

My Suburban Life

Introduction

In the many conversations I've had with children and young people over the past eight years, thousands of South Australia's youngest residents have told me about the perspectives they have on the world around them.

What is clear from what they've told me is that where they grow up has a profound influence on their lives. It determines what facilities are available to them, their access to and from school, what

opportunities for activity and employment are available, and it can mean the difference between 'getting on' in life or feeling left out.

Yet despite how influential where you grow up is, children's views on where they live are seldom sought or considered, which is why I decided to ask primary school students to draw their local neighbourhood. I wanted to gather their insights into what they see and how they connect to the world around them, including what they find is the most challenging thing about where they live and what they would change if they could.

Throughout childhood the local neighbourhood is usually a child's main place of discovery, learning, entertainment, and activity; either fostering relaxation, play and social interaction, or hindering it.

Children are highly dependent on the resources, facilities and amenities on offer in their local communities, particularly when they are not old enough to travel alone, and when their parents cannot afford the time or expense of taking them to destinations by car or public transport.

As a result, they tend to have a very immediate focus on their home, street, friends' homes, school, and on the activities they attend. It is extremely important, therefore, that local areas are fit for children to use; safe, interesting and accessible.

To better understand how children connect to their communities and what is important to them in the places they live, I visited students at a variety of South Australian primary schools across metropolitan Adelaide to ask them directly. My visits included primary schools in areas generally considered to be well off, as well as those in neighbourhoods where families are known to be doing it tough.

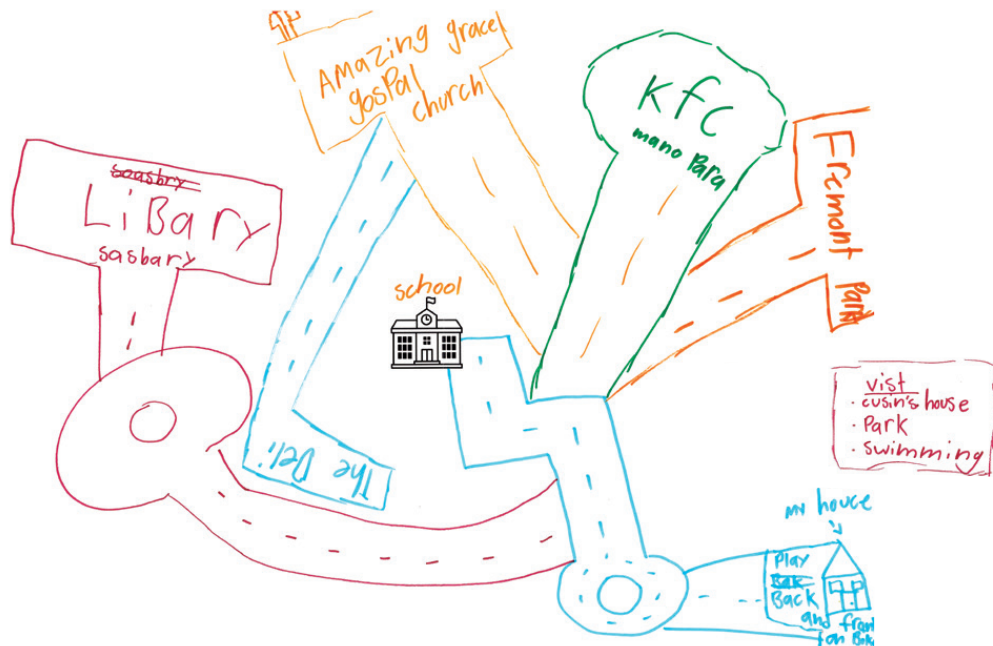
I began by asking children to draw me a map of their neighbourhood. Wherever I went, children wanted pretty much the same things. The most distinct differences their maps showed were not so much about what children wanted, but rather how well or not they connected to their communities depending on where they live.

What is clear from these insights is that neighbourhoods need to be child friendly and child safe. They need to be places where children have access to what they need to develop healthy, happy lives.

If we committed to placing children's and young people's best interests at the centre of decision-making around planning and building of local neighbourhoods, the positive impact this would have on South Australian children would be enormous. As their Commissioner it is incumbent upon me to continue to advocate for this prioritisation on their behalf.

Children are entitled to the same opportunities as their peers. These maps clearly show the disparities that currently exist between neighbourhoods in South Australia. They offer a place to start conversations about how we can build neighbourhoods that better distribute the wealth and opportunities more evenly, so that every child in South Australia has the same opportunities to thrive.

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children
and Young People, SA



What we did

In 2024, South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, visited 24 primary schools at which 728 students were supported to participate in an activity that involved mapping their local neighbourhood.

The Commissioner challenged these children to document how they engage with people and places across their communities. Each child drew their social networks, and the places they regularly go to, as well as which places they visit further afield when travelling with family or friends.

It was evident from what children mapped, that within each local government area at the suburb level, there are significant variations between neighbourhoods. These differences include availability and access children and their families have to community amenities and facilities, green space and transport options.

For simplicity, the Commissioner chose to classify differences that emerged between neighbourhoods into three distinct groups. This was done according to the similarity of the children and the demographics of the school they attend, in preference to what local government characteristics or geographical features each neighbourhood contained.

The three neighbourhood groupings are therefore reflective of the descriptive and representative images children mapped, including any descriptions they added about their day-to-day experiences.



What makes a neighbourhood great for children?

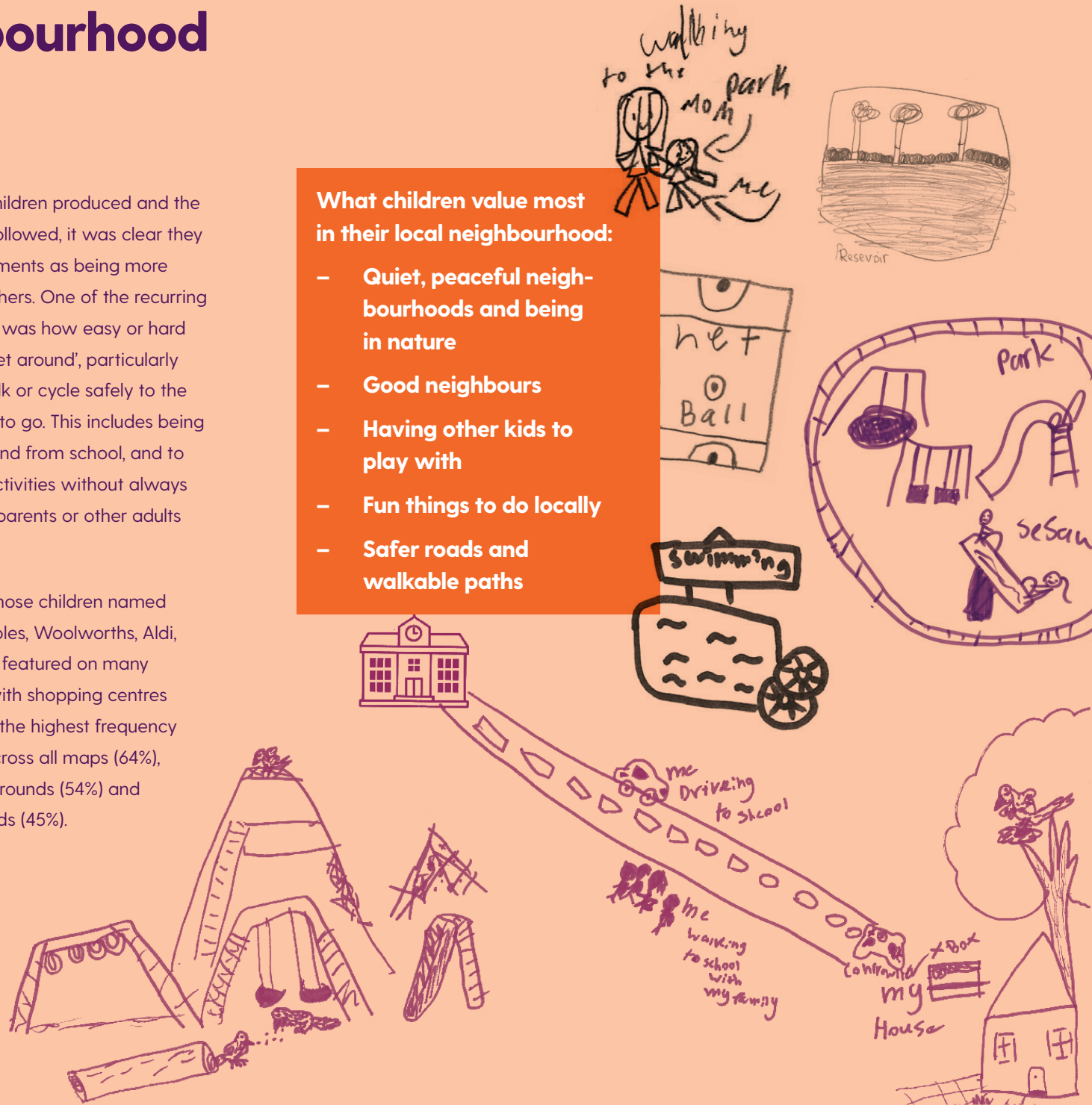
Where children live determines what variability they experience in accessing those things we know make a great neighbourhood. The neighbourhood that has great 'liveability' means it has parks and green spaces, public transport, community centres, youth hubs, local libraries, sporting facilities, swimming pools, shopping centres, museums, cinemas, and theatres. It also includes clean air, well maintained landscapes and safe travel corridors, with attention given to managing pollution and rubbish of all kinds.

