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Health, Wellbeing and Social Capital Benefits of Open Space Use within the City of Knox

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides a report on the findings of a study involving a sample of users and non-users of parks within the City of Knox. The purpose of the study was to identify the categories of people using and not using the selected parks within Knox, to identify the benefits gained from use of parks in Knox, and to explore the barriers to use of parks within Knox. Multiple methods were used in the study including face-to-face surveys, observation, and focus groups. A total of 300 interviews were completed, and three focus groups were conducted. Data was collected between June and November 2004.

While the study found a very high level of satisfaction among study respondents concerning the parks within the City of Knox, there were areas identified in which improvements could be made and/or strategies adopted which would encourage greater use of the parks. Suggestions included: promotion of use of the parks through publicity campaigns, provision of amenities, improved access for wheelchairs or prams, and adoption of a deliberate health promotion campaign focused on park use. The major barriers to use of parks were identified as security and safety issues, vandalism and rubbish, and lack of shelter and seating.

A comparison of users and non-users of Knox parks found that the self-rated health of park users was slightly better than that of non-users. This is in keeping with the fact that park users claimed to engage in physical activity more frequently than non-users, and that the sense of community or social cohesion among park users was higher than among non-users. However, in the focus groups, the link between use of parks and health of individuals was not clearly articulated, suggesting that this is not commonly recognized.

The findings of the study provide baseline data against which the City of Knox will be able to monitor change resulting from any strategies adopted to overcome the barriers to park use. The interest of interviewees in receiving information about parks and about the potential for them to become involved in park planning, development and maintenance indicates that there is significant potential for the City of Knox to promote human health and wellbeing, foster social connectedness and improve the ‘natural capital’ of the area through community engagement in the City’s parks.
1. INTRODUCTION

Australia spends 8.5% of gross domestic product on health (Ross et al., 1999), and while by international standards Australians enjoy good health, it is also true that some Australians experience poorer health than others (AIHW, 2000). Data from the Global Burden of Disease 2000 study indicates that within developed nations such as Australia, heart disease, depression, alcohol dependence and stroke are the leading contributors to the disease burden (Mathers et al. 2002). In Australia, mental disorder is the number one contributor to the disease burden (Vos & Mathers 2000), and the upward trend in the incidence of mental disorders is projected to continue.

The role of social capital (defined in terms of networks, trust and norms which facilitate co-operation and cohesion in communities) as a key determinant of health has been highlighted by recent research (Kawachi et al., 1997; Runyan et al., 1998; Leeder & Dominello, 1999). Despite this recognition of the importance of social capital for health, Putnam (1995) observes that social connectedness and civic engagement – key aspects of social capital – are in decline.

Other research has demonstrated the importance of contact with natural environments for human health and wellbeing (Frumkin, 2001; Wilson, 2001). Ecopsychologists, for example, assert that many psychological and physical afflictions are due to withdrawal from contact with nature, and that exposure to nature can have positive benefits (Scull, 2001; Cohen, 2000; Burns, 1998; Durning, 1995; Hillman, 1995; Roszak et al., 1995; Levinson, 1969). Yet, despite its potential health benefits, increasing urbanisation is resulting in diminishing contact between humans and natural environments, and health is being deleteriously affected.

In 1986, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, Health and Welfare Canada and The Canadian Public Health Association, 1986), developed at an international conference on health promotion, highlighted the importance of environments for health outcomes. The conference’s central theme was the promotion of health by maximising the health values of the everyday settings (places or social contexts) where people’s day-to-day activities take place. It is here that environmental and personal factors interact to influence health and wellbeing outcomes. Parks and open spaces are included in these everyday settings, yet their health promoting potential has to date been unacknowledged and under utilised.

Recent developments in public health policy have taken as their starting point the World Health Organisation’s definition of health: “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 1948). The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (World Health Organization, Health and Welfare Canada and The Canadian Public Health Association, 1986) emphasises that health promotion – the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health - is not just the responsibility of the health sector. In noting the importance of adapting health promotion strategies and programs to suit local needs, the Charter recognises the important role played by local governments and local communities in enhancing and maintaining health.

Another term, closely related to ‘health’ is ‘wellbeing’. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001 p. 6) says this about the meaning of wellbeing:

“From birth to death, life enmeshes individuals within a dynamic culture consisting of the natural environment (light, heat, air, land, water, minerals, flora, fauna), the human made environment (material objects, buildings, roads, machinery, appliances, technology), social arrangements (families, social networks, associations, institutions, economies), and human consciousness (knowledge, beliefs, understanding, skills, traditions). Wellbeing depends on all the factors that interact within this culture and can be seen as a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life.”

This understanding is reflected in the definition provided by Furnass (1996), who states that ‘wellbeing’ includes:

- satisfactory human relationships
- meaningful occupation
opportunities for contact with nature, creative expression, and making a positive contribution to human society.

While the 19th Century city planners may have clearly recognized the influence of environments on health and wellbeing, there was a trend during the 20th Century to see health much more in ‘medical’ terms and to ‘play down’ (if not ignore) the social and environmental determinants of health. However, the current and growing epidemic of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and mental illness indicates that society can no longer ignore the role of factors such as physical activity, appropriate nutrition, social connectedness and the physical environment (both natural and built) in influencing human health and wellbeing.

The recently developed Open Space Plan for the City of Knox reflects this awareness, alluding to the potential health and wellbeing benefits of the City’s open space areas, and saying: “Open space areas are among the most important community places for socialising, family activities, sports, informal exercise and nature appreciation” (City of Knox 2003). Nevertheless, no data on the health and wellbeing benefits of the City’s open space is currently available.

This document reports on a research project which explored the extent of health, wellbeing and social capital benefits arising out of the use of open space within the City of Knox.
2. PARKS, NATURE, HUMAN HEALTH & WELLBEING

In many fields of research, including ecology, biology, psychology and psychiatry, there have been recent attempts to understand the human relationship with nature and how humans might benefit from nature in terms of health and wellbeing. The research indicates that, contrary to popular thinking, humans may be dependent on nature for psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs that are difficult to satisfy by other means (Frumkin, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995; Roszak et al., 1995; Katcher & Beck, 1987; Wilson, 1984).

In the last few hundred years, however, there has been an extraordinary disengagement of humans from the natural environment (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Axelrod & Suedfeld, 1995; Katcher & Beck, 1987) that is mostly due to the enormous shift of people away from rural areas into cities (Katcher & Beck, 1987). Here, contact with nature is often only available via parks. Never have humans spent so little time in physical contact with animals and plants, and the consequences of this are only beginning to be explored (Katcher & Beck, 1987). Modern society by its very essence insulates people from outdoor environmental stimuli (Stilgoe, 2001) and regular contact with nature (Katcher & Beck, 1987). Detrimental effects on humans of this isolation from nature have been asserted by researchers who believe that too much artificial stimulation and an existence spent in purely human environments may cause exhaustion, or produce a loss of vitality and health (Gullone, 2000; Stilgoe, 2001; Katcher & Beck, 1987).

When parks were first designed in the nineteenth century, city officials had a strong belief in the possible health advantages that would result from open space (Rohde & Kendle, 1997; Hamilton-Smith & Mercer, 1991). It was hoped that parks would reduce disease, crime, and social unrest as well as providing ‘green lungs’ for the city and areas for recreation (Rohde & Kendle, 1997). At this time it was also believed that exposure to nature fostered psychological wellbeing, reduced the stress associated with urban living, and promoted physical health (Ulrich, 1993). These assumptions were used as justification for providing parks and other natural areas in cities, and preserving wilderness areas outside of cities for public use (Ulrich, 1993; Parsons, 1991).

