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MyPlace Ashmore Community Survey 2023 Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

The Ashmore Precinct is one of the City of Sydney's largest urban renewal areas. The 17-hectare site is being developed over the next 10 years into a mixed-use precinct which will eventually house around 6,000 residents (CoS n.d.). A retail area with cafés and a small supermarket has been delivered, with plans for a new 7,400sqm park and a green walking and cycling link between Harry Noble Park in the north and Sydney Park in the south (CoS n.d.). The City of Sydney's Community Strategic Plan (CoS 2022) recognises that urban renewal sites such as the Ashmore Precinct provide the opportunity to make significant improvements to the social, economic and environmental performance of the City and Sydney region.

The City of Sydney's vision for a socially sustainable city is a socially just and resilient city – a city for all (CoS 2019). The City's social sustainability policy includes ten guiding principles, six of which this survey contributes to (CoS 2019:19-20):

- “Sydney’s communities’ strengths are valued and supported.”
- “Sydney is a welcoming, socially connected city that embraces diversity.”
- “Sydney is a safe and accessible city for people of all ages and abilities.”
- “Sydney’s environment supports health and wellbeing.”
- “Sydney is a democratic city where people can participate and influence local decisions.”
- “Sydney is a collaborative city where responsibility for community wellbeing is shared.”

So that the City can identify how it might best support communities' social wellbeing and resilience 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 Ashmore 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.

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 was initially designed for the Green Square renewal area, and then expanded to include the Ashmore Area because it is undergoing a similar process of urban renewal and community change. 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 the City of Sydney 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 community programs and events, 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. A full survey for the Green Square renewal area was run in 2014, and another (expanded to include the Ashmore Precinct) in 2017. 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. The survey has retained the same questions since 2017, except for a change to the wording of the gender question in the 2023 survey.

In total, 1,514 people completed the survey in the Ashmore Area in 2023, an area including the Ashmore Precinct and surrounding streets in the nearby established areas of Erskineville. The Ashmore survey, therefore, provides interesting insight into a new redevelopment area located within an established residential area. The survey respondents included 1,318 residents and 650 workers (454 people both lived and worked in the Ashmore Area). The body of this report presents the findings for residents. With a weighting for age applied, the results for residents of the Ashmore Area can be understood as broadly representative of the total resident population of the Ashmore Area (with the exception of language spoken at home) with a margin of error of less than 3%. After weighting for age,

the survey significantly under-represents people speaking a language other than English at home (5% of survey respondents compared to 22% of residents at the last Census) and somewhat under-represents single person households, private renters and residents in 4+ storey apartments.

Key findings

The results of the 2023 survey demonstrate the following:

Wellbeing of residents

- Just over three-quarters (78%) of residents agreed that the area is a good place to live. This represents a substantial drop since the 2020 survey when 97% of people agreed with this statement. A large proportion (80%) of families with children agreed that the area was a good place to raise children, but again this dropped since 2020 (when the figure was 91%). More than two-thirds (68%) of people aged over 50 felt that the area was a good place to retire, a modest decrease from 2020 (when the figure was 71%).
- The most commonly selected reasons for moving to the area were lifestyle (52%), attractive environment (48%) and proximity to the Sydney CBD (46%), followed by proximity to public transport (45%). This was the first time 'attractive environment' made it into the top three reasons for moving to the area, with proximity to public transport featuring in the top 3 in both the 2020 and 2017 surveys.
- The things people most commonly said that they liked about living in the Ashmore Area were access to public transport (56%), the café/restaurant culture (54%), community feel (54%) and convenient location (54%). The inclusion of 'community feel' in the top four reasons is new. Otherwise, these responses were similar to 2020 (in order: convenient location, proximity to CBD, access to public transport, café/restaurant culture) and 2017 (in order: proximity to CBD, convenience of the location, access to public transport, café/restaurant culture).
- The things people most commonly said that they disliked about living in the Ashmore Area related to the danger of overdevelopment, with concerns over insufficient parking (38%) and high levels of traffic (35%), the impacts of construction (37%) and the density of development (30%). A quarter (25%) of people were also concerned about noise. These concerns are similar to both the 2017 and 2020 surveys, when people identified the impacts of construction and density of development as well as heavy traffic and insufficient parking as the things they most disliked.
- Around half of Ashmore Area residents felt part of the community at different geographical scales from the building to the country, reflecting the findings of the 2020 survey. Feelings of attachment were slightly greater at the local area (57%), suburb (59%) and building (58%) levels. This is above the average for the City of Sydney as a whole (44% of people were satisfied with feeling part of their community in their local area in the 2018 City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey).
- Three-fifths (61%) of residents in the newer Ashmore Precinct area who completed the survey have lived there for 5 years or less (a reduction from 70% in 2020). In the more established area surrounding the precinct more than half of residents (52%) had also lived there for 5 years or

less. Almost three-quarters (74%) of residents in the Ashmore Area planned to remain resident in the area for a number of years.