From the map's children produced and the discussions that followed, it was clear they see particular elements as being more important than others. One of the recurring issues they raised was how easy or hard it is for them to 'get around', particularly their ability to walk or cycle safely to the places they want to go. This includes being able to travel to and from school, and to extra-curricular activities without always having to rely on parents or other adults to take them.

Shops, including those children named (Foodland, IGA, Coles, Woolworths, Aldi, BigW and Kmart) featured on many children's maps, with shopping centres in general having the highest frequency of appearance across all maps (64%), followed by playgrounds (54%) and then sports grounds (45%).

What children value most in their local neighbourhood:

- Quiet, peaceful neighbourhoods and being in nature
- Good neighbours
- Having other kids to play with
- Fun things to do locally
- Safer roads and walkable paths



Quiet, peaceful neighbourhoods and being in nature

Research suggests children with access to green space within walking distance of their home, demonstrate lower mental health difficulties than other children their age.¹

Children often talked about the calming affect that being in nature has on their mood and feelings. They told the Commissioner that they value peaceful surroundings that include having access to nature, birds and wildlife, and being in child-friendly streets where they can play freely and safely. They view these features as being important to their local community, and as having a positive impact on their overall health and wellbeing.

Good neighbours

The importance of having good neighbours was a factor children often raised. Some children defined a good neighbour as someone who is 'friendly', 'shares food', 'has kids they can play with', and 'returns balls if they go over the fence'.

Other children were more focused on their neighbours' negative traits with many describing how loud, disruptive or annoying they can be, particularly if they 'hold parties', 'yell a lot at night', or 'have dogs that bark all the time'.

“ I wish my neighbors stop swearing.”

“ I wish my left neighbour was quiet for once.”

Having other kids to play with

We know how important it is for children to have and to be with their friends. However, when we overlay this with what neighbourhoods look like for kids these days, we see it's harder for them to be with their friends.

Parents have more safety concerns for their children, and children themselves have heightened perceptions around their own safety. In practice, this means children are not enjoying the same freedoms their parents did growing up. They can't play freely and explore outside spaces and places 'away' from their homes without their parents worrying, or without their own fears around stranger danger restricting their choices. In many cases, if friends don't live close by (ie next door, or within easy walking distance) it's less likely children will meet up and play outside school hours on a regular basis.

“ My one wish is to have more kids in my neighbourhood to hang out with.”

“ I would really want is my friend to move next to my house.”

“ I wish for more kids.”



Fun things to do locally

Children's ideas for improving their local neighbourhood often centred around being able to do more fun things with other kids their age. They spoke about being able to access a quality playground, a tennis or football field, local pool or waterpark, skate park or pump track. They also enjoyed the prospect of having more access to art or acting classes. Dog parks and pet friendly places were also mentioned, as was having more opportunities to participate in sport and outdoor activities that intersect with fun things like ice cream trucks!

“ I wish I had a zipline park near my house.”

“ Want a soccer club close and cheap.”

Safer roads and walkable paths

It is a rare experience these days to find more than a few children in an upper primary school who are supported to use active travel. This includes walking, cycling, scootering or catching public transport to and from school each day. Instead, most school-aged children are driven to and from school every day.

No matter where they live, children and young people want safer roads and footpaths that will enable them to walk, cycle, scooter, or skate safely to and from their school more regularly, as well as to other places nearby.

A great neighbourhood for kids has the following:

- Places and spaces for children of all ages, genders, ability and cultural background, co-designed with input from children.
- Environments that are child-and youth-friendly that are welcoming, walkable, cyclable, vibrant, connected, and well-resourced.
- Transport corridors that are safe and which enable children to travel to and from school, the shops and to places they need to go without always being reliant upon an adult.
- Opportunities for children and young people to play, learn, work, be physically active, create, build confidence, and connect with other young people their age on a regular basis.
- Child and youth friendly community facilities such as public libraries, swimming pools, parks and playgrounds, youth hubs.
- Community facilities that are child and youth friendly with technology and equipment essential to their needs, eg. free WiFi and reliable access to the Internet at local libraries and community centres.

How to create child-friendly neighbourhoods

Engage children and young people in planning and decision making

In many suburbs, there are few spaces for older children to go. This lack of places and spaces for tweens and teens presents local councils with an opportunity to consult with young people on the design of their local neighbourhood.

Children and young people have plenty of ideas about what activities, resources and opportunities they would like to be able to pursue in their local communities. They need to be able to go to places where they can safely try new things, develop new interests, forge new friendships, and build new skills ranging from juggling to community gaming. Facilitating opportunities for children and young people to attend more community and cultural events will also help.

Open-up school grounds and facilities

One of the ways some local communities are making best use of public infrastructure is by opening up the grounds and facilities of their public schools out of school hours and on weekends. There are many great examples of schools around the state where this is being done successfully and sustainably. Some have community gardens, others offer community libraries, voting facilities, and share school sports facilities and training grounds with local sports clubs and teams.

There is plenty of research and literature supporting the use of school facilities for the benefit of a local community.² Supported in principle by the Department for Education, school leaders have been at the forefront of responding to and managing requests for use of their facilities for many years. Sadly, vandalism and public disorder incidents have deterred some schools from taking steps in this direction, but these are issues that can be worked through by those who see the value of schools being opened up after hours and on weekends.

Invest in public libraries

Planning and infrastructure decision makers need to find ways to create cool, safe, free public places and spaces, in which children and young people feel welcome to hang out, play, and get involved in sport and other activities they enjoy. They also need free Wi-Fi/charging facilities and reliable access to the Internet.

Public libraries, and the spaces around them, are great examples of child and youth friendly local infrastructure. Libraries are well known by children and young people as places they are actively welcomed with school holiday and out of school hour activities devised for them.

Create safe transport corridors to and from school and local facilities

By ensuring there are safe footpaths, cycle paths and crossings within the immediate area of local schools, children are more likely to want to make regular use of them. They're also more likely to have parental support to do so. Effective street lighting and signage will mean children and young

people will be able to travel to the places they need and like to go safely at earlier and later times of the day.