Although parks have not entirely lost their connection with health, the modern emphasis is almost exclusively on their use as a venue for leisure and sport. While the physical activity opportunities provided by parks have been promoted, little if any recognition has been given to the other potential health benefits offered by access to nature through parks. Aside from the leisure and sport purposes, parks in cities tend to be viewed as optional amenities rather than as necessary components of urban infrastructure (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Why the benefits of parks understood by early landscape designers, park engineers and public health campaigners have been overlooked in recent decades is a mystery. Research on the benefits of nature carried out over the last two decades is indicating that these early officials were right. Data so far has shown that access to ‘green nature’ can reduce crime (Kuo, 2001), foster psychological well-being (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1990a), reduce stress (Ulrich et al., 1991; Parsons, 1991), boost immunity (Rohde & Kendle, 1994; Parsons et al., 1998), enhance productivity (Tennessen & Cimprich, 1995), promote healing in psychiatric patients (Beck et al., 1986; Katcher & Beck, 1983), and aid community cohesion and identity (Lewis, 1990a).

Another factor likely to have contributed to human health problems over recent decades is (according to Putnam, 1995) loss of ‘social capital’ – defined by Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti (1993, p. 167) as “features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”. Though there are variations in the way it is defined, the concept of social capital is accepted, generally, as including the level of connectedness or civic engagement within a community, the trust members feel toward others, and the security they feel living within the community (Flower, 1997; Putnam, 1993; Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997; Bourdieu, 1985). Rutter (1995) has proposed that the rapidly increasing psychopathology in modern industrialized societies is most likely due to factors including family conflict and break up, as well as increased individualism. This proposed association underscores the need to promote connectedness and civic engagement within such societies.

It is not surprising therefore, that recent research supports the proposal that social capital (i.e. connectedness, trust, networks) may explain differences in mortality and morbidity within and between
groups (Runyan et al., 1998; Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997). For example, a study of the relationship between social capital and the presence of emotional and behavioural problems found that, independent of other factors, children from families high in social capital had fewer problems than children from families low in social capital (Runyan et al., 1998). In another study, researchers found a significant relationship between community disinvestment in social capital and mortality (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997).

Given the combination of these two factors – disengagement from nature (or diminished access to ‘natural capital’ – defined by Pretty (1998) as the goods and services provided by nature) and declining social capital, it is not surprising that in industrialised countries chronic disease has increasingly replaced acute infectious disease as the major cause of disability and death (House et al., 1988), and that the WHO Global Burden of Disease study (Murray & Lopez, 1996) indicates that by the year 2020, this will be true for every region in the world. These types of afflictions are often long-term and are potentially much more expensive in terms of health care requirements and cost to the community. Current theories of disease have become more complex and moved away from single cause explanations to ones in which multiple behavioural, environmental, biological and genetic factors combine over time, resulting in one or more of a number of different diseases (Cowen, 1999; House et al., 1988).

Yet despite the burgeoning chronic health problems in industrialised nations, and despite the trend away from single cause explanations of illness and disease, little if any attention has been paid to the potential for the ‘symbiotic’ relationship between social capital and natural capital to be exploited as both a preventative measure and a restorative solution to the diseases prominent in modern society.

Regular surveys undertaken by Parks Victoria within a sample of the parks it manages have identified the reasons for people’s use of the parks and some of the factors that discourage park use. However, no data has been collected on perceptions of the health and wellbeing benefits gained through use of parks, nor has any data been collected measuring the social connectedness of park users.
3. THIS STUDY

The study on which this report is based, which was undertaken by a team from the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University, in collaboration with the City of Knox, had as its broad aims:

- To identify the categories of people using and not using the selected open space area/s;
- To identify the range of motivations for use of the open space area/s;
- To explore the frequency of use of the open space area/s by individual users;
- To collect from open space users basic information about their level of health service usage and their perceptions of their general health and wellbeing;
- To document users’ perceptions of the benefits they gain either directly or indirectly from using the selected open space area/s (including health and wellbeing benefits);
- To measure the social capital/social connectedness of open space users;
- To explore the barriers to use of the selected open space area/s (both for the users and in terms of their perceptions of the barriers affecting non-users);
- To develop a set of indicators that can be monitored by Council over time.

The project included three key components: collection of data from users of selected open space area/s within the City of Knox; collection of data from non-users of the open space area/s; and the collection of in-depth qualitative data from some specific sectors of the population.

Data collection was undertaken between June and November 2004 and entailed:

- 150 face-to-face surveys of users of selected areas of open space within the City of Knox;
- 150 face-to-face surveys of visitors to selected shopping centres within the City of Knox who identified themselves as ‘non-users’ of open space areas within Knox;
- 3 focus groups – one with a sample of users and non-users; one with a sample of young people aged 12-17; and one with a sample of people with disabilities/carers of people with disabilities.

The first element involved a survey of users of open space area/s within the City of Knox which were selected in collaboration with appropriate Council staff. Of the 150 surveys completed, 75 took place at the Tim Neville Arboretum, 12 took place at Peregrine Reserve, and 63 took place at Liberty Avenue Reserve. It had been intended to use only two sites – the Tim Neville Arboretum and Peregrine Reserve. However, the researchers found very limited numbers of people using Peregrine Reserve, so (on the advice of Council staff) Liberty Avenue Reserve was adopted as an alternative venue. The surveys with open space users took approximately 15 minutes to complete, and respondents were selected opportunistically. However, an attempt was made to ensure that as wide a range of users as possible was approached, with Research Assistants being present in the open space areas at a variety of times of day and days of the week. Overall, 46% of the surveys were conducted during school holidays, but this was not evenly distributed across the sites, with 56% of surveys at Tim Neville Arboretum and 10% of Peregrine Reserve surveys but none of the Liberty Avenue Reserve surveys being in school holidays. The design of the survey was based on the standard ‘Visitor Satisfaction Monitor’ implemented by Parks Victoria within the parks it manages, to enhance the future comparability of data with data collected at other sites.

Through the survey, data was collected on:

- frequency of use of the open space area/s;
- the motivations for using the open space area/s;
- the activities in which users engage within the open space area/s;
- the perceptions of open space area users concerning the benefits (both direct and indirect) they gain through use of the open space area/s (including health, wellbeing and social capital benefits);
- their level of health service usage and their self-assessment of their overall health and wellbeing;
- the perceptions of open space users about the barriers to use of open space areas within the City of Knox;
- the social cohesion of open space users;
- the demographic characteristics of open space users.
The second element of the project involved opportunistic sampling of non-users of open space areas in Knox. Data was collected face-to-face through a survey of shoppers/visitors at three different shopping centres/activity areas within the City of Knox (Mountain Gate shopping centre, Stud Park shopping centre and Knox library), who identified themselves as non-open space users in response to a filter question. It had been intended to use only two sites – the Mountain Gate and Stud Park shopping centres. However, when the Stud Park venue became unavailable before data collection had been completed, a third site was needed and, on the advice of Council staff, the Library was chosen. An attempt was made to vary the timing of the surveys (including varied times of day, days of the week, and within school holidays or school term). However, due to the belated selection of the Library as a site, none of the surveys undertaken there occurred during school holidays, whereas 45% of Mountain Gate surveys and 44% of Stud Park surveys were undertaken in holiday periods.

