

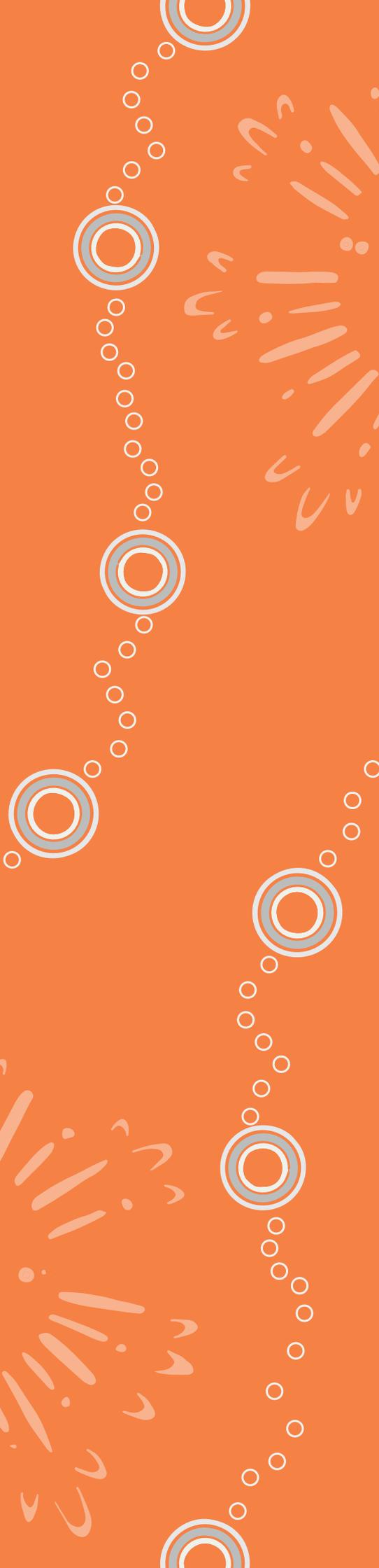
# Public spaces during COVID-19: Adapting to the new normal



NSW Department of Planning,  
Industry and Environment

November 2021





## Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to Elders past, present and future.

We recognise Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to place and their rich contribution to society.

Aboriginal people take a holistic view of land, water and culture and see them as one, not in isolation to each other. Public spaces during COVID-19: Adapting to the new normal is based on the premise upheld by Aboriginal people that if we care for Country, it will care for us.

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Image on front cover: Streets as Shared Spaces, Morph It, Morpeth.  
Credit: Maitland City Council

Artwork (left) by Nikita Ridgeway

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# Contents

Executive summary  
PAGE 2

Overview  
PAGE 4

What we did  
PAGE 8

Who we heard from  
PAGE 10

What we heard  
PAGE 11

What's next for our  
public spaces  
PAGE 28



*Image: Oxford Street, Paddington.  
Credit: Destination NSW*



# Executive summary

Citizen-led engagement is at the heart of our approach to public space in NSW. Community feedback shapes the way we think about, plan for and create great public spaces.

## What we did

In 2020 and 2021, we conducted the *Public spaces during COVID-19* survey to understand **how** people were using public space, **what types** of public space the community **valued most**, and how the community **felt** about public spaces.

In 2020, we presented the findings from that year's survey together with responses to a social pinpoint map in the [Public Spaces - Streets as Shared Spaces Engagement Report](#), identifying an evidence base to understand use of public space early in the COVID-19 pandemic. In this second volume, we have added to the findings from last year's survey and bring these together with the 2021 survey to present feedback from close to 4,000 people in the community across NSW. This second report outlines the changes over time up until March 2021, in the context of easing COVID-19 restrictions at that point in time.

## What we heard

Our research found that people in NSW were using and appreciating public space more than ever during the pandemic, and 12 months on, this trend appears to be here to stay. Use of public spaces increased significantly during COVID-19 and remained high, even as restrictions eased; as they had at the time we conducted the survey. In 2020 and 2021, approximately 45% of people were spending more time in public spaces compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Use and appreciation rose across most types of public spaces in 2021, compared with 2020.

Seven key insights emerged from our research:

1. Even as restrictions eased, people's love for public spaces remained strong.
2. People want high-quality public space that's easy to access.
3. People were walking and cycling more than before COVID-19.
4. More people felt less safe in public spaces, especially because of crowding.
5. More people discovered online services provided by public facilities during COVID-19.
6. People were socialising more in public spaces into the second year of the pandemic.
7. People's use of local high streets has increased since the start of COVID-19.

## What's next for our public spaces

With community use of public space remaining high into the second year of the pandemic, this research highlights the importance of maintaining our focus on walkable access to quality public spaces.

The NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (the department) is using feedback the community gave during our research to support its work in guiding the creation and evaluation of great public spaces.

As we release this report, NSW is facing another outbreak of COVID-19. We anticipate that people's use and appreciation will remain high during this time, and possibly increase, as we continue to live with the pandemic.



*Image: The Festival of Place - Summer Fund, Town Square Market, Port Macquarie. Credit: Marketplace Events*

# Overview

## Why public spaces matter

Great public spaces are vital to communities. They provide places for social interaction, can improve health and wellbeing, and offer communities a sense of identity and character.

Public places that are walkable, green, safe, welcoming, inclusive and accessible improve our quality of life and wellbeing. They create healthier, happier and more resilient communities. Public spaces that delight and support communities are of increasing importance as our cities and towns grow.

Public spaces become places when they are meaningful and significant to people. The community feels attached through positive experiences, whether experiencing an incredible landscape, or through opportunities for social interaction. Place is not just made up of physical elements; it is intrinsically linked to culture, meaning, memory, experience, and deep engagement of community.

Quality public spaces are a priority for the NSW Government. The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment is charged with the Premier's Priorities:

- Greener Public Spaces: to increase the proportion of homes in urban areas within 10 minutes' walk of quality green, open and public space by 10% by 2023
- Greening our City: to increase the tree canopy and green cover across Greater Sydney by planting one million trees by 2022.

## What is public space?

Public spaces are all places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive.<sup>1</sup> They include:



### PUBLIC OPEN SPACES

both active and passive (including parks, gardens, playgrounds, public beaches, riverbanks and waterfronts, outdoor playing fields and courts, and publicly accessible bushland)



### PUBLIC FACILITIES

public libraries, museums, galleries, civic/community centres, showgrounds and indoor public sports facilities



### STREETS

streets, avenues and boulevards; squares and plazas; pavements; passages and lanes, and bicycle paths.

## Place, Design and Public Spaces

The Place, Design and Public Spaces group within the department improves people's lives by planning and designing places and public spaces that make NSW a great place to live and work.

We help provide homes, services and infrastructure, build great communities, create jobs and protect the environment.

We create great places and experiences for all.

We plan for a changing and thriving NSW.

We inspire strong and resilient communities and regions and ensure the responsible and sustainable use of NSW's resources.

Place, Design and Public Spaces also includes the Government Architect NSW, Greater Sydney Parklands, Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, Place Management NSW, Sydney Olympic Park Authority, and Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation.

## How we're engaging the community

We are committed to using a citizen-led approach to deliver the Premier's Priorities.

One way we are doing this is through *The Festival of Place*, a 365-day network of virtual and on-the-ground micro-festival moments and curated partnerships across NSW that invite people to reconnect with and re-discover our public spaces.

Through this survey, we have engaged with the community to understand how people have been using public space, what types of public space the community values and how the community feels about public spaces, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