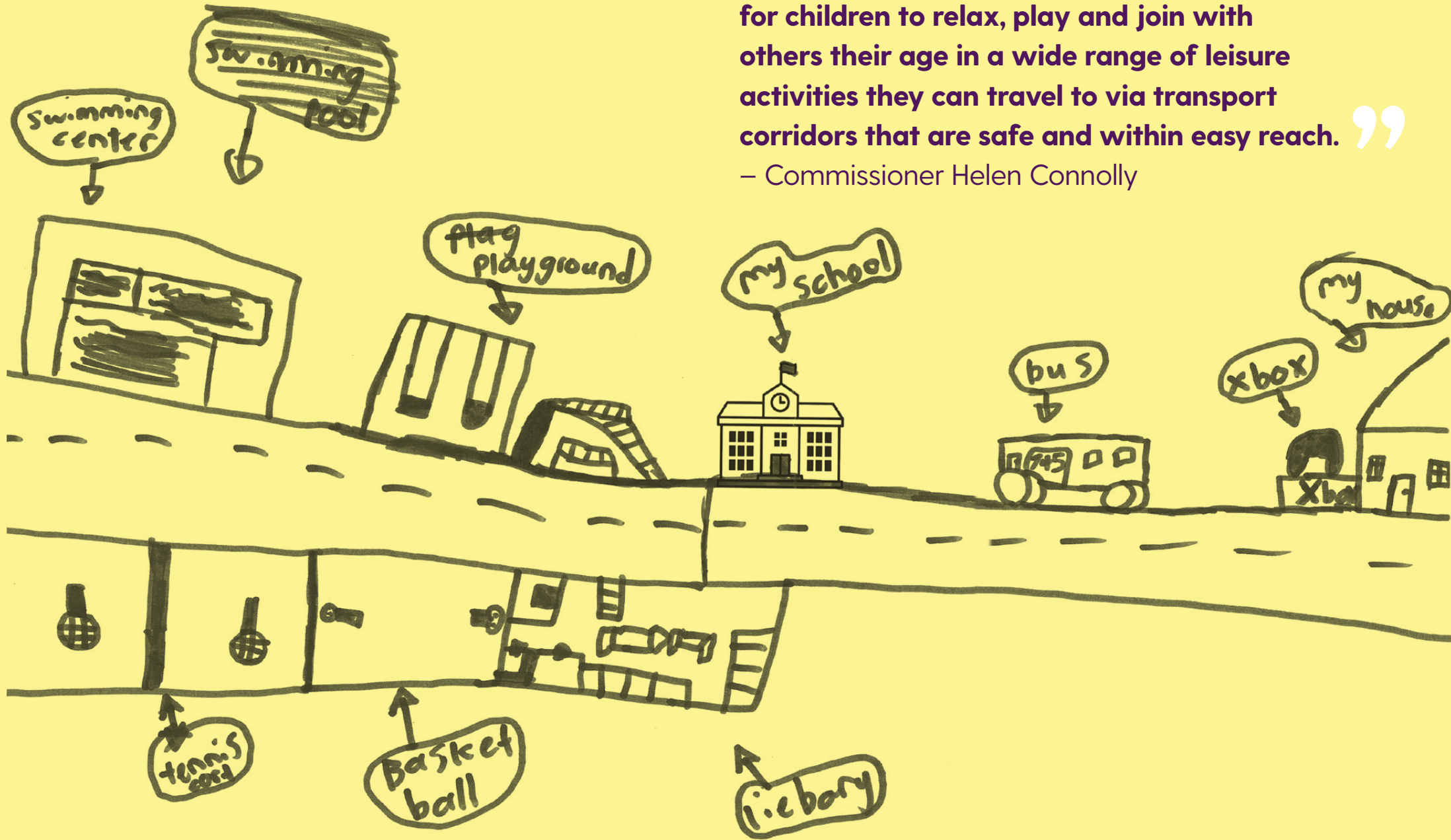
Establishing speed limits appropriate to the function of each road will have significant impact. Adopting 30kmph limits on streets where people live, play, go to school and shop, is considered the ideal by the World Health Organisation. Making a commitment to converting roads around schools, shops and parks to these speeds, while modifying existing roads to include features that calm traffic will help to make neighbourhoods safer for everyone.

Consider safety from the perspective of children

Local Councils, schools and community groups should actively engage children on safety and ask them what they need to feel safe. This may include strategies like putting fences around playgrounds, cleaning public pathways, planting more trees, minimising noise pollution, or adding better lighting. It is important that a diversity of views is sought to ensure the multiple dimensions of safety from children's perspective are addressed.

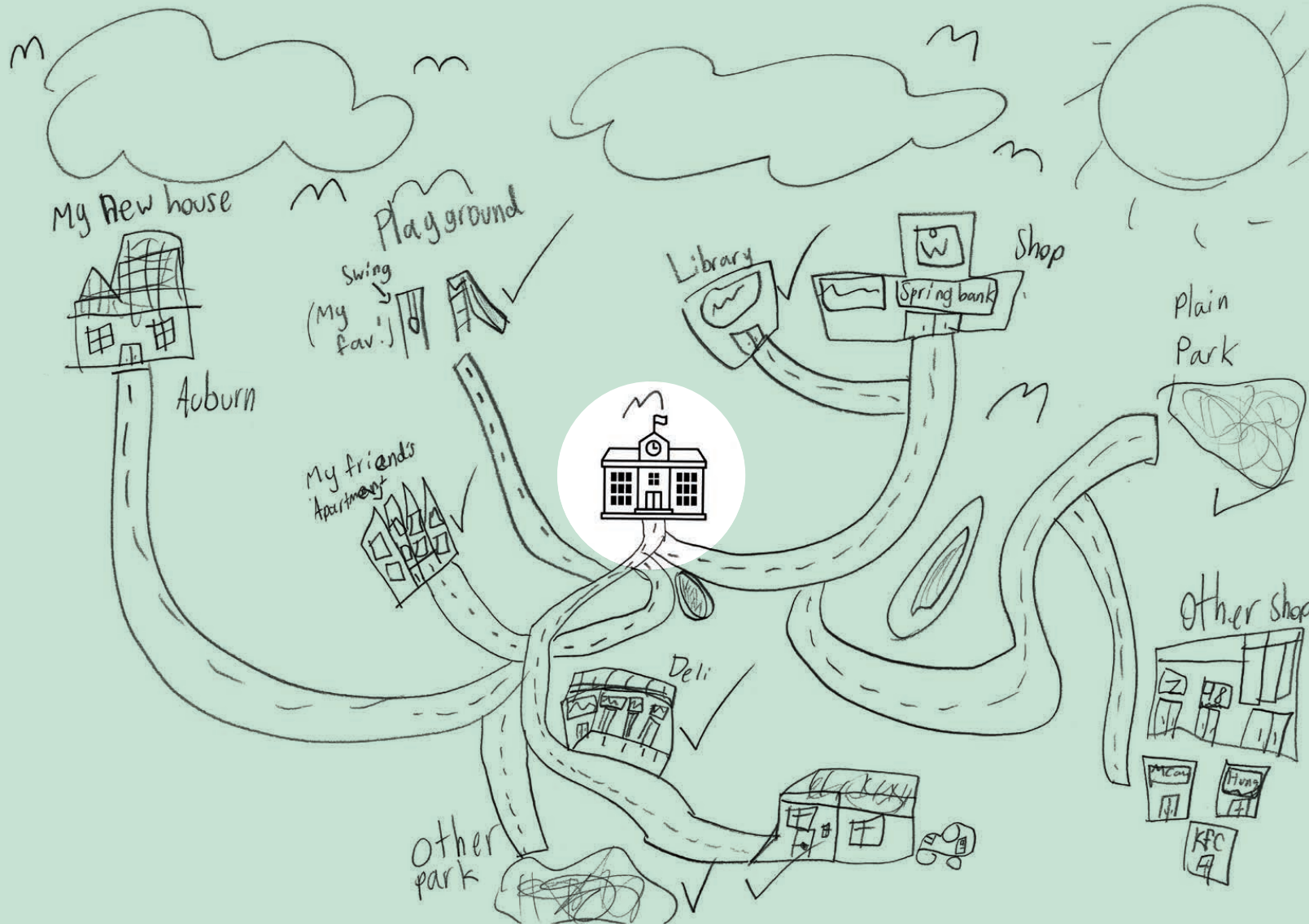
“ In neighbourhoods that provide these elements, there are multiple opportunities for children to relax, play and join with others their age in a wide range of leisure activities they can travel to via transport corridors that are safe and within easy reach. ”