The survey was adapted from the open space users’ survey, in order that the maximum comparability of data could be achieved. It was designed to:

- assess respondents’ knowledge about open space areas within Knox;
- identify the extent of any past use of open space areas;
- identify any reasons for their lack of current use of the open space areas, including any barriers they perceive to such use;
- identify and describe their perceptions about the benefits (both direct and indirect) open space users might gain through use of the open space area/s (including health, wellbeing and social capital benefits);
- identify any alternative ways they might use to gain similar benefits;
- record their perceptions of their level of health service usage and their self-assessment of their overall health and wellbeing;
- measure their social cohesion; and
- record the demographic characteristics of non-users of the open space areas.

Respondents to both surveys were also invited to indicate their interest in: (a) receiving information about parks and other open space in the area; (b) receiving information about opportunities to participate in the planning, development and maintenance of open space in the area; (c) participating in a focus group to explore the implications of the study’s findings.

Following analysis of the data gathered through the surveys, three focus groups were conducted: one involving respondents to the users and non-users surveys (four participants); one with young people aged 12 to 17 (five participants); and one with people with a range of disabilities and/or their carers (three participants). The purpose of the focus groups was to explore further the barriers to and potential for the increased use of open space areas within Knox (including those identified through the surveys) as a way of promoting health, wellbeing and social connectedness.

Although it had been intended to recruit larger numbers of participants for the focus groups, this proved to be impossible. For example, in regard to the users/non-users group, telephone contact was made with all people who indicated at the time of the survey that they would be willing to participate in a focus group, but despite a range of times and venues for the group being offered, only four people were ultimately able to attend. However, given that focus groups typically involve between 5 and 8 people, and in view of the fact that the project did not depend on the focus groups as the main source of data but rather as an opportunity to explore in more depth some of the issues identified through the surveys, the numbers achieved were satisfactory.
4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Field notes/observation data
The following data, drawn from the field diaries of the survey researchers, is provided as a background to the survey data, and needs to be taken into account when interpreting the survey data.

General Observations
The following overall observations were made:

- there was a tendency among many prospective participants to avoid eye contact or make a deliberate change of direction when being approached by the researchers, perhaps triggered by the visual clue of survey clipboards;
- elderly people seemed more inclined to participate in the survey, perhaps relating to them being retired and having more time, or the desire for social engagement, though it may also have been influenced by reduced mobility in comparison with other park users (as they were often approached while seated);
- while there were in the parks many prospective participants aged under 18, they were unable to be interviewed because of the inability to gain parental consent (a condition of the Deakin University Human Research Ethics approval);
- prospective participants were not approached when perceived to be engaged in intense or personal conversation.

Observations by Location
Tim Neville Aboretum
- The park location is next to a main road with traffic flowing throughout the day and situated between a residential area, a disability centre, Dobson park (a sporting oval) and Ferntree Gully College. The park layout consists of many features including two ‘lakes’ with fountain, attracting wildlife (eg. pelicans, ducks), a mini creek with large rocks, bridges and gazebo, garden designs with paths and tree-type tags, a fenced play area with interesting play equipment for young to middle aged children and a bike track. The park facilities include BBQ’s, toilets, some shelter, an amphitheatre, night lighting and security cameras (or the appearance of).
- During school holidays, the park use appeared to be greater with users mainly consisting of grandparents with young children and families (one or two parent) with children (most likely under 10 years of age) who were using the picnic/BBQ facilities over the lunch period. The willingness to partake in the survey was also higher during the school holiday period.
- Similarly, on warmer, sunnier days the park usage also seemed higher with peoples’ attitudes tending to be more relaxed, resulting in greater willingness to participate.
- Generally the weather played a fairly key part in the duration of people’s stay in the park.
- During school term, the park users tended to be smaller groups (one adult with one or two children or elderly people as a pair or alone).
- Approximately 1 in 3 people approached declined to partake in the survey due to interference with family/personal time with their young child, friend or other family member.
- Parents with ‘middle’ aged children independently using the play equipment were generally willing to partake in the research (with supervision of play conducted from a nearby seat). Adults/parents with younger children were more hesitant (or distracted from giving the survey their full attention) due to a perception of decreased care or supervision in assisting their child on the play equipment.
- Most park users who were walking their dog were willing to participate in the survey with a relaxed disposition.
- The park was regularly used by a disability centre adjacent to Dobson Park.
- Many people used the park in a more visual manner from the confines of their car, eating lunch, conversing or resting.
Peregrine Reserve

- The reserve is a fairly large open space located within the gated community of Palmviews Estate. The facilities include a small, unfenced play area, a basketball court and walking path around a small fenced-off (prohibited) vegetated area. It has an uncomplicated layout with sparse vegetation and limited seating. Street parking is available.
- The reserve is not visible from the main road, nor are there signs directing people to the park.
- Most users were from the surrounding residential estate, generally being regular walking mothers and dog walkers, parent/s with young children using the play equipment or teenagers kicking the football or playing basketball. The users appeared to be few and far between with some walkers noted to be walking the circumference of the reserve (without entering) continuing into the neighbourhood streets.
- The use seemed considerably lower compared to that of the Tim Neville Arboretum.

Liberty Avenue Reserve

- The reserve is situated within Wellington Park Estate and next to a kindergarten and primary school. The layout is a triangle shape with an open-ended and raised walking/bike track along one side (serving a dual purpose for recreation and drainage). Part of the layout consists of a recreational/sporting oval used by the primary school. Facilities consist of a basketball and tennis court with an additional concreted area with a wall and a newly renovated (August, 2004) unfenced playground with the latest play equipment, seating, a few surrounding picnic tables and some freshly planted trees. Street parking is available on only one side of the reserve with a car-park shared with the kindergarten and school. No signs are visible from the main road (outside of the main estate entrance) directing potential users to the reserve.
- Since the playground renovations the park use has increased with high usage after school and on weekends.
- Most survey participants (the majority of users being parents with children) were approached when using the play equipment, with dog walkers/ walkers spasmodically using the open-ended path. Otherwise users were either cutting through the park or walking on the perimeter.
- Many participants partook in the survey when using the play equipment intermittently between collecting children from kindergarten and school.
- Potential participants, within/around the playground after school collection, were not always approached with many either highly involved in supervision (with play equipment inundated with children) or engaged socially.

Mountain Gate Shopping Centre and Stud Park Shopping Complex

- Mountain Gate Shopping Centre was an open-air strip of local shops with two neighbouring supermarkets. Stud Park, a newer development, was an enclosed complex, next to the local Knox City Council Library and opposite a Safeway store and fast food establishments.
- At Mountain Gate, there tended to be more passers-by, ‘wandering’ or browsing in a seemingly less pressured state as compared to Stud Park. This may just be an impression from the atmosphere created from the difference in design of the two centres: Stud Park is an enclosed, artificial environment (controlled air circulation and light) where shoppers are surrounded by more intense retail activity; at the Mountain Gate retail strip shoppers can only take in one or two retail establishments at a time and, being in the open air, are aware of weather and natural light.
- The survey refusal rate appeared to be higher at the shopping complexes (compared to parks or reserves) with many potential participants declining to partake, not stopping, ignoring or refusing to pause to hear about the purpose of the survey. This behaviour was explained by a few locals as a result of over saturation of market research, fund raisers, product promotion or selling.
- A common response was “no time” to complete survey with their attention directed to shopping tasks or other retail/service/business activities.
- People who were taking their tea/lunch break from work were less inclined to participate, often responding with an instant refusal, while many on a ‘smoke’ break were happy to partake.
- Shop-keepers were mostly willing to participate to “pass the time” while staffing their shop. Interestingly these participants seemed not to use parks or reserves in Knox area.
- Passers-by with dogs were nearly always park users and therefore were not surveyed.
- Many seated persons, who were easily targeted, were elderly.
- Most people approached to partake in the survey were non-park users.
Library
- A community resource, the library attracted many elderly people from the neighbouring retirement village.
- Situated next to Stud Park Shopping Centre, many parents dropped off their children to use the library facilities while they went shopping (and were not happy to participate in the research with time pressures to complete shopping).
- Most people approached at the Library who were willing to partake in the survey were non park users.

