or drive (40%) to the supermarket or shops. Many people also walk (49%) and/or drive (41%) to other social, sport or recreational activities.

The nature of social interaction and social cohesion in the area

The results of the survey demonstrate the following:

- While most people (90%) said they would help their neighbours, fewer (48%) thought their neighbours would help them, repeating the findings from the 2017 survey. These figures are slightly lower than the figures for the city as a whole (95% of people said they would help their neighbours and 50% said they could get help from their neighbours when needed in the 2018 City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey). A fifth of resident respondents (22%) borrowed things and exchanged favours with neighbours and 30% regularly stopped to talk with people in their neighbourhood.
- Most (75%) resident survey respondents meet with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least weekly. A small proportion (7%) meet with friends, relatives or work colleagues less than once per month.
- The most common ways in which people have contact with other people while in Green Square were socialising in cafés, restaurants and/or pubs (52%) and chatting on the street (49%). Socialising in their own or others' homes is becoming increasingly important (37% in 2014, 41% in 2017, and 45% in 2020).
- Incidental interaction (running into people you know) was most likely to occur at local shops (56%), in the entrance or near the building in which people live (54%), at a local café, restaurant or pub (52%), and on the local streets (50%).
- Many residents said most of their friends were of a similar age (75%) and educational background (70%) and just less than half (47%) that they were of a similar ethnic background.
- Most Green Square residents are not involved in formal civic activities. However, 24% had previously taken part in another research project in the past year, 35% had signed a petition and 17% had participated in an online discussion in the past 12 months. There was a notable increase in the proportion of people who had joined a protest or demonstration from 8% in 2014 and 2017 to 17% in 2020. This reflects an increase across the city in people joining a protest or demonstration (28% of city residents in the 2018 City Wellbeing Survey). This may be explained by the widely attended climate change protests that occurred in 2019.
- One third of residents thought that they understand the rights around urban development and planning for the local area (32%). However, a much smaller percentage felt that they had made a civic contribution by working with others to improve the area (17%) or contributing to shaping Green Square (13%). Related to this, only 22% felt that their thoughts about local issues in Green Square could be heard by people who make a difference and only 18% agreed that there was strong local leadership in the area.
- The majority of residents felt safe or unconcerned in all situations except for walking in Green Square alone after dark, in which circumstance 15% of people felt unsafe or very unsafe. This represents a notable improvement from the 2017 survey when 27% of respondents said that they felt unsafe in the area after dark.
- While the majority (51%) of people feel that most people can be trusted, a notable minority (12%) disagree. These findings are similar to 2017 but indicate a reduction in trust since 2014.

Opportunities and barriers residents face in contributing to social cohesion and community development

The results of the survey demonstrate the following:

- The services and facilities in the Green Square most commonly used by residents were local cafés and restaurants (94%), local parks (79%) and regional parks (66%). Community or neighbourhood centres were used by 10% of all respondents and 19% of unemployed respondents.
- The most common limitation people experience to socialising with others in the area is time constraints (48% often or all of the time). Other important limitations are difficulty in finding information about social activities (26% often or all of the time), not being interested (23% often or all of the time), and not being confident with strangers (17% often or all of the time).
- People would like to get information about opportunities to participate in social activities in their local area electronically such as via social media (63%) and e-mails (56%). More than half (52%) still preferred to be notified via notice boards in public places and/or in their building. Preferences differ by age and language spoken at home.

Implications for practice

The results of the survey were presented to staff across the City of Sydney Council. It is expected that the survey findings will be used to inform Council's investments and activities across a range of areas, including community development, civic engagement, communications, placemaking, land use planning, open space and public domain planning, and local business development. The implications for practice presented here are preliminary and it is expected that City staff will further analyse and apply the survey findings to inform their work going forward. The City intends for the survey to be undertaken on a recurring basis over coming years, to monitor changes to the social fabric over time as the urban renewal area develops.

Implications for community development

Green Square is an area with a large proportion of new residents (72% of survey respondents have lived in the area for 5 years or less¹), but that majority (70%) plan to remain resident in the area for a number of years. People feel more strongly connected to community at the larger scales of Sydney and Australia than at the local level of the suburb and street, but there is a desire to build more local connections, with the majority (68%) of residents wanting to have more interaction with others who live and work in the area. Private renters and younger people in particular desire more local social connection. Importantly, connection to community at the building scale is higher than at the suburb or street level, and the building scale was the only scale at which sense of community increased between 2017 and 2020. This suggests that community development at the building level is promising, but also that there is room to further develop community connections at the local suburb level. Interventions to encourage social interaction will be needed that engage residents who demonstrated a desire for greater involvement in social interactions but are constrained because of a lack of time and/or knowledge about the opportunities available to them, and a lack of confidence when dealing with strangers.