– Commissioner Helen Connolly



1 Neighbourhoods in the Local Government areas of

Charles Sturt, Marion, Salisbury, and Onkaparinga

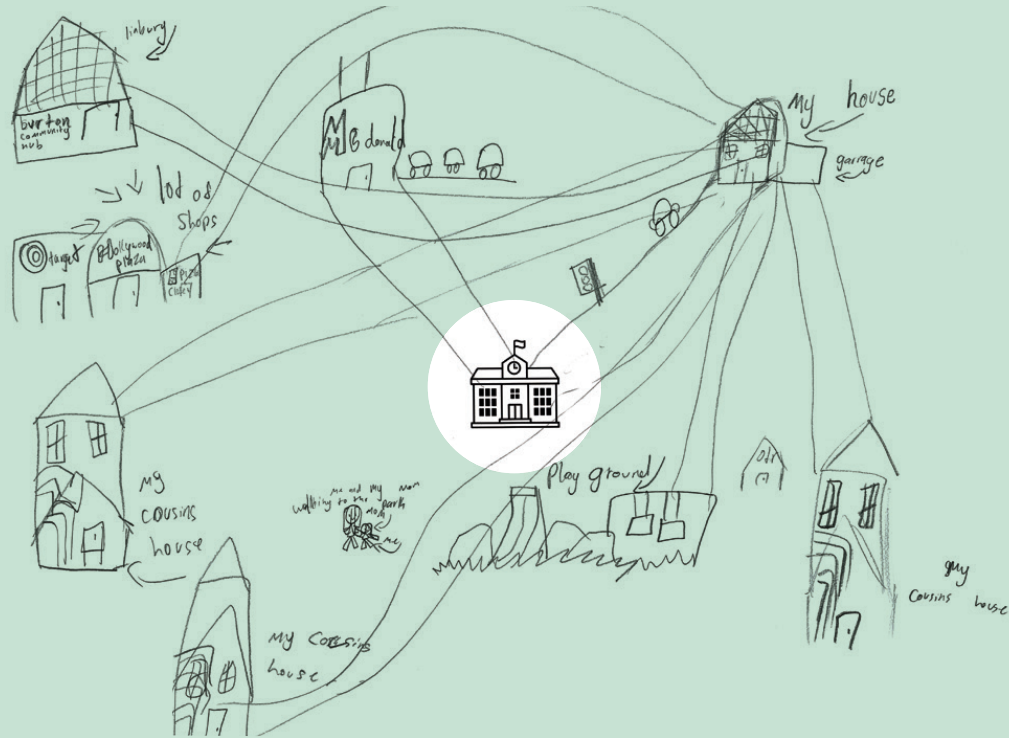


These communities cover neighbourhoods across western, southern and northern metropolitan Adelaide. They include families and individuals with a diversity of home ownership, income, and education levels, who come from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

While many neighbourhoods in these communities are rich in green space, there are some (including some of the newer suburbs) where major arterial roads bisect communities, making access to these green spaces difficult.

Schools in these neighbourhoods include Lake Windemere Primary School, Noarlunga Downs Primary School, Pennington School, Salisbury Park Primary School, Theile Primary School and Seaford Rise Primary to name a few.

How children living in neighbourhood 1 experience life



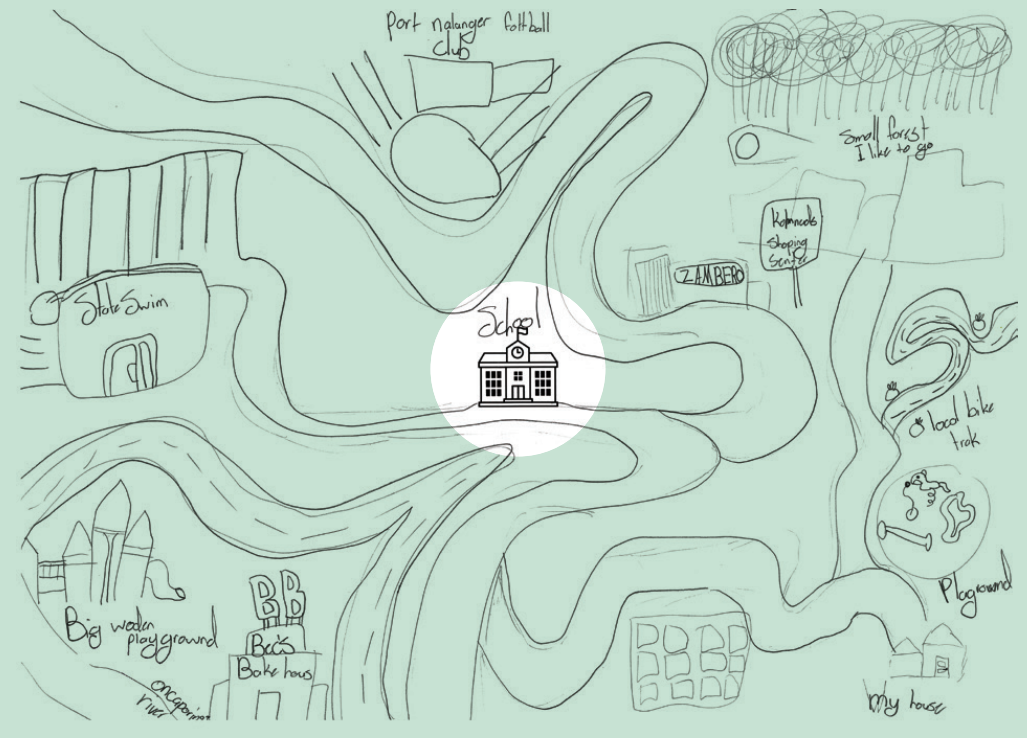
Unstructured play is high, while participation in organised sport remains low.

For children living in Neighborhood 1, play-grounds and parks appear more frequently on their maps than places where structured activities are undertaken, or where sports grounds are situated. Their narrative around sport tends to focus on cost barriers that inhibit their participation on a regular basis. They're aware their families can't afford club fees, uniforms, equipment, travel to and from

training and games, whether the school supports extra-curricular sport or not. This demonstrates the importance that having public spaces like parks in which to play and be physically active, contributes to children's quality of life in these neighbourhoods.