4.2 Survey data

Park Users
The vast majority of respondents to the park user survey were female (81%), and more than half (54%) were in the age range 30-44 years, with the remainder spread relatively evenly across the age groupings. More than two-thirds of respondents had secondary education as their highest level of education, with 23% having completed primary and some secondary education, and 46% having completed secondary education. The remaining 31% had undertaken some tertiary education. The following graph provides a detailed breakdown of the age of park user respondents.

![Figure 1: Park user respondents by age](image)

More than half of the respondents were from ‘young families’ (families in which the youngest child is aged less than six years) or ‘middle families’ (families with children aged 6-15 years). Figure 2 provides a detailed breakdown of park user respondents by lifecycle category.
Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) were Australian born, with people born in the United Kingdom (11%) the only other significant grouping. Not surprisingly, therefore, 91% of respondents said that they spoke English at home. Seventy-five per cent of park user respondents were residents of the City of Knox. Measured on Buckner’s ‘Neighbourhood Cohesion Scale’ (Buckner, 1988) to assess sense of community and community cohesion, park users indicated a relatively high level of social cohesion (a mean score of 3.63 on a scale of 1 – 5). (In both the user and non-user surveys, questions relating specifically to community or social cohesion were answered only by respondents who indicated that they were residents of the City of Knox.)

In terms of their health, the vast majority of park user respondents (91%) claimed to have ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ health (see Figure 3).

Similarly, the vast majority of park user respondents (87%) claimed to engage in physical activity of a moderate to intense level more than once a week (Figure 4).
These claims about health appear to be borne out by respondents’ use of doctors and/or medical services, with 35% of respondents having not used any such services in the three months prior to interview and a further 41% having used such services only once or twice (Figure 5). Given that the Australian average for use of medical services is 5.92 visits per year (AIHW 2004 p. 297), these figures suggest that park users in the City of Knox may well be using health services at a lower than average rate.
Most respondents (87%) were people who had previously visited the park in which they were surveyed, and almost 60% said that they had visited this same park more than 10 times in the past 12 month period. Almost a third of respondents (32%) claimed to have visited the park at least 51 times (and some up to 200-300 times) over the last 12 months. More than three-quarters (79%) of respondents’ visit to the park on the occasion on which they were surveyed was in the company of at least one other person, and in some cases up to nine other people. Living locally and therefore having local knowledge (73%) and word of mouth via friends or relatives (17%) were the main ways in which park users had found out about the open spaces they visited in Knox.

By far the highest proportion of respondents to the park user surveys gave ‘children’s play/use of the play equipment’ as either their main reason for using the park or as another activity they intended to undertake while in the park. This was true for 88 of the 150 respondents (59%), whereas 54 of the respondents (36%) cited exercise as their main or secondary purpose, and 27 (18%) cited walking their dog as their main or secondary purpose. These figures, however, should be interpreted with some caution, as to some extent the nature of these activities may have influenced the likelihood of the participants being interviewed. Parents and grandparents supervising children on play equipment, for example, were easily able to be approached by the researchers and were happy to remain in one place long enough to complete the survey. By contrast, some dog walkers or people out walking for exercise were unwilling to stand in one place for the time necessary to complete the survey. Moreover, the location of the walking path alongside the playground in one of the parks meant that, although the researchers observed dog walkers and exercisers walking past the playground, they were unable to survey them if they were already in the process of surveying others.

When asked about the benefits they gained through use of the park (see Figure 6), respondents overwhelmingly noted benefits in terms of increased opportunity for physical activity (95% agree, strongly agree or very strongly agree), a sense of personal satisfaction (91%), improved physical health (95%) and improved mental health (94%). Furthermore, 76% of respondents agreed that use of the open space areas provided a sense of community or belonging. When one takes into account that those who only ‘slightly agreed’ with these benefits are not included in these figures, it becomes clear that the beneficial impacts of open space are widely recognized by park users.

**Figure 6: Perceived benefits gained from use of open space**

The satisfaction of respondents with the park facilities was extremely high, with 98% claiming to be ‘satisfied’ (15%), ‘very satisfied’ (50%) or ‘fully satisfied’ (33%). Of the remainder, two people claimed to be dissatisfied and one chose ‘don’t know’ as their response. Despite this high level of satisfaction, in terms of suggestions for the open space areas, many ideas were put forward, the most common of which focused on the need for:

- improved drainage;
- more shade and/or shelter, particularly around playground and barbecue areas;
- a playground to suit younger children (pre-schoolers);
- increased (and better maintained) seating;
• more shrubs, trees, flowers, colour, and better maintenance of plants;
• more toilets and better maintained/improved toilets; and
• elimination of vandalism and graffiti.

When asked about their experience of the open space area on the occasion on which they were surveyed (Figure 7 below), the following responses were received:

• 98% agreed or strongly agreed it was a pleasant place to visit;
• 97% agreed or strongly agreed that they could enjoy themselves at this open space area;
• 95% said that spending time in this open space area gave them a break from their routine;
• 93% agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to find the way around this open space area;
• 89% agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to see how things were organized in this open space area;
• 76% agreed or strongly agreed that this open space area is a place to get away from it all.

The negative responses were relatively low: only 20% of people agreed (and none strongly agreed) that it is chaotic at this open space area; only 17% agreed and 1% strongly agreed that it was too crowded; and 28% agreed and 7% strongly agreed that there is a great deal of distraction at this open space area. Care needs to be taken in interpreting this last set of figures (about 'distraction'), as some people interpreted this as being a positive (eg. having lots of things to do and see) while others linked this in a negative way to things such as heavy traffic or too much happening or too many people.

There were some responses to positive statements, however, which received less overwhelming support than those listed above. For example, just over two-thirds of respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed that “this place is natural”. Similarly, just 60% agreed or strongly agreed that “this place has fascinating qualities”. Only 41% agreed or strongly agreed that “this place has a powerful effect”. These responses suggest that there is scope to enhance the open space areas in ways that prompt a greater level of engagement with these areas in environmental terms.
Figure 7: Participants’ experience of the particular park environment on the day of interview.
Participants’ responses to the park environments in which they were interviewed indicated that many felt that ‘natural places’ were less structured, and that ‘natural’ was a term more appropriately applied to naturally-occurring park environments such as national parks than to a ‘human-made’ park environment such as these parks. The researchers discerned a belief amongst many respondents that ‘powerful’ was too strong a word for such ‘artificial’ park environments.

While users expressed a high level of satisfaction with the parks in which they were interviewed, nevertheless they recognized that additional measures could be taken to encourage non-users to begin using the parks and/or to encourage a greater level of use by current users (Figure 8). Among the measures supported by current users were: the use of a deliberate campaign to promote increased use of the open space as a means of promoting health and wellbeing (78%); promoting increased awareness of the benefits to be gained through open space use (75%); and improved publicity about parks and reserves in Knox (51%).