Implications for civic engagement

Around a third (32%) of residents felt they understood their rights around planning and urban development in the local area, slightly higher than in 2017 (27%). A smaller percentage (17%) felt they had made a civic

¹ Because of the timing of the latest Census in 2016, there is no feasible total population estimate to compare these figures against.

contribution by working with others to improve the area. One in five felt that their thoughts about local issues could be heard by people who make a difference (22%) and that there was strong local leadership in the area (18%), demonstrating a slight improvement from 2017 (when the figures were 20% and 15% respectively). There is potential for improved engagement amongst residents in the area as demonstrated by their willingness to be engaged in political discussions, with more residents having participated in other research (25%) and signed petitions (35%). There was also a substantial increase in the proportion of people who had joined a protest or demonstration from 8% in 2017 to 17% in 2020. The survey also revealed that relationships between language spoken at home and civic engagement are complex. People who speak a language other than English at home are less likely to be involved in communicating with a local politician or participated in the running of a strata or community title scheme. However, participation in research and council planning processes were equal or higher amongst people who speak a language other than English at home. There were also differences between people who speak a Chinese language and other language at home, with participation in online discussions, attendance at community events and sending letters to the media being higher amongst Chinese speaking residents than those speaking another language at home. In comparison, participation in a protest or demonstration was higher for those speaking English and another language at home compared to Chinese-speaking residents. These observed differences are based on small sample sizes and should therefore be treated with caution. However, they suggest that different strategies may be needed to encourage civic engagement of people who speak a language other than English at home and that different strategies may be more effective for different language groups.

Implications for communications

Aside from time constraints, difficulty in finding information about social activities (26%) was the second most common limitation given by residents to socialising with others in the area. Barriers to participate in community activities were more pronounced among people speaking languages other than English at home. However, there are some interesting differences when comparing people speaking a Chinese language at home and people speaking another language at home, notably that people speaking a Chinese language are more likely to say that they are not confident with strangers, not interested in getting involved and have difficulty accessing facilities or venues, but are less likely to say that they do not feel welcome than people speaking another language at home.

Residents would like to receive information about social activities through social media (63%), e-mails (56%), noticeboards in public places and their buildings (52%) and websites (36%). The City can provide such information through City-specific social media and through partnering with other social media platforms known to be actively used in the area, as well as collaborating with building managers. These approaches were effective in promoting the survey to residents. However, preferences for information differ greatly by age and language spoken at home. People aged over 50 were much less likely to want to receive information via social media (36%). However, e-mailed community newsletters were a more popular option amongst people over 50 (56%). People speaking a Chinese language at home are more likely to want to receive information via social media, noticeboards in public places or their building, websites, at the local community centre or library and in local newspapers and businesses and less likely to want to receive this information via word of mouth than both people speaking English and those speaking other languages at home. These results indicate that a variety of communication methods will be needed to reach all groups. However social media, e-mailed community newsletters and websites are important sources of information.

Implications for placemaking

The majority of residents (90%) agreed that the area is a good place to live. This proportion has changed little since the 2014 and 2017 surveys and did not change before and after the introduction of the Covid-19 restrictions. This suggests that a high level of satisfaction with the area. However, people felt more strongly connected to Australia, Sydney and the inner city and surrounds than to their local area, street or building. Respondents to the 2020 survey were less connected to the communities at different scales than in 2017, with the exception of the building scale. As there is a relationship between length of residence and

community attachment, this likely reflects the high proportion of residents who have lived in the area for less than six years, but nevertheless suggests that there is potential for further community development at the local scale.

Implications for land use planning

The things people most commonly said they disliked about the area related to the danger of overdevelopment and the impacts of construction on the area and its overall density. Many people were also concerned about heavy traffic (48%) and parking (31%). However, while improvements to traffic management and public transport were the most important improvements residents wanted to see in 2017 (mentioned by 49% and 50% of resident respectively), in 2020 they remained important (mentioned by 43% and 43% of residents respectively) but were no longer the most commonly mentioned improvement. This likely reflects the gradual maturity of Green Square as a neighbourhood, where most hard infrastructure is now in place. More than half (58%) of residents travel to work or study using public transport and almost half (47%) of people said they moved to the area because of the proximity to public transport, demonstrating the important role that public transport plays in the attractiveness of the area.

Notably, improvements that residents wanted to see in the area differed between age groups with younger people more likely to desire a greater variety of cafes, restaurants and bars, evening activities and public transport that connects to more parts of the city, while older people were more likely to desire landscaping in streets and parks a greater variety of retail shops and improved traffic management.

Implications for open space and public domain planning

Parks and public spaces are significant locations for social interaction in Green Square and heavily used by residents. After cafes and restaurants, local (79%) and regional (66%) parks were the most commonly used local facilities. This could influence local land use planning and infrastructure development in Green Square and in future urban renewal areas, as it indicates that parks are important in facilitating local social interaction. However, there remains an important role for more formal community facilities, especially for particular groups, demonstrated by the higher proportion of unemployed people making use of community centres (19%) compared to the population as a whole (10%).

Implications for local business

The most common places where people socialise with others in Green Square is cafes, restaurants and/or pubs (52%) and incidental interaction also commonly occurs in these places (52%). Cafes and restaurants are also the most commonly used services and facilities (94% of residents). Such businesses are therefore playing an important social role in the area, and two-thirds of residents (65%) said that they would like to see a wider variety of cafes, restaurants and bars in the area in the future. This suggests that the ideal of mixed-use development encouraging greater social interaction is supported by the findings in this case and has implications for development application planners who are making decisions about new businesses in the area.