- One-third (33%) of residents were satisfied with the level of social interaction they have with other people who live and work in the Ashmore Area (compared to 42% in 2020), with the remaining 66% all wanting more interaction, including 28% who currently had no interaction with other people in the area (compared to 17% in 2020). More than half (53%) of the respondents who had lived in the area for less than one year said that they had no interaction with others in the area and would like some. A desire for more social interaction was consistent across tenures, with social and private renters more likely to say they have some but would like more involvement, and owner occupiers more likely to say they have none but would like some involvement.
- The most common improvements residents wanted in the Ashmore Area related to socialising opportunities, including the variety of cafés, restaurants and bars (58%) and the availability of evening activities (36%). Improvements to landscaping in streets and parks (38%) was also frequently mentioned. While in 2020 the variety of cafés, restaurants and bars was also a commonly chosen improvement, in 2020 there was a notable difference in preference between age groups for this item, with younger people more likely to select it. In the 2023 survey, the majority of people across all age groups selected this item, with 59% of people aged 18-29 and 30-49 as well as 56% of people aged over 50 choosing this as an important improvement.
- The proportion of Ashmore Area residents who travel to work or study by public transport has reduced since the 2020 survey (from 51% in 2020 to 46% in 2023). One-third (33%) travel to work or study in a private car, just over one-quarter (26%) walk and 1 in 5 (19%) cycle. Most walk (62%) and/or drive (40%) to the supermarket or shops. Many people also walk (50%) to other social, sport or recreational activities.

The nature of social interaction and social cohesion in the area

- Most people (81%) said they would help their neighbours. Notably, this had reduced from 97% in 2020, and is also lower than the rate across the City as a whole in 2018, which was 95% (City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey 2018). Fewer people (67%) felt that their neighbours would help them, reflecting the findings of the 2017 and 2020 surveys. This is slightly higher than the figures for the city as a whole in 2018, where 50% said they could get help from their neighbours when needed (City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey 2018). Half of residents (50%) borrowed things and exchanged favours with neighbours and 61% regularly stopped to talk with people in their neighbourhood (both figures are slightly higher than in 2020).
- Most (70%) resident survey respondents meet with friends, relatives or work colleagues at least weekly. A small proportion (4%) 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 the Ashmore Area were chatting to people on the street (59%) and socialising in cafés, restaurants and/or pubs (52%).
- Incidental interaction (running into people you know) was most likely to occur in a café, restaurant or pub (69%), on local streets (67%) or at local shops (63%) and parks (63%) or in the entrance or near the building they live in (59%).

- Many residents said most of that their friends were of a similar age (64%) and educational background (56%) and just over half (51%) said they were of a similar ethnic background.
- Many Ashmore Area residents were involved in civic activities in the past 12 months such as taking part in other research (42%), signing a petition (35%), participating in an online discussion (34%), attending a community meeting or consultation event (32%), contacting a local politician (25%), joining a protest or demonstration (24%), participating in a council planning process (22%), participating in running a strata scheme (19%) and contacting a media outlet (14%).
- Almost half (46%) of residents thought that they understand the rights around urban development and planning for the local area (an increase from 34% in 2020). Related to this, 39% felt that their thoughts about local issues in Ashmore Area could be heard by people who make a difference and 43% agreed that there was strong local leadership in the area. More than a third felt that they had made a civic contribution by working with others to improve the area (35%, compared to 20% in 2020) or contributing to shaping the area (33%, compared to 20% in 2020).
- The majority of residents felt safe or unconcerned in all situations except for walking in the Ashmore Area alone after dark, in which circumstance 16% of people felt unsafe or very unsafe, reflecting the findings of the 2017 and 2020 surveys. Women were more likely (21%) than men (13%) to feel unsafe walking in the area alone after dark. In addition, 1 in 10 people (11%) felt unsafe at home alone after dark, a similar proportion to earlier surveys (8% in 2020 and 10% in 2017).
- The majority (70%) of residents agree that most people can be trusted, reflecting the findings in the 2020 (70%) and 2017 (68%) surveys.

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

- The services and facilities in the Ashmore Area most commonly used by residents were local cafés and restaurants (84%) and local parks (78%). Neighbourhood and community centres were used by 27% of respondents, much higher than in 2020 (when the figure was 13%). Childcare centres were also used by 31% of respondents (when 34% of respondents lived with children), compared to only 9% in 2020 (when 23% of respondents lived with children).
- The most common limitation people experience to socialising with others in the area is time constraints (40% often or all of the time). Other important limitations were difficulty in finding information about social activities (26% often or all of the time) and not being confident with strangers (21% 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 (68%), e-mails (50%), and websites (34%) and well as through noticeboards (39%). Preferences differ by age, but social media was the preferred method of communication across all age groups.

Implications for practice

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

Most Ashmore Area residents who completed the survey had lived in the area for 5 years or less (57% overall, 60% in the Ashmore Precinct and 52% in the surrounding areas) and 74% plan to remain resident in the area for a number of years. The majority (66%) of residents want more social interactions with people who live and work in the area, including 28% who currently have no interactions with people in the area (a substantial increase from 17% in 2020). People who have lived in the area for less than one year were especially likely to have no local social interactions and want some (53%). Interventions to encourage social interaction, especially among new residents, will be beneficial. While in previous surveys private renters and people aged under 29 were much more likely to be seeking local social interaction, in the 2023 survey residents across tenures desired more local social interaction, and while people aged under 29 were more likely to say that they have no social interaction and would like some (43%, in addition to a further 30% who have some but would like more), at least half of people in other age groups wanted more social interaction with people in the local area. This suggests programs to facilitate local social interaction with broad appeal may be needed. Notably, desire for social interaction was even higher in neighbouring Green Square, where three-quarters of residents (74%) wanted more social interaction with people in the area. Council may, therefore, consider interventions to encourage social interaction across the broader area.

Implications for civic engagement

Levels of civic engagement in the Ashmore Area are high and have increased substantially since the 2020 survey. Almost half (46%) of residents thought that they understand the rights around urban development and planning for the local area (an increase from 34% in 2020). More than a third felt that they had made a civic contribution by working with others to improve the area (35%, compared to 20% in 2020) or contributing to shaping the area (33%, compared to 20% in 2020). Many Ashmore Area residents had been involved in civic activities over the past 12 months including through involvement in council planning processes (22%) and attending community meetings or consultations (32%). There may be potential to leverage from the high rates of civic engagement in the area to help meet residents' desire for more local social interactions.

Implications for communications

Aside from time constraints (40%), difficulty in finding information about social activities was also a limitation given by some residents (26%) to socialising with others in the area, as was not feeling confident with strangers (21%). People who spoke a language other than English at home were more

likely to be limited in participating in social activities by time constraints (48%), not feeling welcome (21%) and not being confident with strangers (29%) than residents who speak English at home. However, there was little difference between people who speak English at home and those who speak another language with regard to finding information about social activities, difficulties accessing facilities or venues and language difficulties or barriers.

Residents of all ages would prefer to receive information about social activities through social media (68% overall, 62% for those under 29, 71% for 30–49-year-olds and 64% for those over 50 years). Other popular means of finding information was through e-mailed community newsletters, noticeboards and websites. 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 (11.4% of survey respondents accessed the survey through social media channels).

Implications for placemaking

Just over three-quarters (78%) of residents agreed that the area is a good place to live. This figure has declined substantially since the 2020 survey (97%) and 2017 survey (94%). However, while satisfaction with the area appears to have declined, a higher proportion of residents reported feeling attached to the local area (57%), suburb (59%) and building (58%) level than in the previous survey. This is also above the average for the City of Sydney as a whole (44% of people were satisfied with feeling part of their community in their local area in the 2018 City of Sydney Wellbeing Survey).

There is a complicated relationship between attachment to the building in which one lives, building type and length of residence. The highest level of attachment at the building scale was amongst apartment residents who had lived in the area for more than 6 years (66%), but more than half (54%) of apartment residents who had lived in the area for less than 1 year also felt attached to their building. Around one-third of apartment residents (34% in buildings of up to 3 storeys and 28% in buildings of more than 4 storeys) interacted with people in the common areas of their buildings. This suggests potential for further community development at the apartment building scale to facilitate more local social interactions.

Implications for land use planning and transport planning and programs

As in 2020, the things people most commonly said they disliked about the area related to the danger of overdevelopment, however they were mentioned less often in 2023 than in 2020, for example, the impacts of construction (37% in 2023, 55% in 2020) on the area and its overall density (30% in 2023, 47% in 2020). Many people were also concerned about heavy traffic, but again fewer than in 2020 (35% in 2023, 53% in 2020) and insufficient parking (38% in 2023, 44% in 2020).

While improvements to public transport and traffic management were the most important improvements noted by residents in 2017 (mentioned by 44% and 42% of resident respectively), in 2020 they remained important (mentioned by 42% and 35% of residents respectively) but were no longer the most mentioned improvements (which were a greater variety of cafés restaurants and bars and more evening activities). That trend continued in 2023, with improved public transport (28%) and traffic management (32%) remaining important, but not as frequently mentioned as other improvements, including a greater variety of cafés, restaurants and bars (58%), landscaping in streets and parks (38%) and evening activities (36%).

The proportion of Ashmore Area residents who travel to work or study by public transport has reduced since the 2020 survey (from 51% in 2020 to 46% in 2023), and one-third (33%) of people travel to work by car. This likely reflects a broader trend towards car usage since the Covid-19 pandemic and suggests the City might consider programs to encourage lower reliance on private cars for transport. Despite a reduced reliance on public transport for trips to work, more than half (56%) of people said that access to public transport was one of the things they like most about living in the area, demonstrating the important role that public transport plays in the attractiveness of the area. Rates of active transport are also high in the area, with just over one-quarter (26%) walking and 1 in 5 (19%) cycling to their place of work or study. Rates of cycling to work/study have increased since 2020 (15%) and 2017 (11%). Many people also walk (62%) to the supermarket or shops (62%) and to other social, sport or recreational activities (50%). These changes in mode of transport likely reflect a broader shift away from public transport use trend since the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase in cycling may also be related to substantial investment in new cycleways in the area since 2020 as well as investment in local courses, guided rides, try-a-bike events and e-bike lease trials.

Implications for open space, public domain and community facility planning

Parks and public spaces are significant locations for social interaction in the Ashmore Area and heavily used by residents. After cafés and restaurants (84%), local parks (78%) were the most commonly used facilities and 63% of people said that they saw people they know in parks. This could influence local land use planning and infrastructure development in the Ashmore Area and in future urban renewal areas, as it indicates that parks are important in facilitating local social interaction. There is also an important role for more formal community facilities. Notably, use of neighbourhood and community centres doubled to 27% in 2023 (compared to 13% in 2020). It is possible that this reflects an increased use of community facilities for hosting parties and other social activities. It is also possible that people have become more aware of the facilities available to them in their local area as a result of spending more time in the local area during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Notably, use of neighbourhood and community centres also increased in neighbouring Green Square over the same period.

Use of childcare increased to 31% in 2023 (34% of respondents lived in families with children), compared to only 9% in 2020 (when 23% of respondents had children). This means that most respondents with children have a child of pre-school age who they are sending to childcare locally. Between 2019/20 and 2021/22 an additional 83 childcare places (service approved by the Department of Education) were provided in the Ashmore Area. The high proportion of people sending children to childcare locally may also reflect an increase in people working from home. There are forward-planning implications of this with regard to available school spaces in the local area. The Alexandria Park Community School has recently been expanded to cater for, at full capacity, 1000 primary students and 1200 secondary students with new facilities. This may have influenced the decisions of people with children to live in the area. Notably, use of local childcare centres also increased in neighbouring Green Square over the same period.

Implications for local business

Many people socialise with others in the Ashmore Area in cafés, restaurants and/or pubs (52% had done so in the past month), and incidental interaction is also common in these places (69%) and at local shops (63%). Local cafés and restaurants are also commonly used services and facilities (84% had visited one in the past 6 months). Such businesses are, therefore, playing an important social role in the area, and more than half (58%) of residents said that they would like to see a wider variety of

cafés, restaurants and bars in the area in the future. Residents in neighbouring Green Square also wanted more cafés, restaurants and/or pubs in the area. This suggests that the ideal of mixed-use development encouraging greater social interaction is supported by the findings in this case and this has implications for development application planners who are making decisions about new businesses in the area. The City of Sydney may also consider this in targeting economic development strategies.