As well as the main strategies identified above as likely to encourage greater use of Knox parks and reserves, some additional suggestions included: improving and/or adding (where not currently available) amenities and facilities within the parks and reserves; running community activities in parks and open spaces to involve families and people in the neighbourhood; using kindergartens and schools as a means of educating children and youth about the parks and reserves; running promotions via community groups or activity groups (such as gardening clubs or walking groups); providing specific attractions such as a café, a barbecue, or using a creative layout or design to encourage interest; and ensuring better access for people in wheelchairs or with prams.

Over 41% of park users identified no barriers which might discourage people from using parks and open space within Knox. Among the barriers identified by the other 59% of respondents, three were noted by 11 respondents (6.4%). They were: security and safety issues, including lighting at night; vandalism and rubbish; and lack of shelter and seating. Lack of fencing around the play area and around a pond was noted by 5.2% of respondents, and the problems associated with conflicts of interest between different user groups were noted by 4.7%. Poor facilities and lack of maintenance were noted by 4.1% of respondents, as was location near a busy road, and the discouragement flowing from anti-social behaviour by some park users.

**Non-Users**

The age profile of non-users varied markedly from that of users, with the non-user survey recording only 26% of people in the 30-44 years age bracket (compared with 54% for park users), but 29% in the 18-29 years age bracket (compared with 10% for park users). ‘Seniors’ – people aged 60 and above – formed a significant proportion of both samples (18% of both non-users and users).
In terms of level of education achieved, a slightly lower proportion of non-user respondents had secondary education as their highest level of education (63% compared with 69% of park users), and a slightly higher proportion had undertaken tertiary study (37% compared with 31% of park users). Both the age differences and the variations in education level between users and non-users may have been influenced by the locations in which the non-user sample was recruited, as the retail sector is popular with young people, especially students, as a casual employment option.

There was greater variation between the samples, however, in terms of lifecycle stage – perhaps a reflection of the differences in age distribution in the two groups. Only 24% of non-user respondents were in the ‘young families’ and ‘middle families’ categories (compared with 54% among the park user sample), whereas 37% were in the ‘mature families’ (with all children over 16 years) or the older couple categories (compared with 25% among park users).
Among the non-user respondents, just over two-thirds (67%) were Australian born, with people born in the United Kingdom making up the only other significant grouping (11%). Despite the fact that there was a higher proportion of respondents born other than in Australia or the United Kingdom, a lower proportion (only 7%) of non-user respondents spoke a language other than English at home.

By comparison with the park user sample, a much smaller proportion of the non-user sample was comprised of Knox residents (53% compared with 75% for park users). This may reflect a trend for people to travel further for shopping than for recreation in a municipal park. However, it is also likely to be a reflection of the fact that a proportion of those surveyed were on a break from work, and that people may travel a longer distance for work than they do either for shopping or recreation. Interestingly, the sense of community/community cohesion within the non-user group was lower than for the user group. Measured on Buckner’s ‘Neighbourhood Cohesion Scale’ (Buckner, 1988), non-users scored a mean of 3.48 – still a relatively high level of social cohesion but lower than the score for park users of 3.63. This appears to lend weight to the claim by both groups that use of parks contributes to a sense of community or belonging.

The proportion of respondents assessing their health status as ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ totaled the same in both samples – 91%. However, a greater proportion of non-users rated their health as only ‘good’ (46%, compared with 35% for park users), and a smaller proportion claimed ‘very good’ health (31%, compared with 43% of park users).
Similarly, while the same proportions of both samples claimed to engage in physical activity of a moderate to intense level more than once a week (64%), a smaller proportion of non-users engaged in such activity on a weekly basis (18% compared with 23% of park users), and therefore more non-users than users fell into the category of those who undertake such exercise only fortnightly or less.

![Level and Frequency of Physical Activity](image)

Figure 12: Non-user respondents by level of physical activity

Given the slightly lower levels of physical activity among the non-user group, one might anticipate a slightly higher level of medical service usage. This was not reflected in the survey, with non-user respondents demonstrating a lower frequency of medical service usage in the three months prior to the survey. One possible explanation for this is the greater proportion of this sample within the less than 29 years age range.

![Frequency of Medical Visits in a Three Month Period](image)

Figure 13: Non-user respondents by frequency of medical visits

Although all respondents to the non-user survey were included on the basis that they do not currently use any parks or reserves within the City of Knox, almost half of the non-users (49%) had used parks or reserves in Knox at some time within the past 12 months. When asked of any alternative means by which they gained the benefits that park users gain through their open space use, non-users highlighted mechanisms such as: walking, including walking around the block or as part of a walking group (18.7%); gym or aerobics (8.4%); sport, including golf (7.8%); going to the movies (5.9%); bike
riding, including an exercise bike (5.4%); use of other parks or open space areas (4.9%); gardening (4.4%); and going to shopping centres (3.4%). Whilst the range of benefits perceived to be gained through use of parks may be met in part or in full by some of these activities, not all of these alternatives offer the combination of benefits gained through park use.

Reasons given by non-users for their lack of current use of parks and reserves within Knox included: being too busy (21%); not having a purpose for using the parks because their children have grown up and/or are no longer living with them (10%); weather-related factors (8%); having other hobbies or entertainment (6.5%); lacking information on Knox parks and reserves (6.5%); distance from Knox parks (6.5%); and use of parks outside the Knox area (5.5%). Interestingly, none of the key issues identified by current users as barriers to use of the parks and reserves were noted by non-users as main reasons for their lack of use of open space in Knox. [To some extent this may reflect the advantage of interviewing people in the location about which they are being questioned. Respondents to the park user survey had the advantage of being in a park at the time of the interview, and therefore of having the opportunity to take cues from their surrounds, both in terms of assessing park amenities and the like, and also in terms of recalling specific issues.] However, non-user respondents did identify some 'additional barriers' to use similar to those identified by users, including lack of fencing, closeness to roads, vandalism, rubbish, inadequate paths, safety issues, conflicts of interest between user groups.

Despite the relatively high level of prior park usage by self-proclaimed ‘non-users’, the perceived level of knowledge about parks and reserves in Knox was quite poor in this group, with only 14% of respondents claiming to have a high or very high level of knowledge about the Knox open space areas. In addition to improved publicity about parks and reserves in Knox being supported as a mechanism for encouraging current non-users to engage with open space in Knox (68%), the running of a deliberate campaign to promote increased use of the open space as a means of promoting health and wellbeing (87%) and promoting increased awareness of the benefits to be gained through open space use (78%) were seen as other valuable mechanisms.

Despite claiming not to know a lot about Knox parks and reserves, and claiming to be non-users, respondents in this group had strong views on the benefits to be gained through people’s use of open space in Knox. As the following graph (Figure 14) indicates, like park users, non-users recognized the benefits in terms of opportunities for physical activity (94%), for relaxation and recreation (93%), improved physical health (92%), improved mental health (90%) and personal satisfaction (82%).

![Benefits Gained From Use of Open Space](Image)

Figure 14: Non-user respondents by perceptions of benefits gained by park users from their use of open space

**Analysis of park user findings by site**

Although the surveys of park users at each of the park sites included people drawn from diverse segments of the population, particular population groups appear to be attracted to the different sites. For example, whereas respondents in the lifecycle categories of ‘older couple’ and ‘mature single’ were strongly represented among those surveyed at both the Tim Neville Arboretum (39%) and
Peregrine Reserve (34%), these same groups made up only 16% of respondents at Liberty Avenue Reserve. Conversely, ‘young family’ and ‘middle family’ sectors comprised 74% of respondents at Liberty Avenue Reserve, 50% of those at Peregrine Reserve but only 38% of those at the Tim Neville Arboretum.