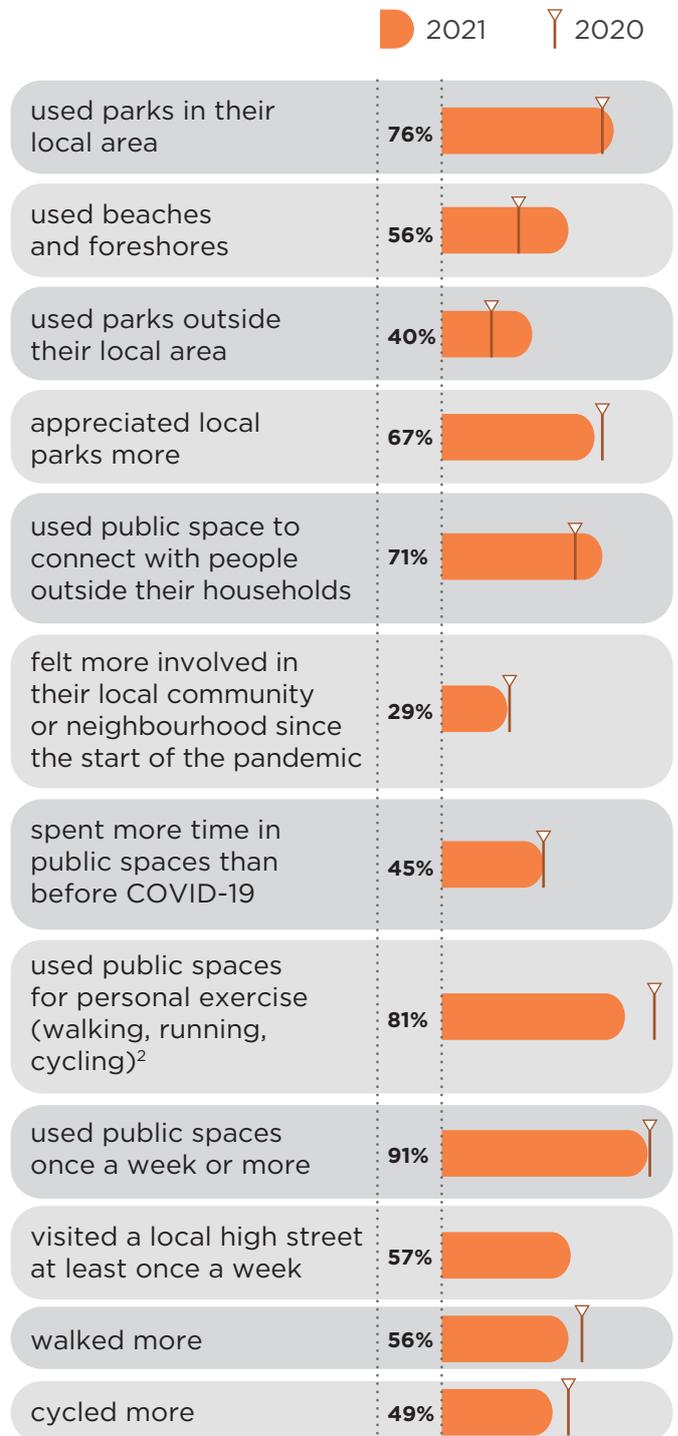
We conducted the survey as an engagement initiative alongside the launch of two grant programs, *Streets as Shared Spaces* and *Your High Street*. We heard from close to 4,000 members of the community across the two surveys.

In 2020, from a range of engagement tools including the community survey, we found that community use and appreciation of public space in NSW had grown dramatically in the context of COVID-19, and that communities, culture and local economies thrive when they have great public spaces. Our full findings are set out in the [Public Spaces - Streets as Shared Spaces Engagement Report](#).

In 2021, we ran the same survey to find out what had changed. This report sets out the comparative findings of both surveys. Into the second year of the pandemic, our research found that even in a time when restrictions had eased, **people in NSW were using and appreciating public space more than ever, suggesting that the trend appears to be here to stay.**

The department is using feedback the community gave during our research to support its work in guiding the creation and evaluation of great public spaces.

## Percentage of people surveyed who...



<sup>1</sup> Source: UN Habitat, Global Public Space Toolkit, p 26.

Please note this definition refers to public space as a concept, not a land-use term or development type.

<sup>2</sup> Combined result from 2 responses: What are the main reasons you use public roads (personal exercise, support for children or others to exercise)?

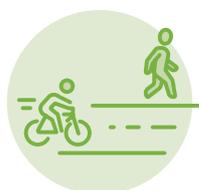
Seven key insights emerged from our research:



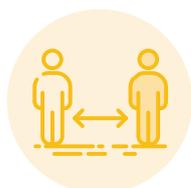
**1** Even as restrictions eased, people's love for public spaces remained strong.



**2** People want high-quality public space that's easy to access.



**3** People were walking and cycling more than before COVID-19.



**4** More people felt less safe in public spaces, especially because of crowding.



**5** More people discovered online services provided by public facilities during COVID-19.



**6** People were socialising more in public spaces into the second year of the pandemic.



**7** People's use of local high streets has increased since the start of COVID-19.



*Image: Summer Fund, Unity Place Activation, Burwood. Credit: Mike Belkin Sorted Media*

# What we did

The department developed the *Public spaces during COVID-19 survey in 2020*, based on a Danish study from urban-design organisation Gehl, *Public Space & Public Life during COVID-19*. This was adapted for NSW with Gehl's permission.

The purpose of the research was to understand community use and perceptions of public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NSW's COVID-19 cases first peaked in March 2020. Restrictions on non-essential activities<sup>3</sup> were announced in that month; businesses were temporarily closed, and physical distancing measures were put in place.

We released the survey with the launch of the Streets as Shared Spaces program in May 2020. The survey included 30 questions about people's behaviour towards, attitudes about and perspectives on public space during COVID-19.

The questions covered topics including:

- use of public spaces
- main reasons for using public space
- public spaces that were useful
- frequency and length of visits to public space
- changes to frequency and mode of transportation
- feelings of safety
- places it was challenging to physically distance
- connections, community and relationships
- benefits of public space
- opportunities to improve public space.

In 2021, we ran the survey again, this time with the launch of the Your High Street program in November 2020. The second survey took place when there were fewer reported COVID-19 cases in both NSW and Australia, public health restrictions were easing and there was a sense that life was returning to normal. The survey closed in March 2021, before a further wave of cases started in NSW in late May 2021. By this stage, the economic implications of the pandemic were becoming clearer, and flexible working and working from home remained a feature of workplaces.

In the second survey, we included questions about high streets, and demographic information relating to people with disability or caring for a person with disability.

Participation in the 2020 and 2021 surveys was promoted through Facebook advertising and the department's LinkedIn and Twitter accounts, as well as organic posts.

Across the two surveys, we heard from close to 4,000 members of the community:

- **2020 survey** (8 May to 20 August 2020): 2,234 responses, of which 1,815 were fully completed
- **2021 survey** (12 November 2020 to 15 March 2021): 3,130 responses, of which 2,149 were fully completed

Conducting the survey twice has allowed us to identify trends in community use and perceptions of public spaces, test the changes over time, and explore the detail and experiences of public space for different demographic groups in NSW. We analysed the survey data to look at any:

- increase/decrease in community use of public space
- shifts in community perceptions of public space
- increase/decrease in active transport (walking and cycling)
- increase/decrease in use of local centres
- differences in the experiences and perceptions of public space across different groups and locations.

Our analysis also considered:

- **geographic location** – postcode by district (Eastern City District, South District, Central City District, North District, Western City District) and regional NSW (all regional areas)<sup>4</sup>
- **gender** – male, female, non-binary
- **age** – under 35, 35-64, 65+
- **car ownership** – yes or no
- **type of work** – essential worker or other
- **household type** – family with children living at home, family without children living at home.

Qualitative feedback was considered in the context of our research into the elements that contribute to great public space:<sup>5</sup>

- Am I able to get there?
- Am I able to play and participate?
- Am I able to stay?
- Am I able to connect?



## Research context

The research and policy context for the survey includes:

- *Draft NSW Public Spaces Charter* (October 2020) – sets out 10 principles for public space in NSW that can be used to ensure everyone has access to high-quality public space that allows them to enjoy and participate in public life.
- Great Public Spaces Toolkit, including:
  - *Great Public Spaces Guide: Ideas and opportunities* – defines public spaces and identifies ideas and opportunities to create great public spaces, considering four dimensions: location, locale, purpose and place attachment.
  - *Evaluation Tool for Public Space and Public Life* – helps to evaluate what works well and what can be improved in public spaces.
- *Public Spaces – Streets as Shared Spaces Engagement Report – Volume 1* (November 2020) – documents the outcomes of community and stakeholder engagement on streets as shared spaces, including the Public spaces during COVID-19 survey.
- *City-shaping impacts of COVID-19: Towards a resilient Greater Sydney paper* (September 2020) – includes key findings from the Public spaces during COVID-19 survey as part of a discussion of greater use of public, open and shared spaces.

<sup>3</sup> Essential activities were described by the National Cabinet as including essential workplaces, where one cannot work from home; health care settings; pharmacies; food shopping; schools and universities, where one cannot study from home; and public transport and airports. The easing of COVID-19 related restrictions was first announced in May 2020, with restrictions on outdoor gatherings, visits to other households, and use of cafés and restaurants gradually relaxed through May, June and July 2020. Public health restrictions were re-introduced in June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to the Greater Sydney Commission’s definitions of the districts at [www.greater.sydney/metropolis-of-three-cities/vision-of-metropolis-of-three-cities](http://www.greater.sydney/metropolis-of-three-cities/vision-of-metropolis-of-three-cities)

<sup>5</sup> NSW Government, Great Public Spaces Guide – Ideas and Opportunities

# Who we heard from



## In 2020 and 2021...

The majority of survey participants were aged **35 to 54 years** (57% in 2020 and 63% in 2021)

At least **two-thirds of participants were female** (66% in 2020 and 70% in 2021)