Music, dance and drama

We see a similar trend in relation to art and culture activities, which can include music, art, drama, dance, languages, martial arts,

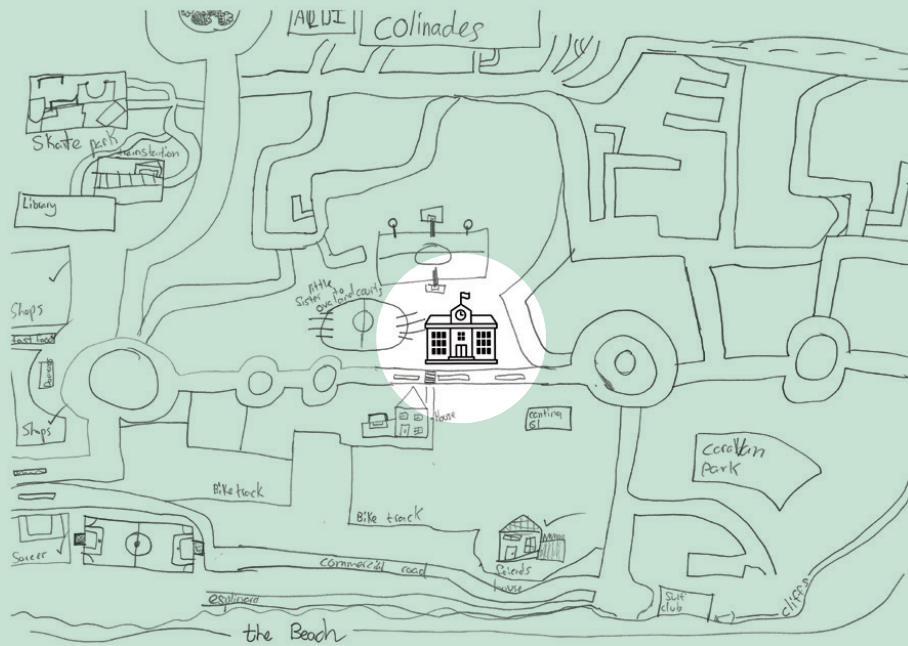


and or other tutoring. Children who came from these neighborhoods were significantly less likely to include an art or cultural activity on their map when compared to children living in Neighbourhood 2.

Nature is crucial

The frequency of children drawing trees, beaches and rivers on their maps was relatively high, reflecting their heightened need for access to the natural environment.

Places like the beach and rivers being within close proximity were important, as were opportunities to be immersed in nature rather than simply going to man-made parks and school grounds. The conversations around nature reflected children's relationships with plants and animals. They see opportunities to be 'in nature' as important to connecting, participating, and belonging in their neighbourhood and local community.



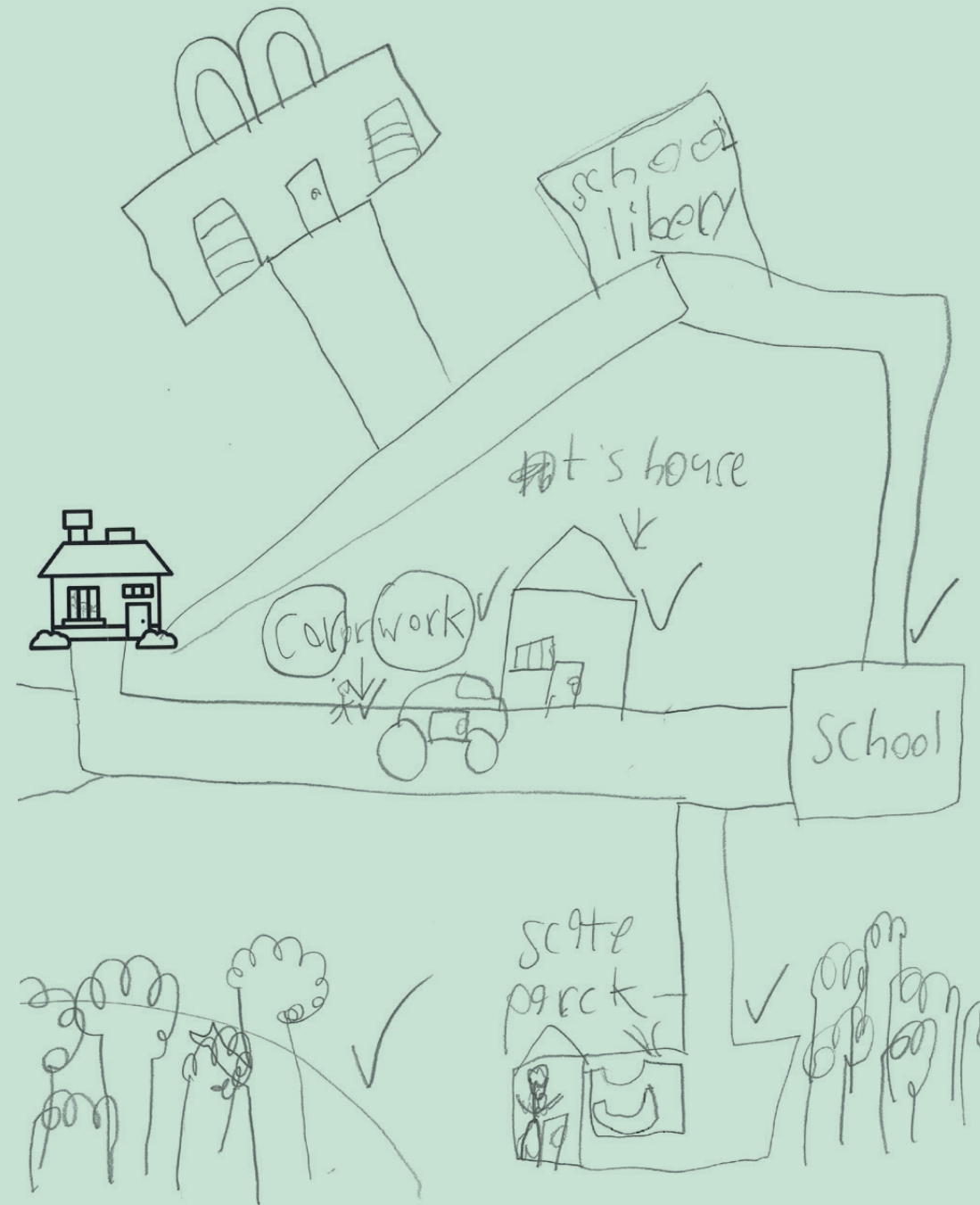
Strong engagement with libraries

Children living in Neighbourhood 1 were most likely to include a library on their map. However, this was strongly influenced by the locality of a library to other spaces in the community, such as a local shopping centre, playground, or their school. When a library was in close vicinity of these places, children included a library in their drawing. Conversely when a library was not in close vicinity of where they lived, shopped and schooled they did not.