Several factors are likely to have contributed to this variation. The Liberty Avenue Reserve is located adjacent to a kindergarten and a primary school, and many of the surveys undertaken there were conducted at a ‘high peak’ time for those facilities – in the afternoon, coinciding with the beginning and end of kindergarten sessions and with the end of the school day. The presence in the park of adults who fit into the ‘young family’ category may reflect parents who had collected children from kindergarten and were using the park to fill in time while waiting to collect older children when school finished.

The age group distribution also varied across the sites, as indicated in the graph below (Figure 16).

While only two individuals expressed dissatisfaction with the parks in which they were surveyed, the level of satisfaction varied across the sites. Whereas 95% of users at the Tim Neville Arboretum were either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘fully satisfied’, only 42% of Peregrine Reserve users and 75% of Liberty Avenue Reserve users expressed that same high level of satisfaction.
Similarly, there were variations in the recognition of particular benefits arising from use of the different parks/open spaces. Undoubtedly, this is at least in part a reflection of the variation in park design, layout, facilities and position (see section 3 above for descriptions). For example, recognition of the opportunities to learn about the local environment (Figure 18) provided by respondents’ use of the open space areas was much higher at Peregrine Reserve (where 84% chose ‘agree’, ‘strongly agree’ or ‘very strongly agree’) than at either the Tim Neville Arboretum (56%) or Liberty Avenue Reserve (24%). Likewise, a greater proportion of users of Peregrine Reserve (58%) when compared with users of the Tim Neville Arboretum (32%) and of Liberty Avenue Reserve (25%) acknowledged that they gained an opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the environment (Figure 19).
Despite the relatively low level of ‘satisfaction’ expressed by users of Peregrine Reserve (see Figure 17 above), 100% of users surveyed there acknowledged that their use of the Reserve provided them with both improved physical health and improved mental health. High proportions of users of Liberty Avenue Reserve also acknowledged physical health benefits (96%) and mental health benefits (93%). The proportion of users of the Tim Neville Arboretum acknowledging physical health benefits (68%) and mental health benefits (70%), whilst still substantial, was comparatively low. Similar variations were found in users’ acknowledgement of benefits such as opportunities for relaxation or recreation (100% at Peregrine Reserve, 82% at Liberty Avenue Reserve and 73% at the Tim Neville Arboretum), a sense of personal satisfaction (100% at Peregrine Reserve, 89% at Liberty Avenue Reserve and 67% at the Tim Neville Arboretum), and opportunities for physical activity (100% at Peregrine Reserve, 95% at Liberty Avenue Reserve and 71% at the Tim Neville Arboretum).

Across all sites, there was general agreement that the best ways of encouraging current non-users to use the open space areas would be through increasing people’s awareness of the potential benefits of using such areas (84% of Tim Neville Arboretum respondents, 75% of Peregrine Reserve respondents and 64% of Liberty Avenue Reserve respondents), and through a deliberate campaign to foster increased use of open space areas as a means of promoting health and wellbeing (86% Tim Neville Arboretum, 76% Peregrine Reserve and 69% Liberty Avenue Reserve).

In terms of the ‘place experience’ of respondents on the occasion on which they were surveyed, there was a high level of agreement (based on combining the percentages of those who chose ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’) across all three sites about the following statements:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>TNA %</th>
<th>PR %</th>
<th>LAR %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) This is a pleasant place to visit</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) This place is natural</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) This place has fascinating qualities</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) There is a great deal of distraction</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) I can enjoy myself here</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) This is a place to get away from it all</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) It is chaotic here</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) This place has a powerful effect</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) Spending time here gives me a break from my day-to-day routine</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j) There is much to explore and discover here</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k) It is easy to see how things are organised</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l) This place is too crowded</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m) It is easy to find my way around here</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notable exceptions to the high cross-site comparability appear to relate to the differing nature of the sites. For example, Peregrine Reserve is perceived to be more ‘natural’ than the other sites and to offer more opportunity “to get away from it all”, while Liberty Avenue Reserve is perceived as having less ‘fascination’ and to be a less ‘powerful’ place; the Tim Neville Arboretum offers more ‘distraction’ and more opportunities for exploration and discovery, and is perceived as less ‘crowded’ than the other sites.

The final question on both the user and non-user surveys included the opportunity for respondents to indicate a desire to (a) receive information about parks and open space in Knox and (b) receive information about opportunities to participate in the planning, development and maintenance of open space in Knox. Not surprisingly, users were more interested than non-users, but there was interest on both counts among both users and non-users, as the following figures show.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interested in receiving information about …</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Non-users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parks and open space in Knox</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to participate in the planning, development and maintenance of open space in Knox</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contact details for people requesting information will be provided to Council officers separately from this report.

### 4.3 Focus Group Findings

As noted above, the purpose of the focus groups was to explore further the barriers to and potential for the increased use of open space areas within Knox (including those identified through the surveys) as a way of promoting health, wellbeing and social connectedness. The focus groups also offered an opportunity to explore in some depth any specific issues facing two particular sub-groups of the population – young people and people with a disability. A set of six (6) discussion ‘starters’ were used in the focus groups, though the ways in which these points were used in each group varied. In one group (the users/non-users group) there was particularly free-flowing discussion which tended to range across the issues without specific need for every question to be posed, whereas in the other two
groups, the questions were used to keep the discussion flowing when it tended to ‘dry up’. The questions were:

1. How often do you go to/use parks in the City of Knox?
2. What do you use the parks for?
3. What has it been like for you using the City of Knox parks?
4. What are the barriers (if any) to you and to other people using parks within the City of Knox?
5. What would need to happen to encourage increased use of parks within the City of Knox: (a.) generally; and (b.) for young people/people with a disability?
6. What (if any) other issues would you like to raise about parks and park usage in the City of Knox?

In relation to the first discussion point – the frequency of use of parks and open space within the City of Knox – there was no clear pattern of use, with frequency of use appearing to be dependent on the circumstances of the individual, the nature of the parks and open space areas themselves, and other intervening conditions. For some of the older members of the focus groups, factors such as competing time demands (for example the need to spend significant time in their private gardens), and weather conditions (either too cold, too wet or too hot) could influence park usage.

Overall, views of focus group participants concerning the parks and open space areas in Knox were positive, with recognition that Knox has a variety of parks and open space areas of different types which, taken together, provide a range of opportunities for Knox residents to have contact with nature and the outdoors. Because of the nature of the questions asked and the make-up of two of the focus groups (youth, people with a disability), the data which emerged from the groups highlighted issues and concerns specific to those population groups. This should not be interpreted as being representative of the population as a whole, and therefore as being of greater import than the survey, but rather as providing a depth of understanding in relation to these specific issues and specific population groups. The following key themes were highlighted in the focus groups:

- Accessibility
- Social connectedness/social exclusion
- Safety
- Amenities
- Maintenance
- Other barriers
- Possible strategies

**Accessibility**

Whilst acknowledging the quantity and variety of parks within the City of Knox, participants highlighted accessibility of parks as a major factor influencing their use. A park close to home where people wanting to walk their dog could do so without having to drive to gain park access, where young people could meet with their friends without having to catch public transport, and where the elderly who are being encouraged to “use it or lose it” (for example, through health promotion and falls prevention programs) can go for gentle exercise, was seen as more likely to be used than a less accessible park.

“Convenience … it needs to be close by unless you’re going for a very specific purpose. You’re not just going to jump on a bus to go to a park to just sit.”