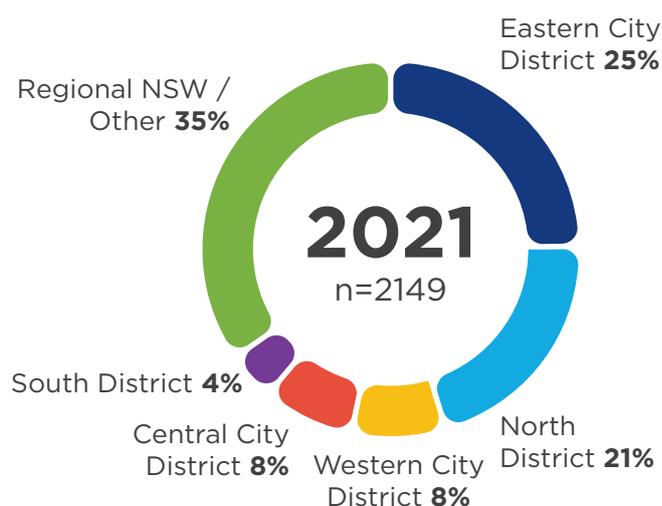
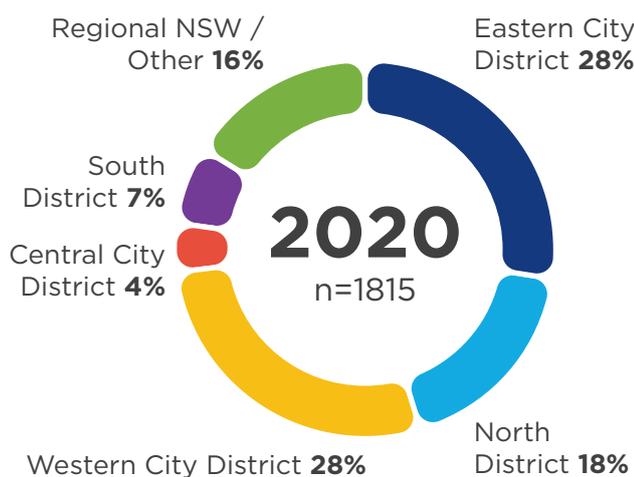
At least **four in 10 had children under 18 years living at home** (44% in 2020 and 40% in 2021)

Just over **one in 10 was a person with disability** or was caring for a person with disability (12% in 2021 only)

Approximately **nine in 10 lived in a household with a car** (89% in 2020 and 94% in 2021)

Just under one-third of survey participants were **essential workers** (31% in 2020 and 30% in 2021)

Participants were located **across Greater Sydney's five districts and regional NSW.**



# What we heard

## #1



### Even as restrictions eased, people's love for public spaces remained strong

Use of public spaces increased significantly during COVID-19 and remained high, even as restrictions eased.

This was true across most public spaces, with people in 2021 using almost all types of public spaces more than in 2020. While local neighbourhood streets saw a slight decline from the peak in 2020, use of local main or high streets saw an increase rising from 36% in 2020 to 41% in 2021. This continuing use may have been a result of many people continuing to work from home at least some of the time, and being active in their local areas into the second year of the pandemic.

While use of main and high streets was increasing, the extent to which these streets were considered especially useful or appreciated decreased, suggesting that investment in these spaces to meet local needs may be warranted.

### Local parks, local neighbourhood streets and walking tracks have been the most used public spaces during the pandemic



Exercise and being outside were the main reasons for using public space during COVID-19 in both surveys.

People aged under 35 placed less focus on local main or high streets, parks outside their area and off-leash dog areas and were more likely to focus on high streets, including for work or activities/events, and plazas. They were also less likely to use public spaces for personal exercise and more likely to undertake essential activities or commute.

“The local parks and national parks became busier than ever.”  
*Resident of Leichhardt, NSW*



Image: Byron Bay. Credit: Destination NSW

### Active and passive recreation were among the most commonly reported reasons for using public space during the pandemic



Over a third of people surveyed in 2021 indicated their appreciation for off-leash dog areas, suggesting this subcategory of open space is an important community asset. Women have been significantly more likely to use off-leash dog areas and public spaces for dog walking and essential activities during the pandemic, but less likely to use public spaces for exercise than men.

For people with disability and carers, indoor public spaces such as libraries, museums and galleries have been important spaces during the pandemic, as have temporarily closed streets. For these members of the community, public spaces were more likely to be a place to care for people or to undertake essential activities in local or main streets (such as medical appointments or grocery shopping), as opposed to being spaces for exercise and recreation.

In regional NSW, parks and off-leash dog areas attracted lower levels of use and appreciation, while beaches, foreshores, and main streets have been identified as important public spaces.

“

Dog walking has been vital for safe, healthy, open air exercise and socialisation with those living in the community.

Resident of  
Balmain, NSW

”



**The research found the growing appreciation of public spaces is here to stay.**

Local parks topped the list of public places people most appreciated or used during the pandemic. People showed a growing appreciation of public spaces beyond their local neighbourhoods while restrictions were eased. In this second survey beaches and foreshores, off-leash dog areas and parks outside the local area became more widely appreciated.

This reflects the increase in visitation in our major public parklands and botanic gardens compared to pre-pandemic.

**20.1% increase**

**in visitation to the Australian Botanic Garden Mount Annan**  
(in the second half of 2020 compared to same period in 2019)

**19.9% increase**

**in visitation to the Blue Mountains Botanic Garden Mount Tomah**  
(in the second half of 2020 compared to same period in 2019)

**25% increase**

**increase in visitation to Sydney Olympic Park**  
since April 2020

**New monthly highs**

**for visitation to Sydney Olympic Park every month from April 2020 to March 2021**  
(since monitoring commenced in 2004).

**The top six public spaces that people appreciated in early 2021 were:**



**68%**

Parks in your local area



**43%**

Local street in your neighbourhood



**48%**

Walking track



**40%**

Bushland or national parks



**47%**

Beaches and foreshores



**37%**

Off-leash dog areas

## #2



### People want high-quality public space that's easy to access

People in NSW were using public spaces frequently and spending more time in public spaces than before COVID-19.

Most people used public space **frequently** during the pandemic, with frequency of use similar in 2020 and 2021. Most survey participants used public spaces a few times a week or more, and only 8% to 9% used public spaces less than once a week. People aged 35 to 54 were significantly more likely to be spending more time in public spaces than others, compared with before COVID-19.

Just under half the participants **spent more time** in public spaces during the pandemic, and length of stay was similar in 2020 and 2021. Women were more likely to spend less time in public spaces than men.

Under 35s were also more likely to spend less in public spaces compared with people in other age groups.



Park equipment can be greatly improved to accommodate more families and ages. Although equipment was closed during COVID-19 the parks in general are lovely so walking/scooting with kids was great. Better road crossings between the parks would be great!

*Resident of Glen Innes, NSW*

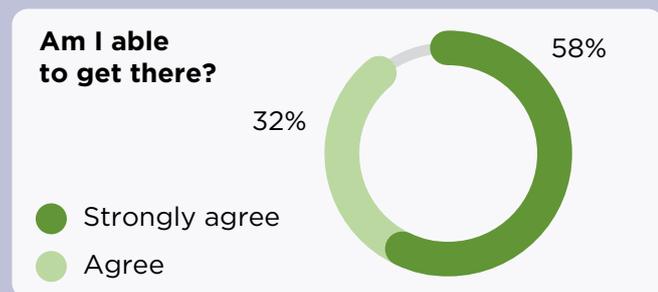
*Image: Reddall Reserve, Lake Illawarra*

## The Department's Evaluation Tool for Public Space and Public Life identifies four key questions that can help evaluate the quality of a public space and public life:

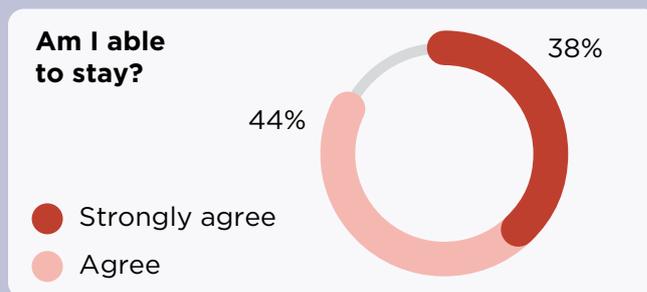
- Am I able to get there?
- Am I able to play and participate?
- Am I able to stay?
- Am I able to connect?

The 2021 survey asked people what attracted them to the public spaces they visit most during the pandemic.

Being able to stay, play and connect were all identified as important features of public space, but being able to get there easily has been the single most important attractor to public space during the pandemic. There were no significant differences between demographic groups or between regional and metropolitan survey participants.



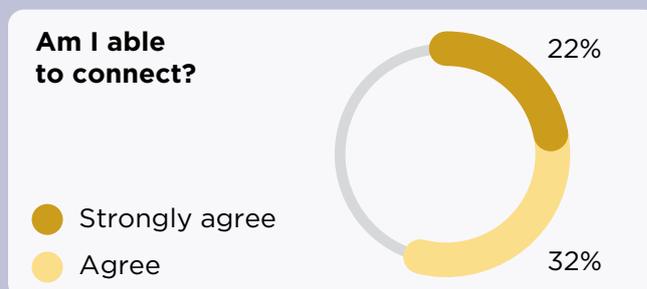
**Nine in 10** survey participants told us the main attraction for visiting these public spaces was **being able to get there easily** – 58% strongly agreed and another 32% agreed with this statement. This **demonstrates the importance of 'accessibility' (Am I able to get there?)** to creating great places.



**Being able to comfortably stay and experience public spaces** was also commonly identified – 38% strongly agreed and another 44% agreed that this attracted them to visit particular public spaces. This demonstrates the **high importance of 'comfort' (Am I able to stay?)** to creating great places.