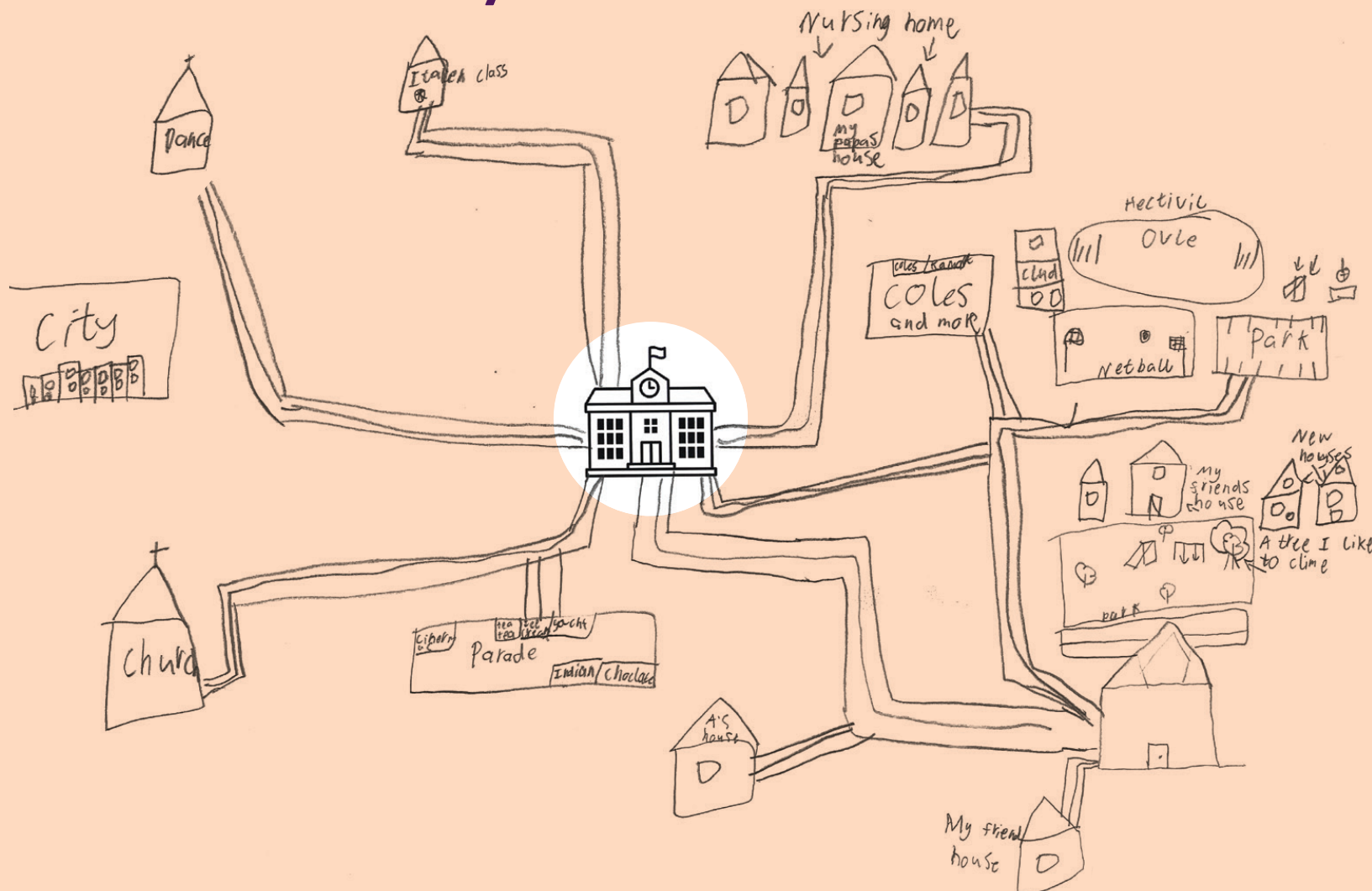
Kids with safety concerns

While not appearing that frequently, some children expressed safety concerns in relation

to their local neighborhood, either through wording or images they included on their neighbourhood map. For example, some children made references to neighbours who were screaming or yelling at night. Others referred to burnouts being done by young people in fast loud cars. There were mentions of theft and property damage that included incidents of graffiti and property being set alight in local streets. They also expressed their concerns in relation to being bullied or having to interact with “weirdos and JUNKIES!!” In these neighbourhoods children expressed the need to be able to walk around their neighbourhood safely, and reported that this was actually more important to them than having access to green space.



2 Neighbourhoods in the Local Government areas of Adelaide, Burnside, Campbelltown and Holdfast Bay

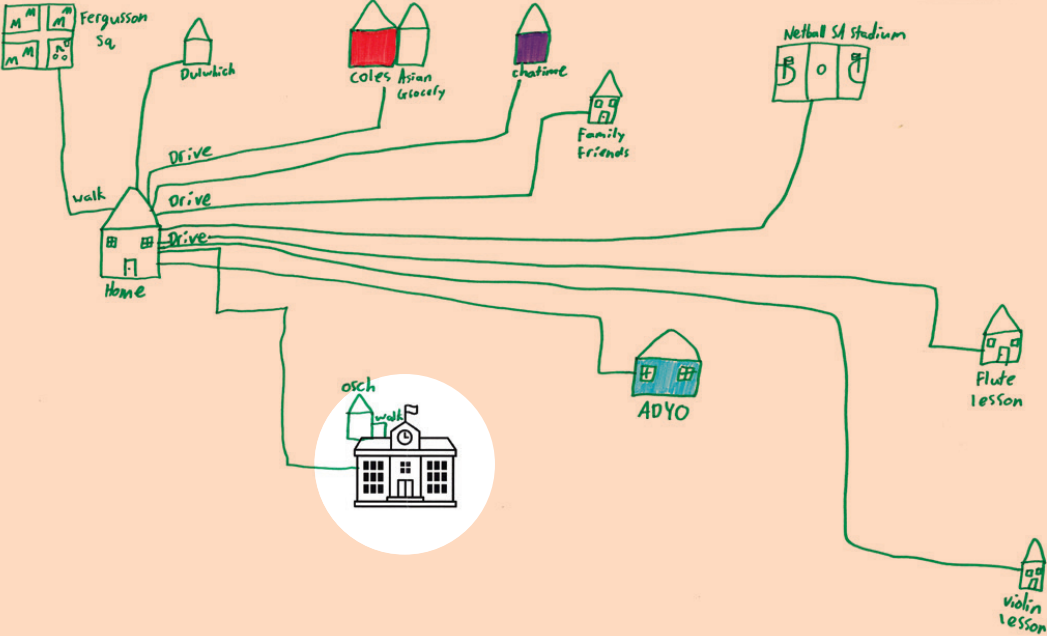


These communities include the leafy eastern suburbs as well as the seaside areas of western and southern Adelaide. This neighbourhood includes some of the wealthiest addresses in South Australia where incomes and education levels are highest. Children in these areas have easy access to the City of Adelaide and surrounding parklands, as well as to the beach, hills, and green spaces that can be found throughout their local communities.

While some of these areas were built relatively recently, others are old and well established featuring wide tree-lined streets and manicured local parks. Residents have easy access to well-positioned community centres and local libraries, while also benefitting from a variety of quality local shopping centres, sports facilities and entertainment venues.

Schools in these neighbourhoods include Magill Primary School, West Lake Shore School, Seacliff Primary School, Rose Park Primary School, North Adelaide Primary School and Paradise Primary School to name a few.

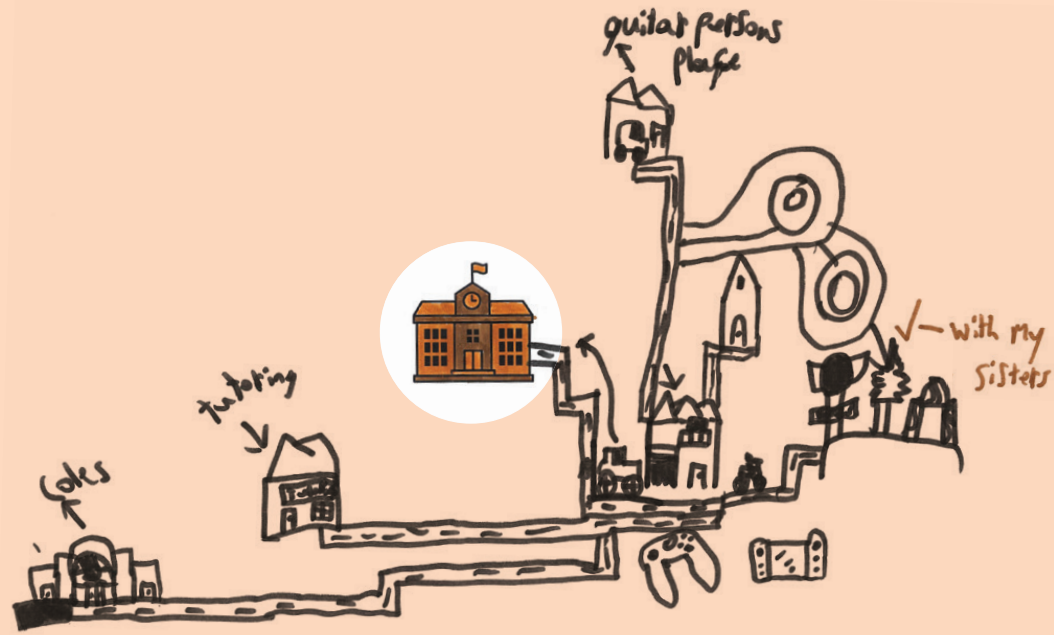
How children living in neighbourhood 2 experience life



Structured activities like sport are high, while unstructured play drops off

An interesting trend emerged across the maps drawn by children who live in Neighbourhood 2. Namely, the more sport a child played, the less likely they were to include references or images of parks or playgrounds on their neighbourhood map.

For students at some schools, references to structured sport appeared 64% more often than it did on maps drawn by children living in Neighbourhood 1, with references to parks and playgrounds correspondingly lower. This highlights the level of importance having access to formal sporting opportunities is for children living in Neighbourhood 2, and the focus being placed on their participation in structured sport over engaging in more general play and exercise on a regular basis.

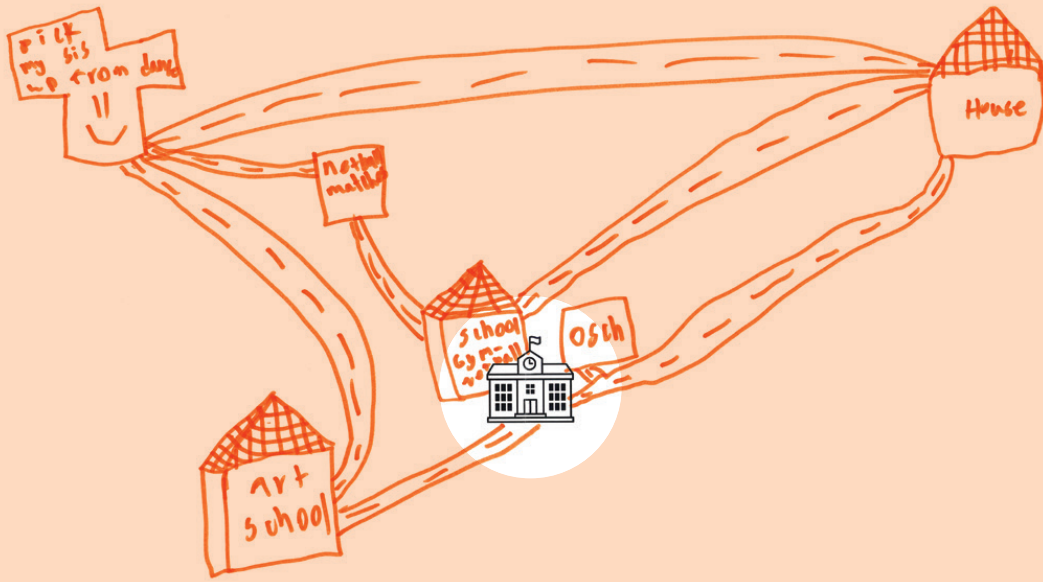


Fast food remains a feature – but it's far more varied

While children living in Neighbourhood 2 still included references to common fast-food outlets on their neighbourhood map (eg KFC and McDonalds) they also included references to other foods and food places such as local bakeries, cafes, sushi, Vietnamese, ChaTime, ice cream and frozen yoghurt, as examples.

Music and tutoring appear, as if out of nowhere!

Art and cultural activities, including music, dance, theatre, martial arts, language classes, and other tutoring feature more on the maps of children living in Neighbourhood 2 than on those living in Neighbourhoods 1 & 3. Up to 50% of the students in Neighbourhood 2 are participating in these activities outside of school on a weekly basis. This is in stark contrast to the lack of references to participation in art and culture that occur on the maps of those children living in Neighbourhoods 1 & 3.



Children are limited in a different way

With the pressure for both parents to work, and the changing nature of the world, kids in these neighbourhoods spend more time on structured and supervised activities, and less time on unstructured play in nature or in local parks.

Overall kids feel safe

While references to personal safety occasionally appeared on the maps of children living in Neighbourhood 2, overall the kids in

these neighbourhoods appear to feel safer than those living in Neighbourhoods 1 & 3. Their biggest concerns related to noise levels, pollution and litter, along with the proximity they have to their friends, and the need for there to be more things for kids to do. When safety was mentioned or referenced, it was generally more broadly related to an issue such as theft, or having concern for people in their community who are disadvantaged or homeless.



my gymnastics club



my friends house



3

Neighbourhood in the Local Government area of Playford

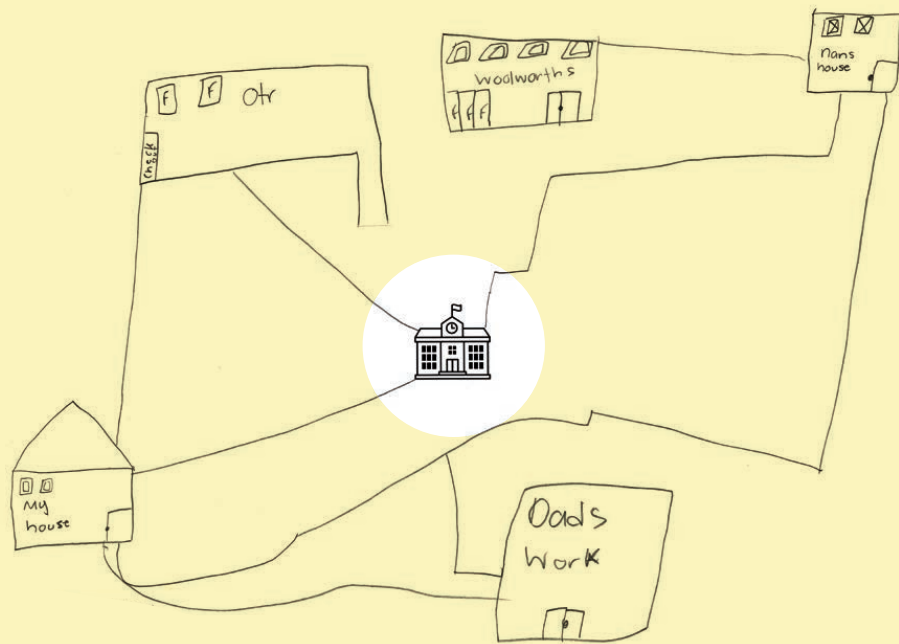


Playford is the fourth fastest growing local government area in South Australia. It is also the fourth most disadvantaged. Birth rates in Playford are higher than anywhere else in the State. Growth is predicted to continue at a rapid rate, with major housing developments planned to cater for rapidly growing population levels that include a high number of families and individuals from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

While Playford has plenty of green space, many residents report that they do not feel safe walking around their local neighbourhood. Playford is almost wholly car-dependent and its division by rail and major roads leading north out of Adelaide (ie the Northern Expressway) make it hard for residents (of all ages) to get around on foot or bicycle.

Some of the schools in the Playford neighbourhood include Blakeview Primary School, Darlington Primary School, Elizabeth Downs Primary School, Elizabeth Grove Primary School, Elizabeth Park Primary School, Elizabeth South Primary School, Elizabeth Vale Primary School, Mark Oliphant College, Munno Para Primary School, St Mary Magdalene's School, Swallowcliffe Primary School and Taparra Primary School.

How children living in neighbourhood 3 experience life



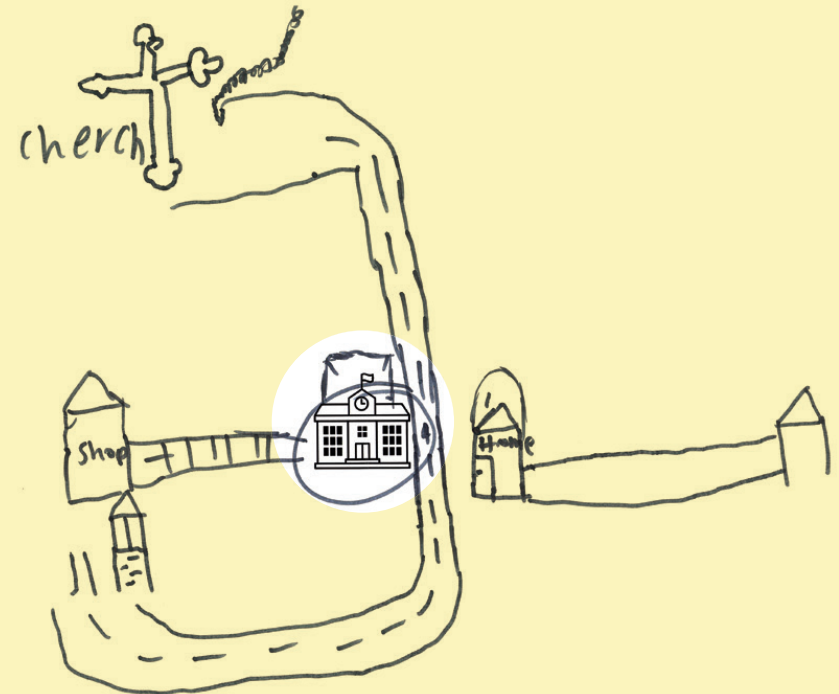
There was some variation within this neighbourhood, which was very clearly linked to individual schools and local suburbs. However, across the board and in stark contrast to children living in other neighbourhoods, those living in Neighbourhood 3 found it difficult to draw more than their home, school, and the local shop on their neighbourhood map.

Within Neighbourhood 3, children attending the most disadvantaged primary schools were less likely than children living in Neighbourhoods 1 & 2 to draw themselves:

- going to a playground or park
- participating in structured sport
- going to their local swimming pool
- visiting a friend's house
- cycling or skating in their local area
- going to the local library; or
- eating fast-food at fast food outlets on a regular basis.

Play, sport, and cultural activity all low, yet religion high

Images or references to children participating in organised sport and/or cultural activities that



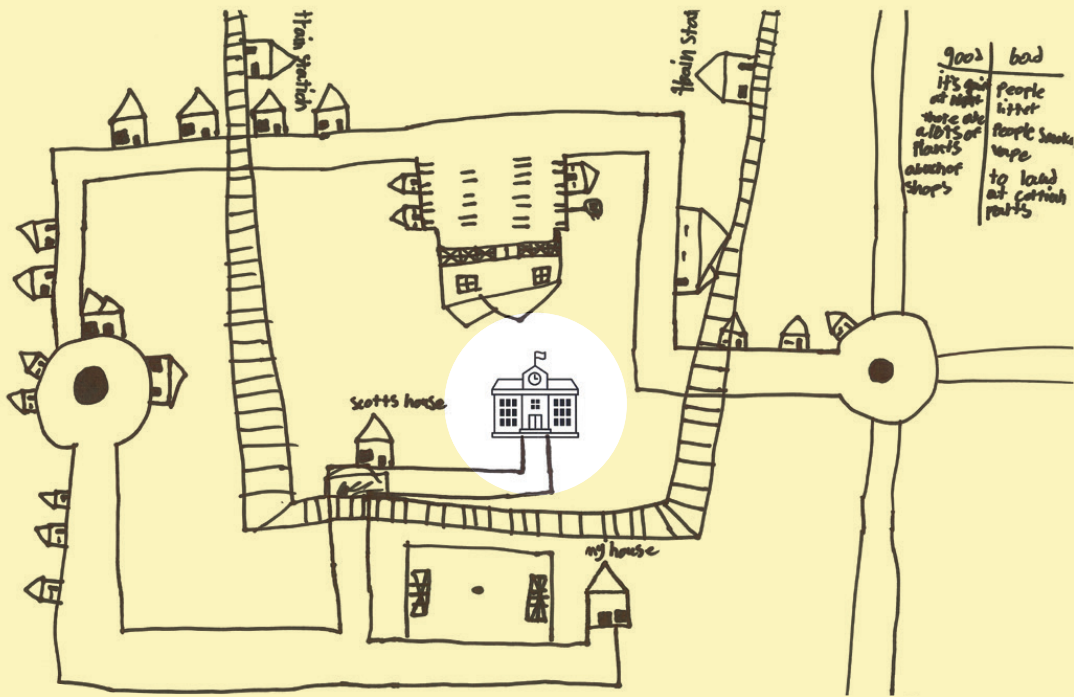
included music, art, dance, or drama were non-existent on the maps drawn by children living in Neighbourhood 3. However, participation in religious activities appears prevalent in the lives of these children, with drawings or references to churches, mosques and temples frequently appearing on their neighbourhood maps.

Their world is local – very local

For children living in this neighbourhood, life is local and focused on three main places; the school they attend, the local shops they go to with their families to buy food and other

supplies, and their local park. Many attend some of the state's most disadvantaged public primary schools.

For the majority of children in Neighbourhood 3 their map included a local shop or nearest OTR or fast-food outlet (McDonalds, Hungry Jacks or KFC) and occasionally what could be interpreted as a local park. Rarely did children in Neighbourhood 3 have a map that reflected them venturing beyond their immediate suburb or shopping centre, with shops often linked to an OTR rather than to an actual supermarket or shopping centre.



Kids have significant safety concerns

For children in this neighbourhood, safety concerns were raised more often and with more specificity. They made references to neighbours yelling and physically fighting, to drunk or “sketchy people”, and to dangerous items like broken glass on the ground. Their concerns were personal, legitimate, and sometimes serious. They were not naive about their community and its challenges, and expressed their desire to be able to feel much safer in their own neighbourhood.

“ My neighbourhood is very sketchy.”

“ I don't feel that safe (lots of unsafe people).”

“ Our house got broken into. Pedos live around our area.”

“ There's teenager's harassing people so I can't rid my bike alone.”

“ Drunk people. Smoker. Vaper. Staring. Creep.”

“ Nabers are gangs. Not very safe. Police are not safe.”

“ Children are entitled to the same opportunities as their peers. These maps clearly show the disparities that currently exist between neighbourhoods in South Australia. They offer a place to begin conversations about how we can build neighbourhoods that better distribute the wealth and opportunities more evenly between residents to ensure every child in South Australia has the same opportunities to thrive. ”

– Commissioner Helen Connolly

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the 24 schools whose students were supported to participate in the CCYP Neighbourhood Mapping project, undertaken between February and October 2024.

Blakeview Primary School
 Darlington Primary School
 Elizabeth Downs Primary School
 Elizabeth Grove Primary School
 Elizabeth Park Primary School
 Elizabeth South Primary School
 Elizabeth Vale Primary School
 Lake Windemere Primary School
 Magill Primary School
 Mark Oliphant College
 Munno Para Primary School
 Noarlunga Downs Primary School
 North Adelaide Primary School
 Paradise Primary School
 Pennington School
 Rose Park Primary School
 Salisbury Park Primary School
 Seaford Rise Primary School
 Seacliff Primary School
 St Mary Magdalene's School
 Swallowcliffe Primary School
 Taparra Primary School
 Theile Primary School
 West Lake Shore School



Throughout this report your unedited quotes have been used to ensure your views are being faithfully communicated.

Endnotes

- 1 Access to and Quality of Neighbourhood Public Open Space and Children's Mental Health Outcomes: Evidence from Population Linked Data across Eight Australian Capital Cities, by Amanda Alderton, ORCID, Meredith O'Connor, Hannah Badland, Lucy Gunn, Claire Boulangé and Karen Villanueva, 2022, <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/11/6780>
- 2 Literature Review: Schools as Community Hubs, ACER, Catholic Schools NSW, 2022, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1038&context=tll_misc

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The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016*. The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people. This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation. The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes, services and practices that affect their lives.

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