It was recognized that people might drive a distance to access a particular park on an occasional basis (especially a large facility such as Jells Park), but that frequent park usage was more likely to be associated with parks being in close proximity to users’ homes.

Disruptions to accessibility were identified as factors undermining park usage. Instances were given of parks which were “closed” at certain times (i.e. fenced off with people locked out except during ‘opening hours’), set aside for particular sporting activities, or even replaced by shops. Focus group
participants felt that this undermined residents’ access to parks, and that poor access would in turn undermine frequent park usage.

As well as access to parks, access within parks was highlighted as a major factor undermining park usage. For example, people in wheelchairs and people with young children in prams or strollers suffer from physical inaccessibility in parks because of lack of continuity and/or appropriateness of pathways. Instances were cited of inappropriate vegetation over pathways (eg. trees with overhanging branches) which are hazards undermining park access for people with visual impairment. Inappropriate design of amenities within parks, such as toilet blocks, drinking fountains and barbecues, may make them inaccessible to wheelchair-bound users, and therefore discourage use of parks by this sector of the population. One participant commented:

“My experience is that parks aren’t designed for wheelchairs …I used to go to the park up the road from me; there was a little bit that you could access and that was the car park and then there was an oval that was all sort of bumpy grass area, so it wasn’t friendly to (wheelchair-bound people). … I went to a special school where I could roam free; there were nice little pathways; they designed the open space knowing that there’d be people in wheelchairs who’d just want to drive around for hours and hours. The ones that are in main stream society aren’t built like that.”

**Social connectedness/social exclusion**

Focus group participants highlighted the fact that parks and open spaces naturally foster social connectedness. As one participant commented:

“When you walk in the park, if you say ‘Good morning’ to somebody, they’re more likely to say ‘Good morning’ back; but if you’re walking down the street and you say ‘Good morning’, they look at you like ‘who are you’?! Parks help people relate quicker.”

In the focus group comprised of young people, there was debate about whether particular facilities in parks (eg. a skate ramp) might encourage one sector of the population (eg. youth) to use the space but at the same time discourage another group (perhaps older people). But an example was also highlighted of a country town (Rutherglen) in which a playground, a skate park and a lawn bowls club were said to be all co-located without any evidence of tensions – potentially building connections between the different groups.

Several other examples of parks and open spaces as places either that connect and include people socially, or exclude people socially, were highlighted through the focus groups. In particular, one participant highlighted the value of parks for promoting inclusiveness, giving the example of people who provide family day care to children with a disability bringing those children to the park “and everyone playing together – it’s much easier to have that in a park”. However, the other side of the coin was also emphasized, with another participant recalling the park as a place “where I was reminded of my disability because I couldn’t go on the swings or I couldn’t go on the slide”.

Especially for parks which have as a key element the provision of sporting facilities such as basketball courts or football grounds, the strong sense of ‘ownership’ of these spaces by people who are able-bodied may result in the exclusion or ‘squeezing out’ of people with a disability. However, it was also noted that the same sort of social exclusion could occur with able-bodied people if they are not a member of the ‘in group’ or ‘gang’ which may be using the facilities at a given time.

**Safety**

Safety was a commonly expressed concern across all the focus groups, although the specific concerns varied. Broadly, safety concerns fell into three main categories: concerns associated with competing uses of the parks/open spaces; issues relating to perceived threats to personal safety from other people; and issues relating to safety in travelling to/accessing of parks and open spaces.

In all focus groups concerns were raised about safety in relation to competing uses of the parks/open spaces. Examples given included:
• concerns about shared cycle and walking tracks – particularly when cyclists (often young people) ride aggressively without due thought to the concerns of older walkers, or when people use them for motorbikes or motorized scooters;
• the danger associated with people practising golf in parks rather than on designated golfing areas, and the threat this poses to the safety of other park users in terms of being hit by a wayward golf ball;
• the issue of dogs roaming off-lead – particular concern was expressed that people (and especially wheelchair-bound people) may feel “defenceless” and be anxious about being attacked by a dog which is roaming free.

Overall, perceived threats to personal safety did not form a major part of the focus group discussions. Nevertheless, some specific issues were raised, such as:

• the lack of any emergency telephone system which could be used by people who are feeling harassed or under threat;
• being confronted in parks by “drug users” and “people that you feel threatened by”;
• lack of lighting or poor lighting, creating shadowed areas where people feel less safe;
• a perception that females using parks may feel more vulnerable than males.

The observation was made that if parks are perceived (for example, by parents) as either unsafe or as undesirable places to go, this perception may filter down through the generations and discourage people from using them.

Overlaps between safety issues and accessibility issues occurred to some extent. For example, attention was drawn to:

• perceptions that bus stops and train stations where there are used syringes and poor lighting may discourage people from catching public transport to use parks (and may therefore reduce park use by those without private transport);
• the unreasonably short time given by pedestrian lights for people crossing major roads to access parks and open space – this was said to be true for able-bodied people, but worse still for those who are wheelchair-bound;
• lack of continuity of pathways, the lack of concreted pathways in to some parks, and the unsafe positioning of bus stops (“around the bus stops it’s impossible because they’re just built on the edge of a hill”).

**Amenities**

Generally speaking, focus group participants expressed the view that the amenities within Knox parks are good. For example, it was recognized that the location of parks and “natural” areas close to residential areas is a ‘magnet’ attracting people to live in Knox. Similarly, the co-location of parks and bike paths was viewed favourably. However, it was observed that some amenities were absent, and some were not always available. For example, it was noted that:

• toilet facilities may not always be available to park users because of being locked, and this is a discouragement, especially to older people;
• the absence of or non-functioning of features such as drinking taps may discourage use of parks;
• young people would be more likely to be attracted to a park which had a kiosk or small shop within or adjacent to it;
• in dull weather, some parks (especially those with predominantly native vegetation) may be unattractive because of the overall ‘greyness’ of the effect – use of specific plants to introduce colour and to brighten the outlook for park users was recommended;
• particularly for people with a disability, the emphasis on sporting facilities within parks and the lack of amenities set at heights that meet the needs of wheelchair-bound park users (eg. toilets, tables and seats, rubbish bins, barbecues, even sensory gardens) undermine the level of use of parks and open spaces by this sub-group of the population;
• some parks lack adequate barbecue facilities and areas of shelter from sun and/or rain;
• it would be helpful to have more park benches, and to have them regularly distributed within parks, so that (for example) elderly people or others who may have difficulty walking long distances would have an opportunity “to sit down, then walk a bit, then sit down again”.

In relation to the particular needs of people with a disability, it was stated:

“What’s available now is just not sufficient for people with disabilities … Often they say ‘people don’t use them so why bother?’ People don’t use them because they’re not useable!”

Maintenance

Maintenance of parks and open spaces and the equipment and amenities in them was seen as very important in encouraging people to use them.

“What places look like – (if) everything is all rusty and grey and dead, it puts people off.”

Focus group participants did not claim that parks and open space in Knox were poorly maintained overall, but they did note the following specific issues in relation to maintenance:

• park benches with railings snapped off;
• drinking taps that don’t work;
• fences which have become rusty;
• toilets that are not clean;
• vandalism - mentioned specifically in relation to the Tim Neville Arboretum.

Other barriers

A number of other factors which might impede or undermine use of parks and open spaces in Knox were identified through the focus groups. These included the following:

• some people may not use parks and open space areas because they may be unaware of their local parks and the amenities they offer;
• the tendency to look on visiting parks as an activity one does when one ‘goes away’ on holidays, rather than as an everyday activity undertaken on a local basis;
• time constraints and competing time demands – “most women work, don’t they, and juggle family and all the other commitments … just haven’t got the time physically to go to parks.”