**Being able to enjoy play or participating in other activities** was identified as a contributing factor – 29% of participants strongly agreed and another 34% agreed. However, one in 10 survey participants did not find this an important attribute. This demonstrates the **importance of spaces where 'people can engage in activities' (Am I able to play and participate?)** to creating great places.



**Feeling connected with my community** was identified as an important factor – 22% strongly agreed and another 32% agreed that this attracted them to public spaces. This demonstrates the **importance of 'sociability' (Am I able to connect?)** to creating great places. However, as many as 12% of participants did not find this important. This may be because they prefer to visit public spaces that offer peace and quiet or were outside their local area.

Importantly, people with disability and carers were unlikely to identify 'being able to get there easily' and 'being able to stay comfortably' as important attractors. This may mean that accessibility and comfort levels should be improved to better meet the needs of these community members, for example by meeting universal design principles.



“

Better facilities, especially seats, more trees for shade, proper paths not just muddy “desire lines”, bins to keep the place clean and safe pedestrian/bike connections to destinations rather than just being isolated one-off parks.

*Resident of Orange, NSW*

”

“

Our neighbourhood has one main park where people walk their dogs and run. During the height of covid it felt more crowded so I aimed for later or earlier visits to avoid the rush.

*Resident of Yass, NSW*

”

*Image: Streets as Shared Spaces, Coogee Bay Road, Coogee. Credit: Randwick City Council*

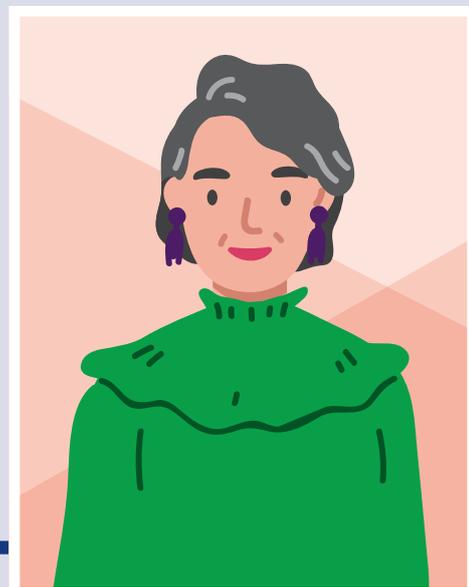
A series of personas are included in this report to highlight the way people in NSW have used and experienced public space during the pandemic and what it means to them. The first of the personas is included below.

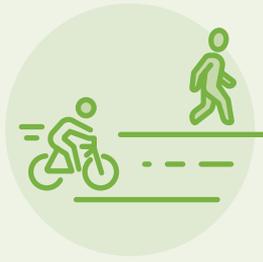
All personas have been created based on specific demographic characteristics and highlight statistically significant differences between target groups and the overall sample.

### Rosemary’s experiences (62 years old, Glebe)

- Rosemary has made good use of public spaces throughout the pandemic, particularly to stay connected with people in her neighbourhood by visiting local parks.
- She is most likely to use public streets and parks, and off-leash dog areas.
- She is much less likely than the average community member to visit walking tracks and bushland.
- Her main reasons for using public spaces during COVID-19 were to exercise and walk the dog.
- Rosemary appreciated parks and off-leash dog areas more during COVID-19.
- She feels very connected to her local community.

- She is significantly less likely than average to visit the local high street at night.
- She is almost twice as likely as the average person to visit the high street for cultural or community facilities.





# #3

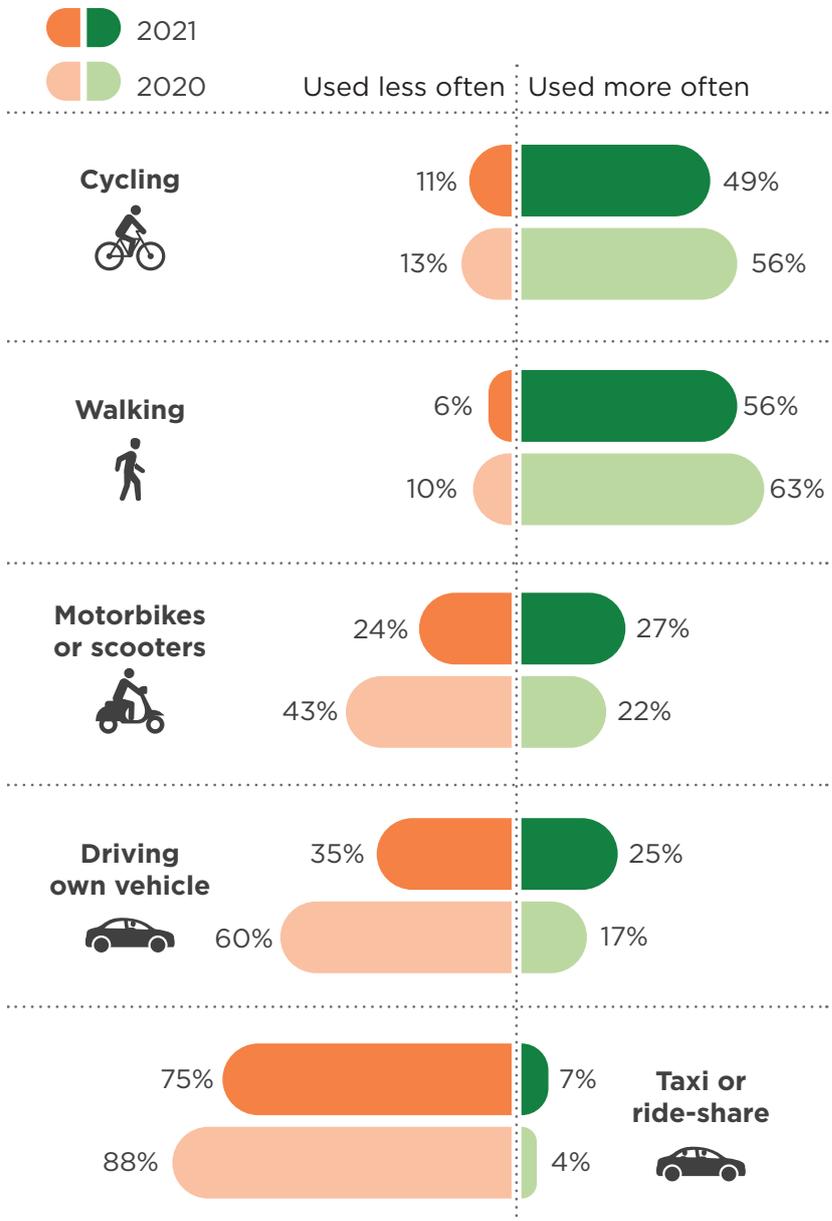
## People were walking and cycling more than before COVID-19

The pandemic has seen a dramatic increase in walking and cycling which has been largely sustained, with only a slight decrease in 2021. Almost half of all survey participants (49%) reported cycling more often in 2021 (compared with 56% who were cycling more in 2020), showing only a slight downward trend from the height of the pandemic.

This is broadly consistent with Transport for NSW data, which shows an increase on recreational cycling routes in 2020 compared to the previous year of 40% along the Parramatta River cycleway and Como cycleway bridge, and 10% along the Hawthorne Canal. Pop-up cycleways delivered as a partnership between Transport for NSW and local councils also saw over 1 million trips between July 2020 and May 2021 inclusive.

The research highlights a considerable decline in the use of personal vehicles in the height of the pandemic, but with a noticeable shift towards pre-COVID levels of use in early 2021.

The pandemic has seen some considerable shifts in travel patterns – during the pandemic people surveyed were travelling less by motor vehicle and walking and cycling more



While our findings indicate that people were driving less than before the pandemic, Transport for NSW data showed that overall road usage had recovered to pre-COVID levels by early 2021, recovering from a 35% decline during the April 2020 lockdown.<sup>6</sup> However, the

nature of road use had changed, with average journey time reducing and more car journeys in residential areas.<sup>7</sup>

Our research also identified a sharp and sustained decline in the use of taxis and ride-share services.

<sup>6</sup> Transport for NSW Vehicular Observations (SCATS), March 2021

<sup>7</sup> Dspark Mobility Data – March 2021

“

Mountain bike riding is very popular and we need more trails in bushland environments. People of all ages have embraced the benefits of riding and we need more areas for all riders to enjoy.

*Resident of  
Pennant Hills, NSW*

”



*Image: Mountain biking at Pomingalarna Reserve, Moorong.  
Credit: Jack of Hearts Photography, Visit Wagga Wagga*

“

[I'd like to see] safer cycleways and footpaths and connecting paths to link existing path networks.

*Resident of Yellow Rock, NSW*

”

While the survey research did not explore public transport use, Transport for NSW data suggests that **the pandemic has transformed public transport use**. Public transport use remains well below pre-Covid levels, but was slowly recovering in April 2021. Train trips were still 35-40% lower than pre-Covid levels in April 2021.<sup>8</sup>

## Brian's experiences (48 years old, Narrabri)

- For Brian, life hasn't changed much during the pandemic. Use of public space is mainly focused around visits to local suppliers, the supermarket and stopping off for a bite to eat.
- He is significantly less likely than the average community member to have used local streets, parks and off-leash dog areas during COVID-19.
- Trips during COVID-19 were mainly for necessities (such as shopping and to access health services), rather than leisure or exercise.
- Brian is significantly less likely than metropolitan residents to spend more time in public spaces, compared with before COVID-19.
- He is less likely to have walked, cycled or driven more during COVID-19.

- His reasons for connecting in public spaces are similar to those of metropolitan residents, though he is more likely to be supporting others to access essential services.
- He visits his local high street less often than city dwellers, both day and night.



<sup>8</sup> Transport for NSW Opal patronage data, April 2021



# #4

## More people felt less safe in public spaces, especially because of crowding

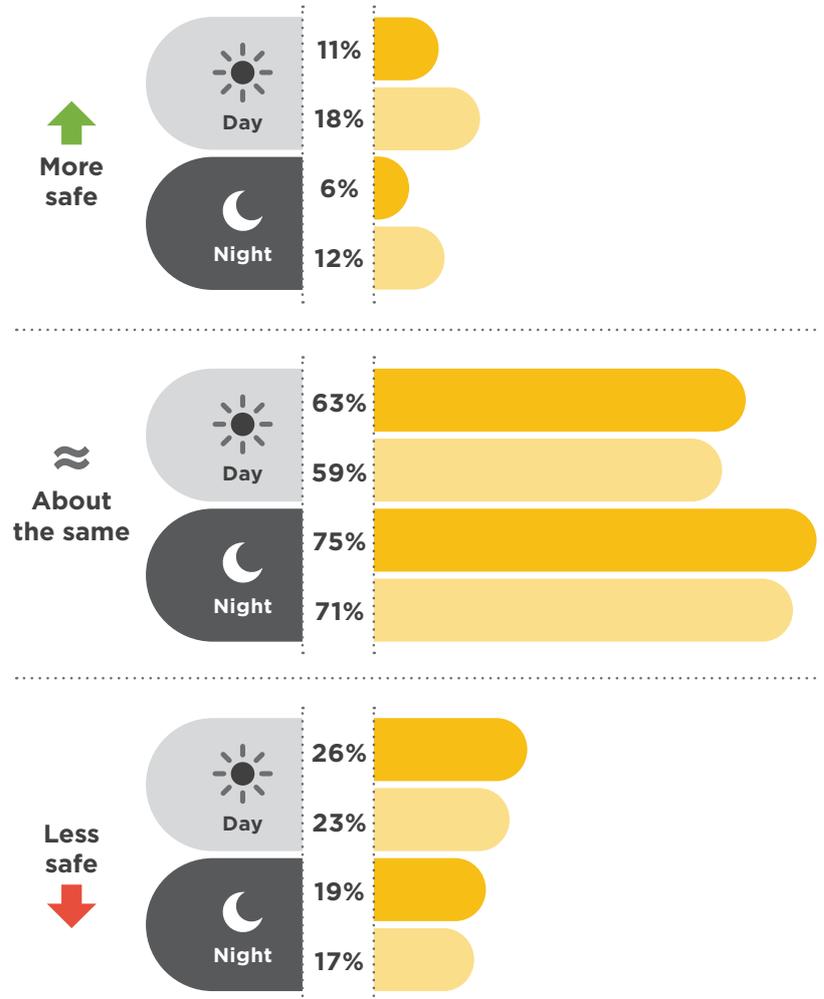
The majority of people were feeling ‘about the same’ in terms of their safety in public space by day and night during the pandemic in 2020, but in 2021 more people were feeling ‘less safe’ in public space. Women, people with disability and carers were significantly more likely to feel ‘less safe’ during the day and night.

More than two-thirds of people had visited public space where they found it difficult to practise physical distancing due to the number of people. And while the data suggests that physical distancing has become easier in many places – particularly local main streets, walking tracks, local parks and local neighbourhood streets – this was not the case across the board. Public spaces where it became more difficult to distance in 2021 included plazas and paved public spaces.

Public health was a key consideration for many people when using, or thinking about using, public space. Some people were using public spaces when there are less people around, such as after dark, in order to avoid close

### While close to two-thirds of people feel ‘about the same’, more people were feeling ‘less safe’ in public space in 2021

2021 (n=2118)  
2020 (n=1767)



contact with others and potential health issues.

When asked to share comments about their feelings of safety, four in 10 responses in the 2021 survey indicated that community perspectives about safety were unchanged during the pandemic. A quarter of all responses focused on being ‘COVID-19 safe’, and another 6% expressed concern about too many people in public spaces. Other responses focused on

personal safety and security and physical safety when walking or cycling.

Women reported feeling less safe in public space during the day and night, suggesting there may be opportunities to increase and enhance their experience of public spaces through a focus on safety improvements, programs and activities (that is, personal safety/security and COVID safety).

“

I feel safe in areas like walking paths and bike paths because it's easy to socially distance - you're outdoors, there's space to spread out and everyone is moving.

*Resident of Dulwich Hill, NSW*

[I feel more safe because] I feel that more people are looking out for each other. Although, there are public areas that are not well-lit and feel unsafe, especially as a female.

*Resident of Kotara East, NSW*

[I feel less safe because] I feel very vulnerable to infection in public spaces - especially in larger centres. I feel safest closest to home.

*Resident of Parkes, NSW*

”



*Image: Places to Love, Unity Place, Burwood.  
Credit: Department of Planning Industry and Environment*

### Daisy's experiences (24 years old, Chatswood)

- Daisy has enjoyed using local parks and playgrounds and online content from the State Library of NSW during the pandemic, staying close to home in the early stages with her young daughter. More recently, she has ventured out of her local area to places such as Newtown and Bronte, where she enjoys the shops and cafés.
- She is significantly less likely than other people to visit parks outside her neighbourhood, walking tracks, major parklands or bushland/national parks - but more likely to use indoor public spaces.
- She is far more likely to have used public spaces for essential activities (such as shopping) than exercise or leisure.
- Daisy is very unlikely to spend more time in public spaces (and far more likely to be spending less time) than other community members.

- Likewise, she is much less likely to have walked or cycled more during COVID-19.
- She is much more likely to feel less safe in public spaces during COVID-19, and more likely to have found it difficult to practise physical distancing (especially indoors).
- She is more likely than other residents to have discovered new online resources during COVID-19.
- She is unlikely to use high streets at night, but more likely to visit during the day.



# #5



## More people discovered online services provided by public facilities during COVID-19

Many people continued to discover new public spaces, facilities and services, even while COVID-19 related restrictions were eased. The research found that indoor public facilities, and the online services they provide, played an important role in connecting communities.

More than two-thirds of people had discovered new online resources or services, or a public space that they didn't know about before COVID-19 (68% in 2020 and 69% in 2021).

More than one-third (35%) had visited an indoor public space such as a library, museum or gallery in person in 2021, following easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

Just under one in four survey participants (39%) had used online services provided by indoor public spaces in 2020, compared with just under a third (31%) in 2021. These figures show the continued importance of these services, even following easing of

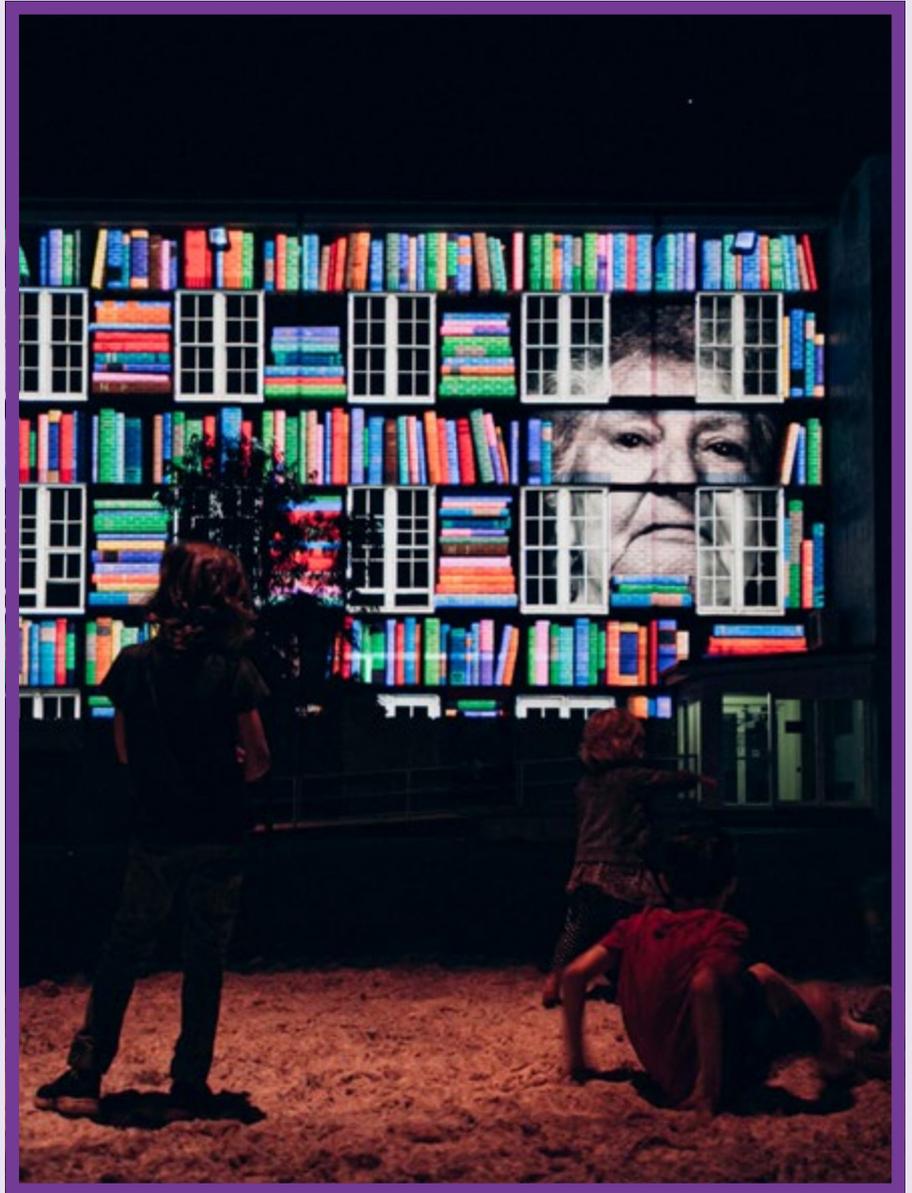


Image: Dungarimba Wandarahh, Lismore Place of Learning.  
Credit: Kate Holmes

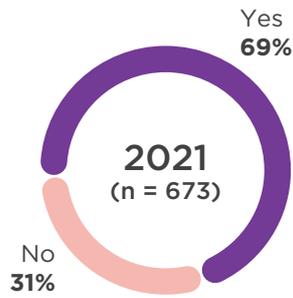
COVID-19 restrictions. Women, people with disability and carers were significantly more likely to use online services.

In both surveys, most people who had accessed or used online services from indoor public spaces reported that these services had helped them 'feel connected' during the pandemic (54% in 2020 and 52% in 2021). Interestingly, the

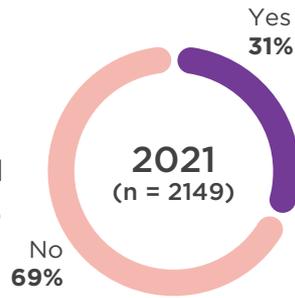
proportion of people who 'felt very connected' almost doubled from 7% in 2020 to 13% in 2021.

Women were significantly more likely to use online services compared to men, suggesting that these public facilities were important to women in particular.

More than two in three people surveyed discovered new online resources or services or a public space they didn't know about before COVID-19



Approximately one in three survey participants had accessed and used the online services provided by libraries, museums and galleries



More than one in three participants in the 2021 research (35%) had visited a library, museum or gallery in person

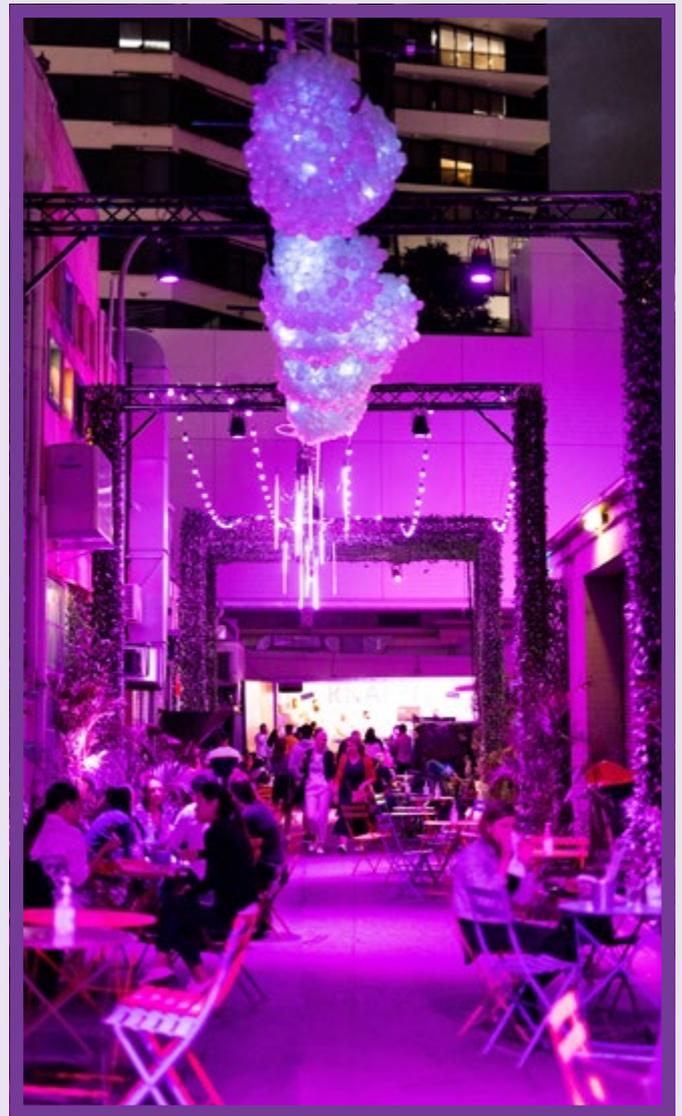
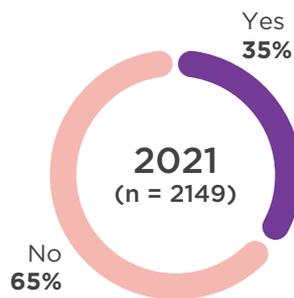
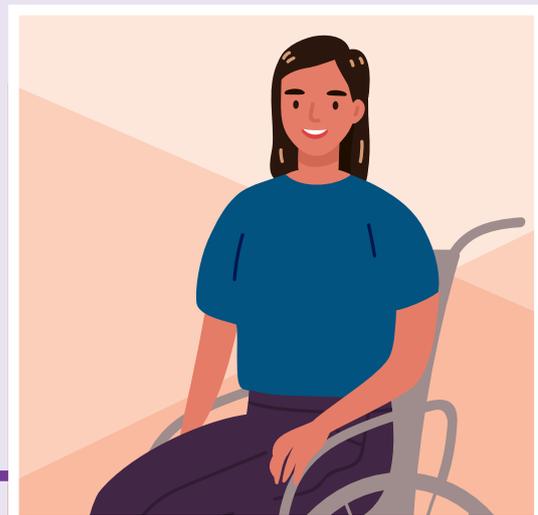


Image: Streets as Shared Spaces, Phillip Lane, Parramatta. Credit: City of Parramatta Council

## Linda's experiences (19 years old, Merrylands)

- As a person with disability, Linda spent more time at home than usual, even in the later stages of the pandemic, as her work and study went online, and social activities such as her community choir went on hold.
- She is significantly more likely not to have left her home during COVID-19 (6% versus 1% of other community members).
- She is more likely to have used public spaces mainly for essential purposes.
- Linda is more likely than other community members to spend less time in public spaces than pre-COVID-19.

- She is more likely to feel less safe in public spaces both day and night.
- She has accessed online services more enthusiastically than other people.



# #6

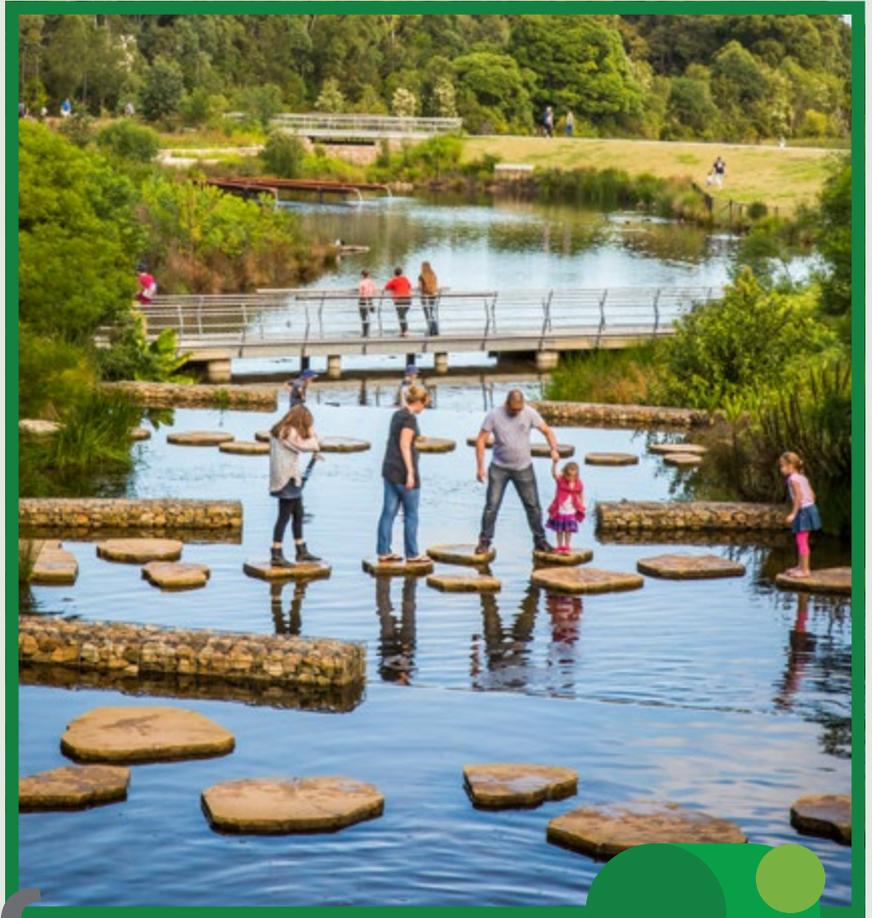


## People were socialising more in public spaces into the second year of the pandemic

The importance of public space as a place for connection during COVID-19 is clear. The survey research showed a trend toward people connecting in public spaces with people outside their immediate household, rising from 59% of all participants in 2020 to 71% in 2021.

The main activities being undertaken in public spaces by people connecting with others beyond their household were exercising together and walking together. Women were significantly more likely to connect by walking (68%) compared to men (49%). Men were significantly more likely to connect by exercising together (55%) compared to women (38%).

Close to one in three survey participants (29%) reported being more involved in their local community or neighbourhood during COVID-19 than before the pandemic. This level of local community involvement remained consistent across both surveys. More than eight in 10 people spent time talking and interacting with their neighbours during the pandemic (86% in both 2020 and 2021).



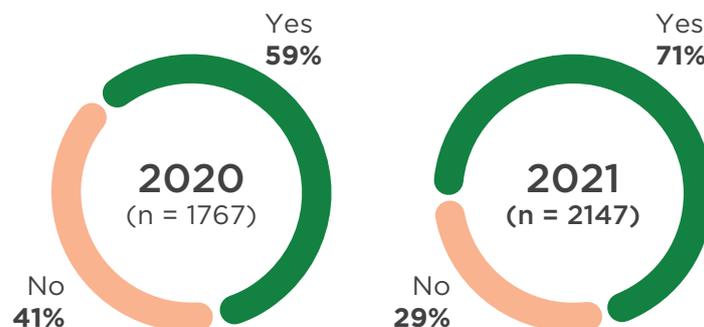
I've used Sydney Park to catch up with friends. Instead of meeting in a café/bar, I now often go for a walk with a friend.

*Resident of Erskineville, NSW*



*Image: Sydney Park, St Peters. Credit: Destination NSW*

### The survey research showed an increasing trend toward people connecting in public spaces



“

Being a dog owner and many others getting a dog has meant we have built a new circle of friends in the community and see [them] at least several times a week. It's been so lovely to finally feel a sense of community.

*Resident of Mascot, NSW*

”

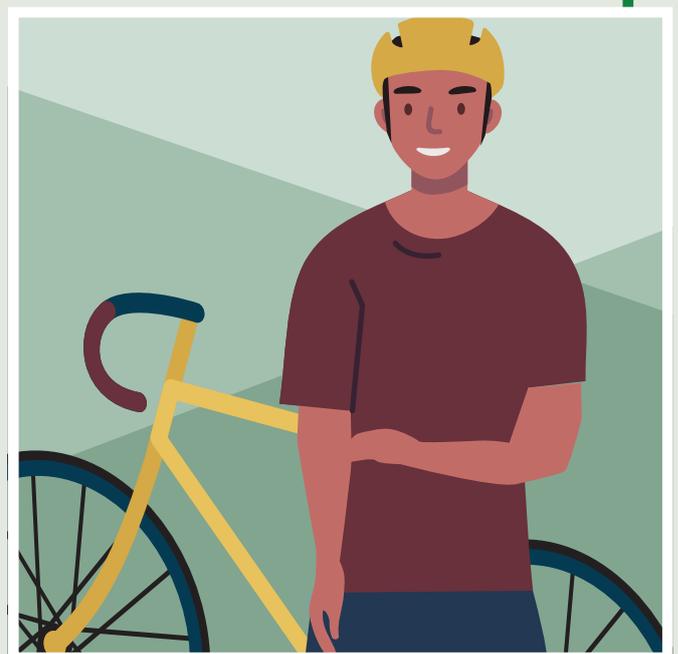


*Image: Wollongong Beach.  
Credit: Destination NSW*

### Luke's experiences (30 years old, Croydon)

- With reduced work hours during the initial stage of COVID-19, Luke spent more time than usual making use of public spaces – to go mountain bike riding, enjoy a drink with friends as pubs reopened, and just spend time getting out of his apartment.
- During COVID-19, he spent most of his time outside in public spaces exercising and enjoying nature.
- He is unlikely to be supporting children or to go dog walking.
- He is most likely to be seen during COVID-19 in local parks, local streets, beaches and bushland.
- Luke is more likely than the average member of the community to use plazas/paved public spaces and temporarily closed streets.
- He found it especially difficult to practise physical distancing in indoor community facilities (for example, libraries and museums) or at public events.

- He is significantly more likely than the average resident to visit high streets in the evenings.
- He is more likely to value vibrant public art, a mix of day- and night-time activities, and live music or other entertainment.



# #7



## People’s use of local high streets has increased since the start of COVID-19

As noted earlier, use of local main or high streets rose in 2021 compared to 2020. The 2021 research showed that during the pandemic, most people had visited a high street at least once a week (57%), and of these, more than one in 10 (13%) had visited daily or more frequently.

Two-thirds of survey participants were visiting high streets at similar frequency compared to before COVID-19, a quarter were visiting less frequently and just over one in ten were visiting more frequently. As this data was only collected in 2021, we could not identify trends over time. Potentially, people who reported visiting high streets less frequently as COVID-19 restrictions eased may have returned to work in a larger centre away from a high street; those who visited more frequently may have continued working from home.

People living in Greater Sydney were significantly more likely to visit a high street ‘more frequently’ than before COVID-19 compared with those in regional areas (16% versus

### The most common reasons for visiting local high streets were to:



Shop or access services



Visit cafés and restaurants

### Other reasons included to:



Socialise



Travel or commute



Visit cultural or community facilities



Work



Spend time in the natural environment



Rest and relax

7%), and two-thirds of people (68%) typically visited high streets only during the day, while 32% visited both day and night.

People living in the regions were significantly more likely to visit high streets to work (20% vs 14%) or to participate in community life than Sydneysiders (15% vs 8%).

All the features of high streets tested in the 2021 survey were identified as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ by most participants. Feedback emphasised the importance of getting the basics right. Responses commonly prioritised safety and lighting, then accessibility and natural landscape ahead of a variety of things to do.



I would love my local High Street (Willoughby Road in Crows Nest) to have a section that is closed off.

*Resident of Crows Nest, NSW*

'It would be great to see more small towns with streets closed off or limited to cars - this would increase pedestrian safety and ability for outdoor dining numbers to increase in a safe way.'

*Resident of Jervis Bay, ACT*

'Erskineville Road has wide footpaths, plaza areas, calmed traffic and pedestrian crossings. I love the village feel there as I often bump into my neighbours'

*Resident of Erskineville, NSW*



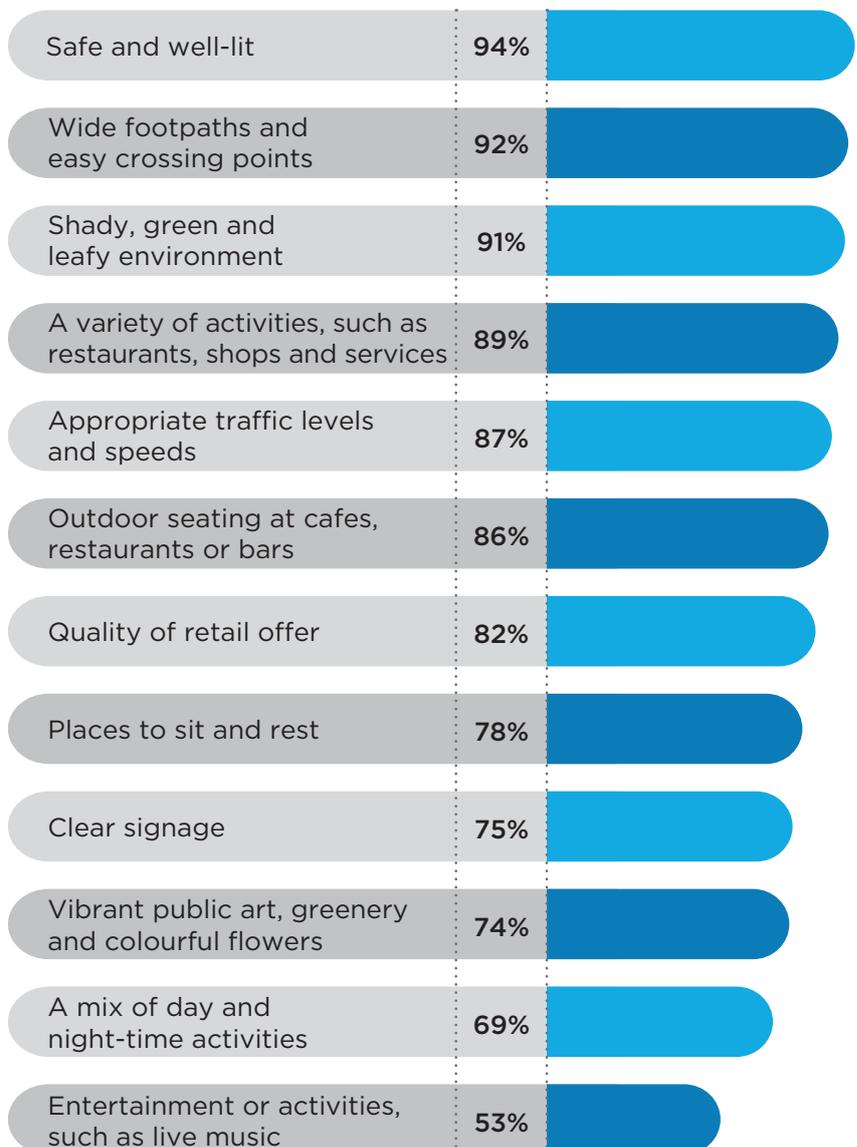
Not all high streets are equal. Places such as Oxford Street or Glebe Point Road may offer higher levels of activity or amenity than those in other parts of Sydney and NSW, particularly at night. People living in the Eastern City District, where streets are more likely to have been created before the car, were significantly more likely to use local main or high streets in their area (51%) compared to those in other districts (38% and under) and visit more frequently (22%) compared to people in other districts (15% or under).

There may be opportunities to encourage people to use high streets more by improving the amenity and increasing what the street offers (potentially with lessons learned from some of the high streets in Sydney's east, which offer strong appeal).

It will be interesting to monitor whether people visiting high streets for work remains at 16% over time, as there is a trend toward working outside the Sydney CBDs. Government forecasting predicts that around 30% of NSW workers may work from home post-pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> NSW Innovation and Productivity Council, NSW Remote Working Insights, 2020

### All features of high streets tested in 2021 were identified as important by most people



## High Streets need...

“

...to be in walking distance for locals on accessible safe walkways or bike paths and co-located with community facilities such as parks, libraries and community centres.

*Resident of West Pennant Hills, NSW*

”



“

...more street table seating for cafes – important to keep business going but also allow people to sit outside in fresh air.

*Resident of Potts Point, NSW*

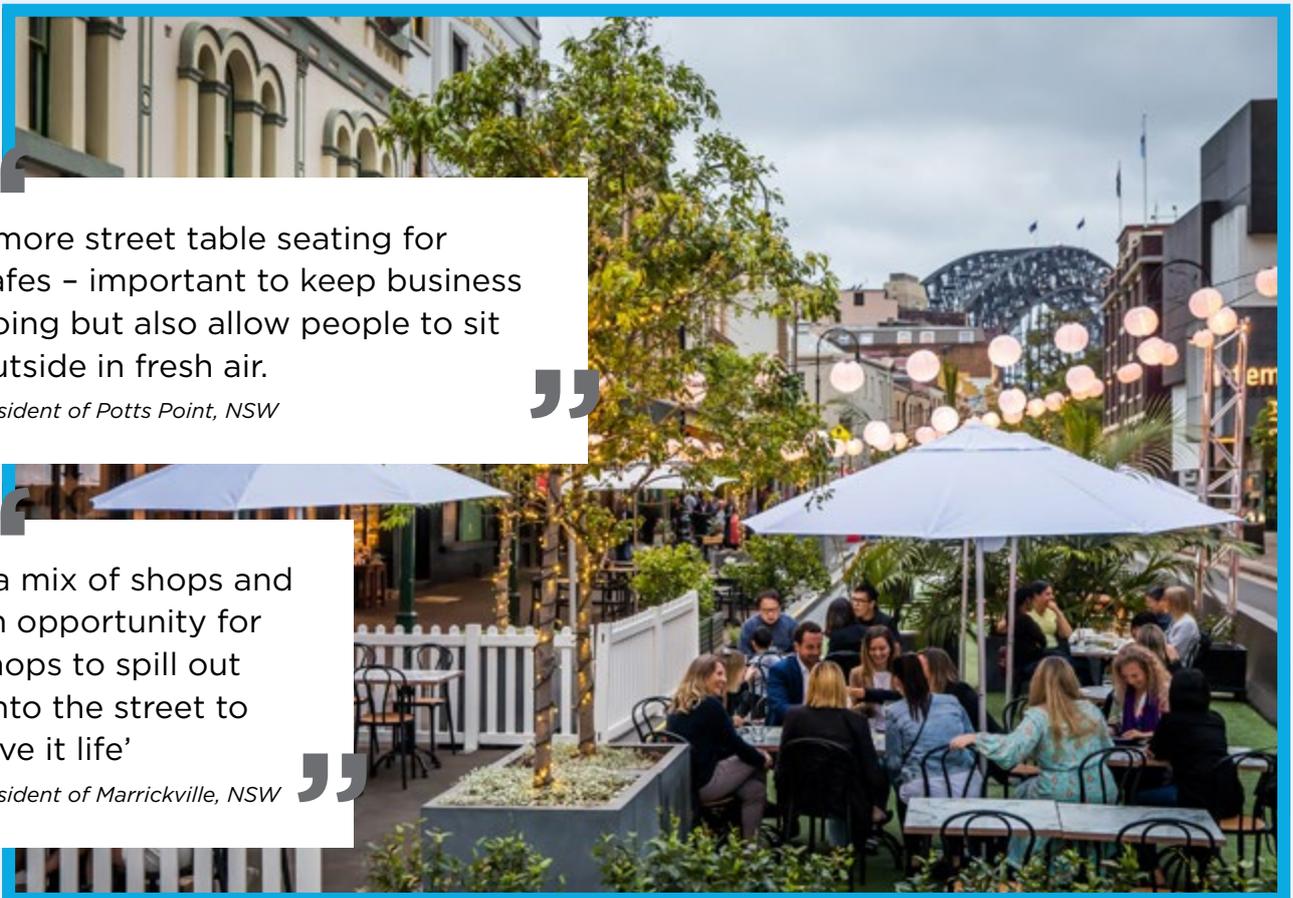
”

“

...a mix of shops and an opportunity for shops to spill out onto the street to give it life’

*Resident of Marrickville, NSW*

”



Images: Above: Five Ways, Paddington. Credit: Destination NSW.  
Below: Outdoor Dining, The Rocks. Credit: Anna Kucera

# What's next for our public spaces

## Conclusions

In summary, the research suggests that up until March 2021, when our survey closed:

- Community **use of public space** remained high throughout the pandemic. People were using almost all types of public spaces more in 2021 than in 2020, even as COVID-19 restrictions eased (as at March 2021, and not taking into account the most recent outbreak). The most common uses of public space were personal exercise and being outside, but dog walking is on the rise in 2021. People have discovered public spaces they didn't know about before COVID-19. This includes indoor public spaces such as libraries, museums and galleries and the online services they offer. These facilities and services have been helping many people feel connected during the pandemic.
- Community **perceptions of public space** show its ongoing value. Local parks have been widely appreciated during the pandemic. Appreciation grew for public spaces further afield, including beaches and foreshores, off-leash dog areas and parks outside the local area, while COVID-19 restrictions were eased.
- **Active transport** (walking and cycling) remains high compared to before COVID-19, although slightly down following a dramatic increase early in the pandemic. Following an initial steep drop in people using personal vehicles (such as cars and motorbikes) and taxis/ride sharing, 2021 has seen an increase in driving/riding, but use of taxis/ride sharing has remained low.
- People were continuing to **live locally**, relying on their local parks and neighbourhood streets, and using local high streets slightly more than in 2021. While restrictions were eased, people's use of public spaces farther from home increased. Future research may help to understand whether the shift to a decentralised model of working is temporary or more permanent. And clearly not all local high streets are created equal – some offer communities greater levels of amenity and appeal than others.

- People's **feelings of safety** in public space are complex and have been affected by the experience of COVID-19. Members of the community reported using public space at less busy times – including after dark – in order to physically distance and avoid illness. To support use by all members of the community, particularly women, people with disability and carers, public spaces need to feel safe.

## Next steps

The department is using feedback the community gave during our research as part of a citizen-led approach to the care and creation of **great public spaces**.

The results of the research are presented here to support understanding of community perspectives and use of public spaces during the pandemic – and as a resource for agencies, councils, businesses and communities in the establishment and renewal of public spaces that are well used and contribute to positive community outcomes.

## Further reading

[Great Public Spaces](#) website, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

The [Public Spaces – Streets as Shared Spaces Engagement Report](#), Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (November 2020)

The draft [NSW Public Spaces Charter](#), Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (October 2020)

[Great Public Spaces Toolkit](#), including The Great Public Spaces Guide and Evaluation Tool for Public Space and Public Life, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment

The *draft Greater Sydney Recreation Report*, Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (September 2020)

The [City-shaping impacts of COVID-19: Towards a resilient Greater Sydney](#) paper, Greater Sydney Commission (September 2020)



*Image: Streets as Shared Spaces, Cabramatta. Credit: Ken Leanfore*



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[dpie.nsw.gov.au](http://dpie.nsw.gov.au)