Possible strategies

In addition to recognizing the need for the specific issues outlined throughout this section of the report to be addressed, a number of other strategies for promoting the use of parks and open space within Knox were identified through the focus groups. They predominantly reflected the view that the main factor influencing many of the people who do not use parks and open spaces in Knox is a lack of knowledge or understanding of the range of parks available and the facilities and amenities they offer. Key strategies identified by the focus group participants included:

• organizing performances in the park: The suggestion was made that public performances should be staged in the parks on a regular (perhaps monthly) basis, featuring local talent. Reflecting on the English tradition of bandstands in parks, it was noted that lots of local young people play in bands through school or through other settings. As well as featuring bands and choirs, it was recognized that there are probably many local people with other talents as entertainers, and that this could be used to provide public entertainment (but would at the same time provide an audience and recognition for local talent). It was suggested that people who attended the performances would become more aware of the parks and the amenities offered in them, and through that heightened awareness may become regular users of parks and open space;
• colourful posters and brochures:
Similarly, drawing the attention of people to their local parks by devising colourful posters and brochures was suggested – “posters saying ‘Have you tried your local park lately? Do you know where your local park is?’ or something like that” could be made available through (for example) libraries as a means of encouraging non-users to engage with local parks;

- media featuring a particular park:
  Participants noted that the Council has a regular column in local newspapers, and it was suggested that that column could be used from time to time to feature a particular park;

- promoting the parks to particular groups:
  This was, perhaps, a reflection of an underlying recognition by focus group members that the profile of park users in Knox is not representative of the population as a whole (eg. 2001 Census data shows that 81.6% of Knox residents were born in Australia or North-West Europe, whereas these population groups accounted for 85% of park users surveyed) with fewer young people and fewer people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups among park users. It was suggested that strategies such as promoting use of the parks to particular groups (for example, local scout groups), and organizing in the parks activities which would appeal to particular groups (for example, organizing exercise groups such as Tai Chi) should be adopted.
5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the study found a very high level of satisfaction among study respondents with the parks in Knox. Nevertheless, some areas in which improvements could be made were identified, both as a means of improving the park use experience by current users and of encouraging non-users to access these parks and open spaces. There was a perception that many Knox residents were not aware of the parks and open space areas in the municipality, or of the amenities offered within these areas.

The responses to the multiple choice options about benefits gained through use of the open space areas indicated a very high level of recognition among respondents of the health and wellbeing benefits provided by parks and open space, and a slightly lower (but still substantial) level of awareness of the community cohesion/social capital benefits flowing from use of parks. However, the minimal articulation of such benefits in the focus groups suggests that, while intuitively people may recognize that parks make them feel better, the level of unprompted community recognition of the specific health, wellbeing and social capital benefits flowing from park use is limited.

This is in contrast to the recognition of such benefits by the Council as evidenced by the commissioning of this research and by the reference to such benefits in the City of Knox Open Space Plan (see p. 4 above). Given the key role played by local government in promoting health and wellbeing (through mechanisms such as Municipal Public Health Plans), the findings of this study suggest that there is scope for the municipality to take more action to promote the use of parks, specifically to increase the proportion of the population and the range of population groups accessing these benefits. The study findings indicate that some sectors of the population are more inclined or more able to access parks (and the benefits that flow from park use) than other groups. The study has identified a number of barriers to use of parks and open spaces, particularly in relation to specific sub-groups of the population such as people with a disability. There are obvious actions which can be taken by Council to address these barriers. Overall, in addition to actions to address barriers affecting specific sub-groups, respondents to both the users and non-users surveys agreed that Council should consider three strategies to promote the use of parks and open spaces within the municipality:

- conducting a deliberate health promotion campaign centred on parks and open spaces in Knox;
- a campaign to heighten awareness of the benefits flowing from use of such spaces; and
- improved publicity within the municipality about the range of parks and open spaces and the amenities they offer.

Given the importance placed by study respondents on maintenance of parks and open spaces, there appears to be potential for the ‘symbiotic relationship’ between social capital and natural capital (noted on p. 6 above) to be exploited by Council. This could contribute to the achievement of multiple goals, such as improving park maintenance and promoting greater usage of parks, but also maximizing the health benefits associated with the municipality’s parks and open spaces. For example, the Council could establish groups of volunteers to contribute to the management and maintenance of the various parks within the City of Knox (so-called ‘friends of parks groups’).

Evidence from other studies undertaken by the Deakin University team responsible for this project indicates that there are increased health, wellbeing and social capital benefits that flow from engagement in volunteer environmental activities (so-called ‘civic environmentalism’), over and above the benefits gained by simple use of such environments (eg. Townsend & Marsh, 2004). Moreover, the activities of ‘friends of parks groups’ have been found to provide support and encouragement to council staff involved in the management of parks and open spaces, enabling them to achieve improved environmental outcomes and to feel less overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks they confront (Townsend & Marsh, 2004). The user survey results, which indicate that relatively few park users currently perceive they have opportunities to contribute to the improvement of the environment (58% of Peregrine Reserve respondents, 32% of Tim Neville Arboretum respondents, and 25% of Liberty Avenue Reserve respondents), suggest that the establishment of ‘friends of parks groups’ associated with the various parks and open space areas within Knox is likely to be well received by current park users.

In addition to improving the maintenance of the parks and open space areas, the establishment of ‘friends of parks groups’ would provide a cost effective mechanism by which Council could monitor the
use of parks and open space areas, and keep abreast with users’ views. In particular, in addition to ‘hands-on’ environmental work, such ‘friends groups’ could undertake surveys on a regular basis – perhaps annually (under the guidance of Council staff) to monitor changes in:

- the demographic profile of park users;
- the frequency of use by individual users;
- the main purposes of park use;
- users’ satisfaction with the parks;
- the barriers which might discourage people from using parks;
- the recognition of specific types of benefits from park use;
- the self-rated health of park users; and
- the social connectedness of park users (using a tool such as social network mapping).

A draft survey form, which could provide the basis for such a survey, is attached (see Appendix 1). The data gathered through the current study would provide a baseline against which changes could be measured.

Additional monitoring could also be undertaken. For example, if Council was to adopt the three strategies outlined above (see p. 28), it may be of value to implement them sequentially and in an incremental manner, monitoring the impacts after each stage. The obvious first stage would be the implementation of a publicity program to raise public awareness of the range and nature of parks and open space areas within Knox and the amenities they offer. The second stage would be a campaign (perhaps through local media, posters, leaflets and the like) to heighten awareness of the range of potential benefits to be gained through use of parks and open space areas in Knox. The third stage would involve Council implementing a specific health promotion campaign associated with the parks and open space areas (perhaps encouraging particular sub-groups of the population, such as people from CALD backgrounds, retired people, people with particular health problems to use parks and/or to become involved in a local ‘friends group’). By undertaking a monitoring exercise after each phase of the program, Council would obtain valuable information about the efficacy of each strategy.

This report provides a strong basis from which the City of Knox can move forward to optimize the engagement of local residents with the parks and open space areas in the municipality. Based on the findings of this study, any increase in the use of parks and open space areas by residents of the municipality is likely to have benefits in terms of health, wellbeing and social connectedness. If Council does succeed in expanding the engagement of local community members in the management and maintenance of parks and open space areas, it can feel confident that in doing so it is likely to have benefits not only for the Council and its officers, but also even greater benefits for the individual citizens than can be gained through simple park use.
REFERENCES:


