

Breathable Density



Committee
for
Sydney

Acknowledgement of Country

The Committee for Sydney acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the land. Sovereignty was never ceded: this was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Density Done Well Partners

We would like to thank our Density Done Well Partners for their support of this research.

Sydney needs to build more homes, and to build them well. Our Density Done Well Partners are demonstrating what that looks like in practice, across Sydney and NSW – homes connected to transport and public spaces that are liveable and connected to nature.

Their support underpins this third report in the series and reflects a shared commitment to growth that works for everyone. We are proud to work with our Density Done Well Partners.



Thank you to the following organisations who participated in a workshop, shared their expertise, contributed to or reviewed this work

- Aecom
- Arcadia
- Bates Smart
- BDO
- Bicycle NSW
- Canterbury Bankstown Council
- Bayside Council
- City of Parramatta
- City of Sydney
- Coronation
- Steve Driscoll Advisory
- Coronation Property
- Cumberland Council
- Department of Planning Housing and Infrastructure
- Georges River Council
- Government Architect NSW
- Greater Sydney Parklands
- Hassell Studio
- Hills Shire Council
- Inner West Council
- Ku-ring-gai Council
- Landcom
- Mirvac
- Moir Studio
- Randwick City Council
- Resilient Sydney
- SGS Economics and Planning
- Stockland
- Strathfield Council
- Sutherland Shire Council
- Transport for NSW
- University of Sydney
- UNSW
- Walk Sydney
- Warren and Mahoney Architects
- Willoughby City Council

This paper has been completed in partnership with AECOM.



AECOM teams are driven by a common purpose to deliver a better world through our unrivaled technical expertise and innovation, a culture of equity, diversity and inclusion, and a commitment to environmental, social and governance priorities.

Cover image
Thornton, Penrith. Image: Landcom

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Executive summary

Sydney’s next wave of growth can breathe new life into the suburbs that need it most, if we do density well.

Breathable density is density designed around people and nature. It means public space, tree canopy, light, water and fresh air are part of the brief from the start, at every scale of the city, from the suburban street to the high density tower.

The evidence is unambiguous. Quality green and blue space is one of the most powerful health interventions a city can make.

Just one to two hours a week in nature improves the odds of relief from loneliness by 69% after four months.¹ A 10% increase in tree canopy is associated with a 12 to 13% reduction in poor mental health.² Achieving 30% canopy cover within 1.6km of every home would save Greater Sydney an estimated AU\$1.09 billion a year in avoided cardiovascular hospitalisations alone.³

More than half of Sydney’s growth precincts are starting furthest behind. Canopy access around TOD stations ranges from 34% in the north to 8% at St Marys.⁴ Canterbury-Bankstown, home to an Accelerated Precinct, exceeds WHO guidelines for both PM2.5 and NO2.5 Western Sydney runs 6 to 10°C hotter during heatwaves, at a cost of \$1.4 billion a year.⁶ Too often, the same suburbs carrying Sydney’s housing targets have the least green, the hottest streets and the most polluted air.

Growth is the chance to close that gap. New development means new streets, verges, parks and buildings, and the opportunity to plant, cool and connect the suburbs that need it most.

Four principles guide the way: green at every turn, streets for all, every space counts, and places that breathe in and out.

This report shows how to apply them at city, neighbourhood, street and building scale, and sets out five ideas to breathe breathable density to life.

Five ideas to bring breathable density to life:

Idea	Who?	Key actions
1. Build a city of greenways	State	• Publish a Greater Sydney Greenways network plan, mapping priority corridors and a logical delivery sequence. • Require a meaningful corridor contribution through planning approvals where development adjoins or could activate a greenway. • Establish the Green-Blue Grid Committee as a cross-agency governance body, with a solid link to local government. • Commit multi-year funding tied to the plan, e.g. a consistent proportion of Housing Productivity Contribution (1% annually).
	Local	• Sign up to the network plan and commit to delivering corridor sections within your LGA. • Enter joint delivery agreements with other councils for corridors that span multiple LGAs.
	Public land and utility providers	• Activate residual public land for greenway use through standardised Asset Activation Agreements. • Identify which water land, rail easements, utility corridors and road reserves can serve community purpose without compromising operational function.
	Developers	• Contribute land and connections through the planning system. • Reorient sites that adjoin greenway corridors towards them and help activate the corridors.
2. More places to swim and play in our big parks	State	• Map the short, missing links between each of the five parklands and its nearest swimming or paddling spot, prioritising the gaps rather than the whole network. • Get Greater Sydney Parklands, Transport for NSW and relevant councils coordinating delivery, building on what’s already committed at Callan Park, Fernhill and the Southern Parklands framework. • Extend Sydney Water’s RiverWatch program to cover all prospective parklands swim spots, including inland dams, with twelve months of monitoring ahead of any opening and continued monitoring after. • Fund the last-mile links, cycling and walking connections, signage and shade with the same seriousness as the swim sites themselves.



Idea	Who?	Key actions
3. Close Sydney's green gap and heat gap together	State	- Target canopy investment using vulnerability and demographic gap analysis. - Fund consistent multi-year canopy investment for councils, shifting away from competitive grant cycles toward the highest-gap corridors. - Sequence canopy planting with utility undergrounding, road renewal and transport works. - Guide councils in setting strategy-based targets by publishing a NSW future-climate species list and canopy framework.
	Local	- Lead on public land, maximising canopy on streets, parks and verges. - Set canopy targets for streets and private land, weighted toward heat-vulnerable areas. - Unlock street planting by auditing capacity and coordinating with utilities to resolve blockages from powerlines and easements. - Set ambitious park-by-park canopy targets, prioritising parks in dense, lower-canopy precincts. - Diversify species selection using genus and family diversity benchmarks suited to the climate of 2050. - Protect trees through stronger protection orders, increased penalties for unlawful removal, and meaningful replacement multipliers.
4. Build a city of safe and shaded school streets	State	- Publish a Sydney school streets program identifying priority schools where canopy is lowest and population growth is highest; embed school street design standards into NSW street design and planning frameworks. - Coordinate across Transport for NSW, Schools Infrastructure NSW and Health to align school siting, street design and active transport investment, building on Fort Street Public School and the Get Kids Active program. - Commit multi-year funding for a coordinated school streets rollout.
	Local	- Use school catchments as the sequencing logic for streetscape improvements; map safe walking and cycling routes to every school and prioritise upgrades within those catchments first. - Invest in continuous tree canopy along school walking routes, prioritising streets that connect homes, parks and schools. - Slow vehicle speeds, install safe crossings and connect footpaths within school catchments as a baseline standard. - Involve children, parents, schools and the community in designing local streets, using trials to demonstrate benefits before permanent changes.

Idea	Who?	Key actions
5. Better benchmarks for buildings that breathe	State	- Update the Sustainable Buildings SEPP to include greening minimum standards and performance benchmarks, aligned with deep soil, tree planting, canopy cover and replacement requirements by development type and location. - Push the Australian Building Codes Board to close the NCC's ventilation loophole, aligning national standards with the ADG's existing objective on effective opening area.
	Federal	Direct the ABCB to amend NCC F6D7 to measure natural ventilation compliance against effective opening area rather than sash area.
	Local	- Strengthen Development Control Plans with consistent greening standards and benchmarks. - Build canopy and deep soil compliance into DA assessment, occupation certificate conditions and post-occupation auditing.
	Development and design Industry	- Treat window and screen design as a first-order amenity decision, not a late-stage facade detail. - Look beyond proven models: alternative facade strategies designed for effective opening are likely to unlock further options.



Potential future of prospect pipeline, part of the proposed Prospect to port greenway' brought to life by Warren and Mahoney Architects



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Quartet, Bates Smart. Photographer: Felix Mooneeram



Introduction

Close your eyes and picture a place in Sydney where you feel truly at ease. Maybe it's a leafy street where the canopy closes overhead. A greenway where the morning belongs to joggers, cyclists and dog walkers. The cry of a kookaburra carrying across the park. A bench in the sun, a path along the water's edge, the smell of eucalyptus after rain or waves crashing at the beach. These aren't luxuries. They're the basic conditions for a good life in a city.

Connection to nature, generous public spaces or the chance to just touch some grass, is all part of what a growing city can offer.

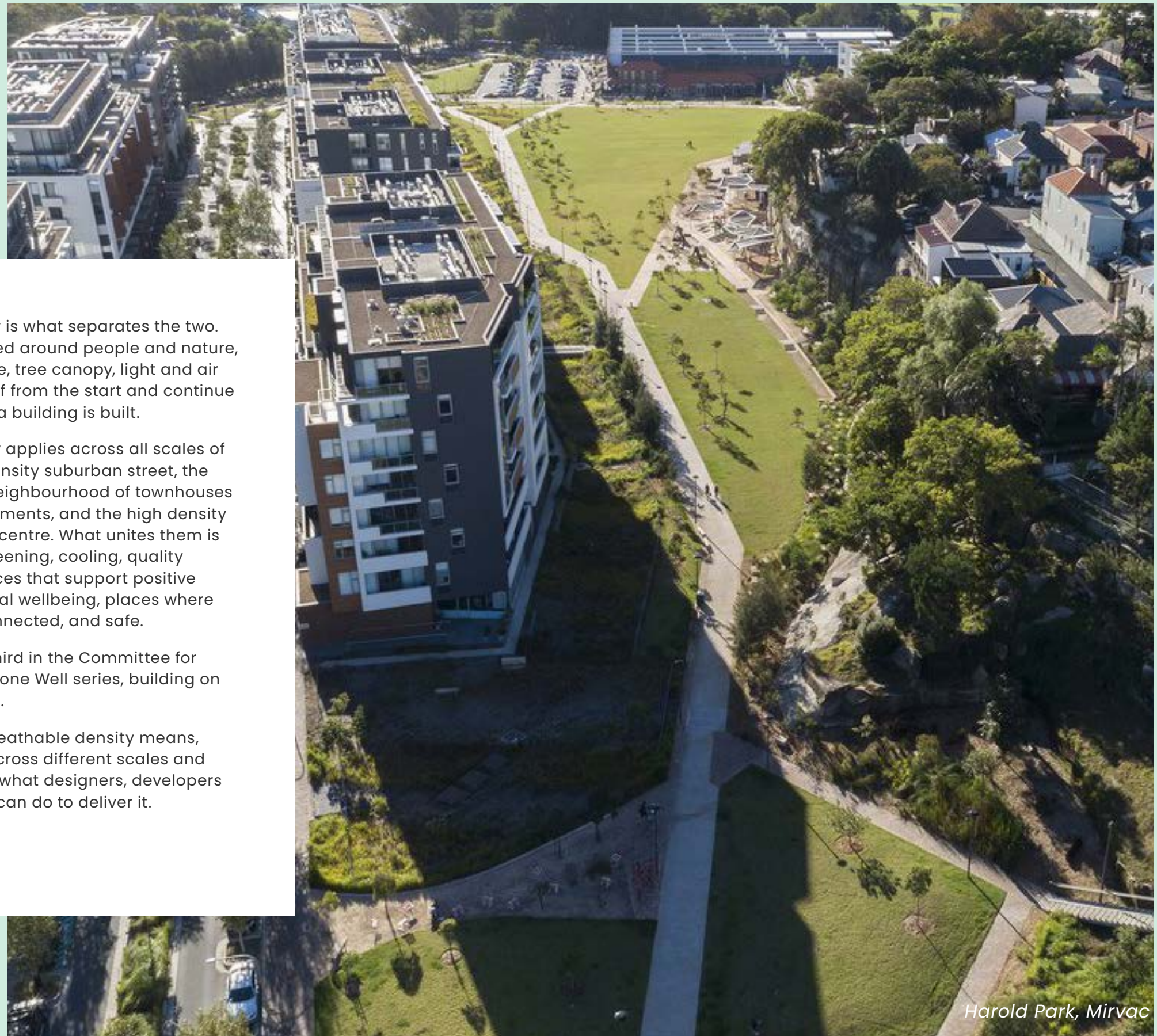
When we design with nature and people at the centre we create places that are full and flourishing. The alternative is that we build places that are dense but not alive, what researchers have called "lonelygenic environments."⁷

Breathable density is what separates the two. It's density designed around people and nature, where public space, tree canopy, light and air are part of the brief from the start and continue to grow long after a building is built.

Breathable density applies across all scales of our city: the low density suburban street, the medium density neighbourhood of townhouses and walk-up apartments, and the high density tower and activity centre. What unites them is the provision of greening, cooling, quality buildings and spaces that support positive mental and physical wellbeing, places where we feel respite, connected, and safe.

This report is the third in the Committee for Sydney's Density Done Well series, building on work begun in 2016.

It explores what breathable density means, what it looks like across different scales and communities, and what designers, developers and governments can do to deliver it.



Harold Park, Mirvac



What is breathable density?

Breathable density is a way of planning cities that supports both people and nature.

It means trees, waterways, clean air and sunlight are essential to how we design our buildings, streets, neighbourhood and city.

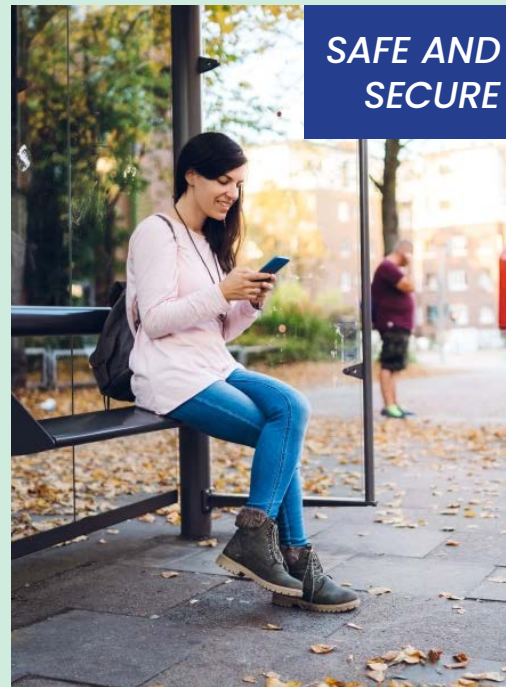
In practice, this means planning for deep soil so that trees can grow and mature, ventilation so that people can feel fresh air in their homes, and access to public spaces and water so people have a place to gather, play or cool off on a hot day.

Breathable density shows up in everyday details. From a window that can catch the afternoon southerly breeze, a street cool enough to walk in summer, a neighbourhood built to face the local creekline instead of hide from it, or a city-wide greenway network that stitches communities together.

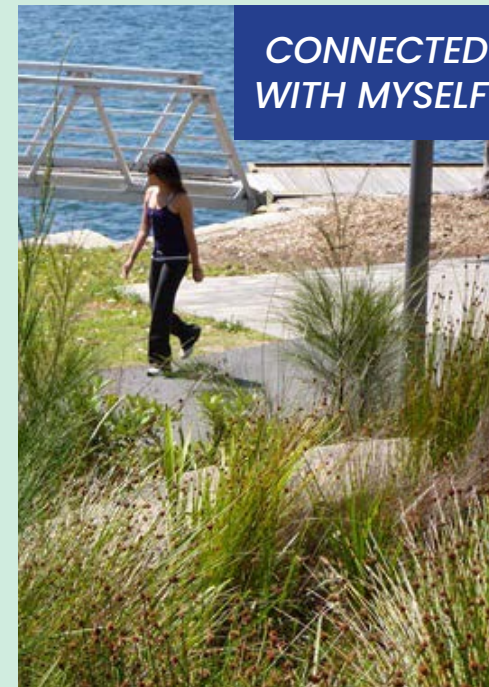
These choices support people's mental and physical health, because nature and human need have been designed in together.

The impact of breathable density is ultimately a feeling. Spaces that make room for quiet, for nature and for community can let someone feel grounded, safe, connected to nature, to others, and to themselves.

**SAFE AND
SECURE**



**CONNECTED
WITH MYSELF**



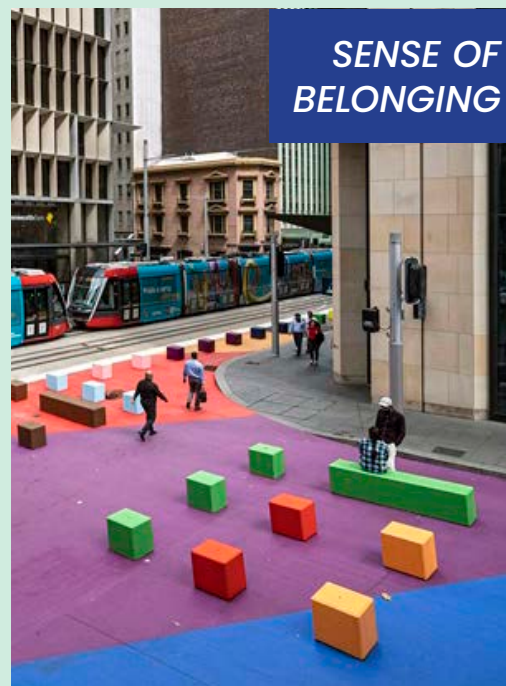
**CONNECTED
TO NATURE**



**CONNECTED
TO OTHERS**



**SENSE OF
BELONGING**



GROUND



RESPI



UPLIFTED





Why do we need breathable density?

Green and blue space is one of the most powerful health interventions a city can make, and getting it right matters most where growth is landing.

Better access to green and blue space, and cleaner air in your street and neighbourhood, mean people live longer, feel less lonely and stay healthier. It also saves millions, if not billions, in avoided health costs.

This section sets out the evidence: why green and blue space matters for our health and wellbeing, where Sydney's gaps sit today, and why the next wave of growth is the chance to close them.

\$1.09 Billion

estimated annual health sector savings if all of Greater Sydney had access to at least 30% tree canopy within 1.6km.⁹

69% > 110%

improved odds of relief from loneliness at 4 months, rising to 110% at 16 months, with just 1–2 hrs/week in nature.⁸

A 10% increase in tree canopy leads to a

12% to 13%

reduction in poor mental health among house dwellers and apartment residents respectively.¹⁰



Iglu Summer Hill, Bates Smart. Photographer: Felix Mooneeram



**The research is unambiguous:
breathable density saves lives,
reduces loneliness, and cuts
health costs.**

Quality green and blue space is one of the most powerful health interventions a city can make.

But simply having a green or blue space nearby is not enough. A nationally representative Australian study of 2,940 adults found that how people perceive the quality of their local green and blue spaces is a stronger predictor of health outcomes than simply having green space nearby.¹¹ The research measured quality across eight dimensions:

- access
- aesthetics
- amenities
- facilities
- incivilities
- potential usage
- safety, and
- social

The relationship was striking and linear: the higher the quality, the better the outcomes across every measure. People who rated their local green spaces highly across these dimensions were significantly more likely to be active, connected, and well. They are also more likely to spend sustained time outdoors, multiplying the benefits even further.

This evidence base applies to water as much as it does to greenery. The study measured green and blue spaces together, and the restorative and protective benefits of water in the urban environment are as well established as those of parks and street trees.¹²

Having access to high-quality green space means you're...

3×

more likely to
spend 2+ hrs per
week in nature

4×

more likely to visit
local nature spots
regularly

5×

more likely to
feel connected to
community

10×

more likely to
feel solace and
respite

The data is clear: high quality public space means more visits, more time outdoors, stronger community bonds, and a ten-fold chance of finding solace and respite.

One good park visited regularly delivers more health benefits than several mediocre ones visited rarely.¹³ This matters for how we plan: the goal is not always to maximise the number of green spaces, but to ensure the ones we have are good enough to draw people back.

Even small doses of nature produce significant and lasting reductions in loneliness and poor mental health

Longitudinal research shows that just one to two hours a week in nature can improve the odds of finding relief from loneliness by 69% after four months and by 110% after sixteen months with benefits compounding over time.¹⁴

Increased tree canopy also has proven mental health benefits

A 10% increase in tree canopy cover is associated with a 12% reduction in poor mental health among people who live in houses, and a 13% reduction among people who live in apartments.¹⁵

This effect holds independently of other neighbourhood factors, meaning tree canopy is not simply a proxy for wealthier or better-resourced areas it is doing its own work.¹⁶ This is particularly significant for Sydney's densifying neighbourhoods, where more people are living in apartments, often with less access to private green space.

Achieving 30% canopy cover within 1.6km of home saves AU\$19.3 million per 100,000 people annually from reductions in cardiovascular hospitalisations alone.¹⁷

This figure is conservative, excluding the downstream costs of chronic medication, comorbidities, depression, and lost productivity that typically follow a serious cardiac event. Extrapolated to the population of Greater Sydney (5.64 million), this would mean an estimated AU\$1.09 billion in annual savings if 30% canopy cover within 1.6km of home were achieved everywhere. Canopy is infrastructure. It should be funded, protected, and expanded accordingly.¹⁸



Green and blue space also helps keep people safe from extreme heat. In Western Sydney, the cost of not getting this right is \$1.4 billion a year, and rising.¹⁹

More people around the world are experiencing extreme heat, more often and for longer. Close to home, days above 35°C in Western Sydney are set to double, from 10 to 20 a year, in coming decades.²⁰

The cause isn't just a warming climate. It's compounded by the urban heat island effect, where roads, asphalt and buildings absorb heat by day and radiate it back overnight.

Urban heat isn't distributed equally. Western Sydney runs 6 to 10°C hotter than the rest of the city during heatwaves, a gap driven by rapid growth in heat-trapping infrastructure and a corresponding decline in cooling trees and vegetation. Playground surfaces in Western Sydney have been recorded at over 80°C in summer, turning a trip to the park into a hazard.²¹

This is not inevitable. Tree canopy shades surfaces and cools the air through evapotranspiration, while well-designed parklands that include water and urban greening can lower local temperatures significantly.²² Targeted canopy coverage, increased access to water and urban greening will help ensure Western Sydney's growth corridors remain safe places to live, work and play as the population grows.

Birdsong and biodiversity are not incidental to green space they are part of what makes it work

Feng and Astell-Burt's research points to biodiversity as an emerging and important area of inquiry, noting that the presence of birds, varied vegetation, and species diversity may be a meaningful pathway through which green spaces deliver mental health benefits.²³ A street lined with a single species is not the same as one where the canopy is layered, varied, and alive with sound.



Newmarket, Arcadia and Bates Smart. Photographer: Brett Boardman



Sydney has the makings of
a breathable city, growth
is the chance to share it
fairly



UNDERSTANDING EQUITY OF
ACCESS TO CANOPY IN SYDNEY

Growth and greening are not competing
priorities. Done well, they go together.

The NSW Government’s housing targets will direct the majority of Sydney’s new homes to station precincts and activity centres across the city. These are the right places to grow. But our analysis of tree canopy cover across Sydney’s train and metro station precincts reveals a gap that Sydney’s growth agenda has a real opportunity to close.

Meeting Sydney’s housing targets is necessary and achievable. But the planning and investment frameworks that enable growth must actively incorporate green infrastructure including canopy targets, open space standards, and investment in the quality of streets and parks in the places where growth is landing. The evidence on what this delivers for health, for community connection and for the public purse is unambiguous.

Sydney’s growth corridors have the most
to gain from green infrastructure: TOD
canopy ranges from 34% in the north to
8% in the west

The stations in Sydney’s leafy north including Hornsby, Roseville, Lindfield, Killara sit within neighbourhoods where between 29% and 34% of the surrounding area has canopy access, at or near the 30% threshold where the health and cost benefits described on the previous page begin to be realised.

The stations in Sydney’s south and west where the majority of growth is planned are starting from a much lower base. St Marys sits at 8%. Punchbowl and Belmore at 11%. Lakemba, Berala and Banksia at 12–13%. Bankstown, one of Sydney’s six Accelerated Precincts, sits at 15%. None of these stations come close to a 30% canopy threshold. Every percentage point below represents a measurable health and economic cost to the people who live there, resulting in poorer mental health, and higher levels of loneliness, and cardiovascular disease that the evidence tells us green space can prevent.

Table 1: Access to tree canopy across Sydney’s
TOD precincts

Station	LGA	Canopy access
Hornsby	Hornsby	34%
Roseville	Ku-ring-gai	34%
Lindfield	Ku-ring-gai	31%
Killara	Ku-ring-gai	29%
Crows Nest	North Sydney	27%
Gordon	Ku-ring-gai	25%
Macquarie Park	Ryde	24%
Kellyville	The Hills	23%
Turrella	Bayside	21%
Dulwich Hill	Inner West	21%
Homebush	Strathfield	18%
Bella Vista	The Hills	18%
The Bays	Inner West	17%
Kogarah	Bayside	16%
Ashfield	Inner West	16%
Bankstown	Canterbury-Bankstown	15%
Canterbury	Canterbury-Bankstown	15%
Croydon	Burwood/Inner West	15%
Marrickville	Inner West	14%
North Strathfield	Canada Bay	13%
Wiley Park	Canterbury-Bankstown	13%
Lakemba	Canterbury-Bankstown	13%
Banksia	Bayside	12%
Berala	Cumberland	12%
Punchbowl	Canterbury-Bankstown	11%
Belmore	Canterbury-Bankstown	11%
Rockdale	Bayside	10%
Lidcombe	Cumberland	9%
St Marys	Penrith	8%

Source and methodology: SEED, NSW DPHI,
Greater Sydney Canopy Access (2022)

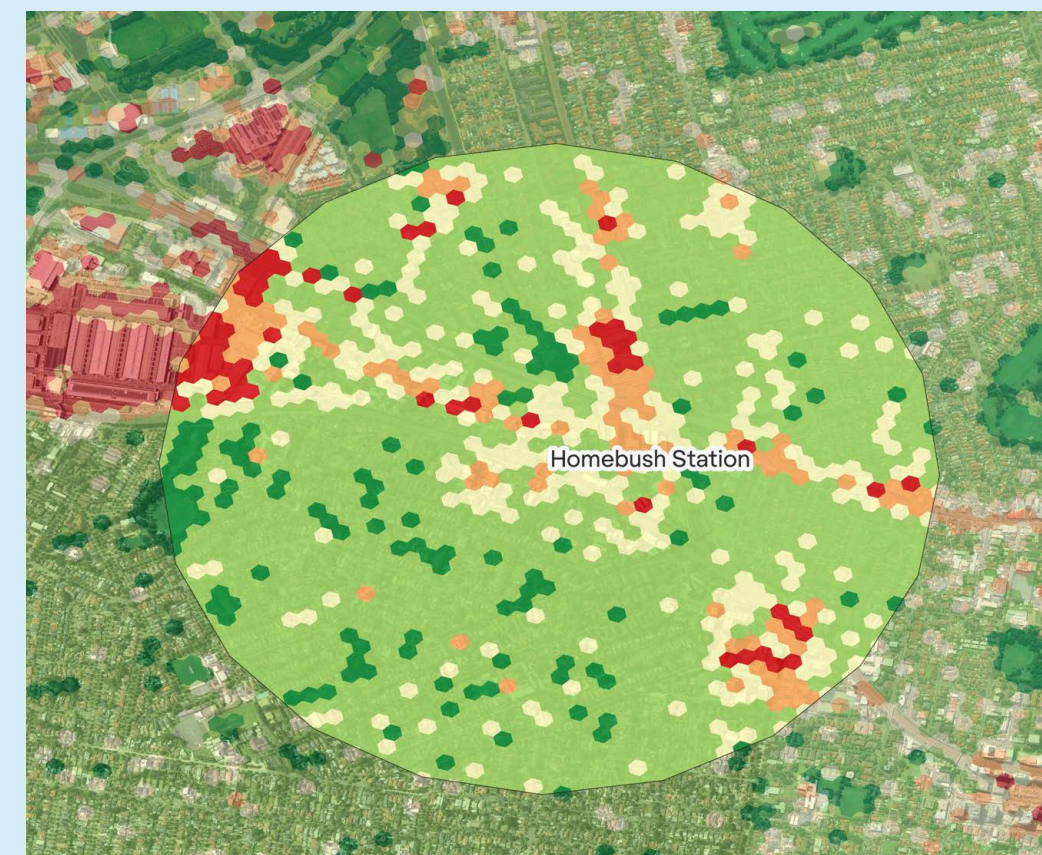
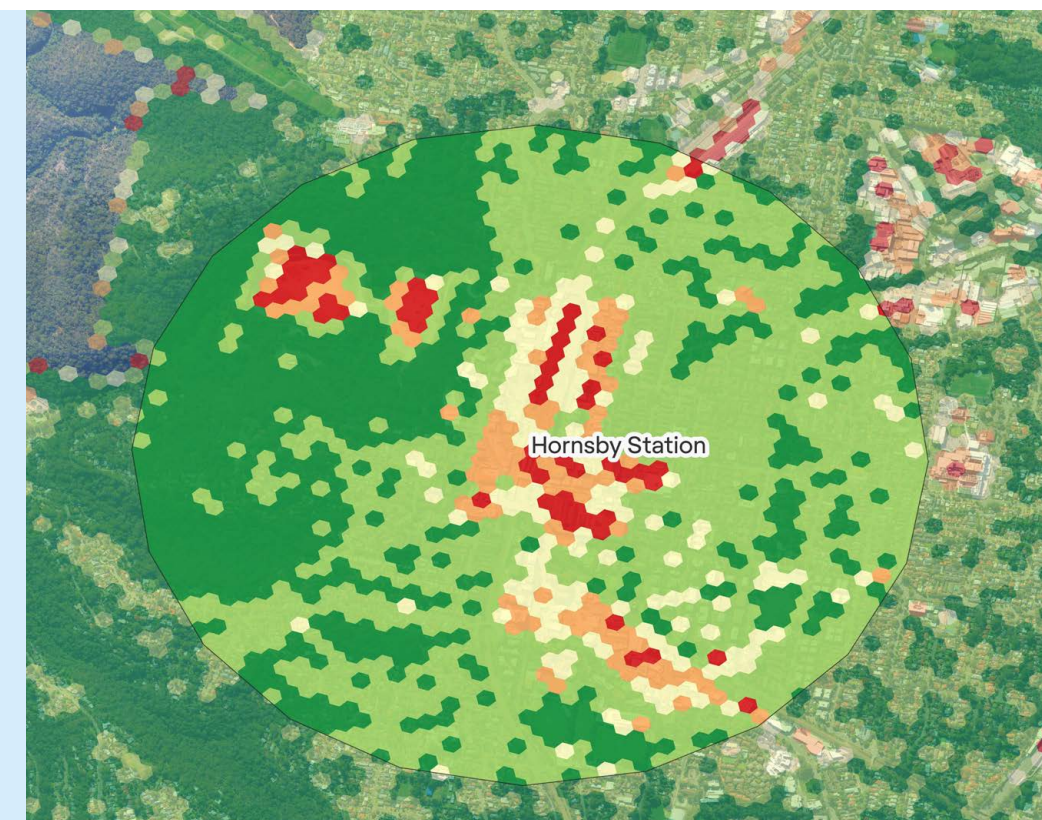
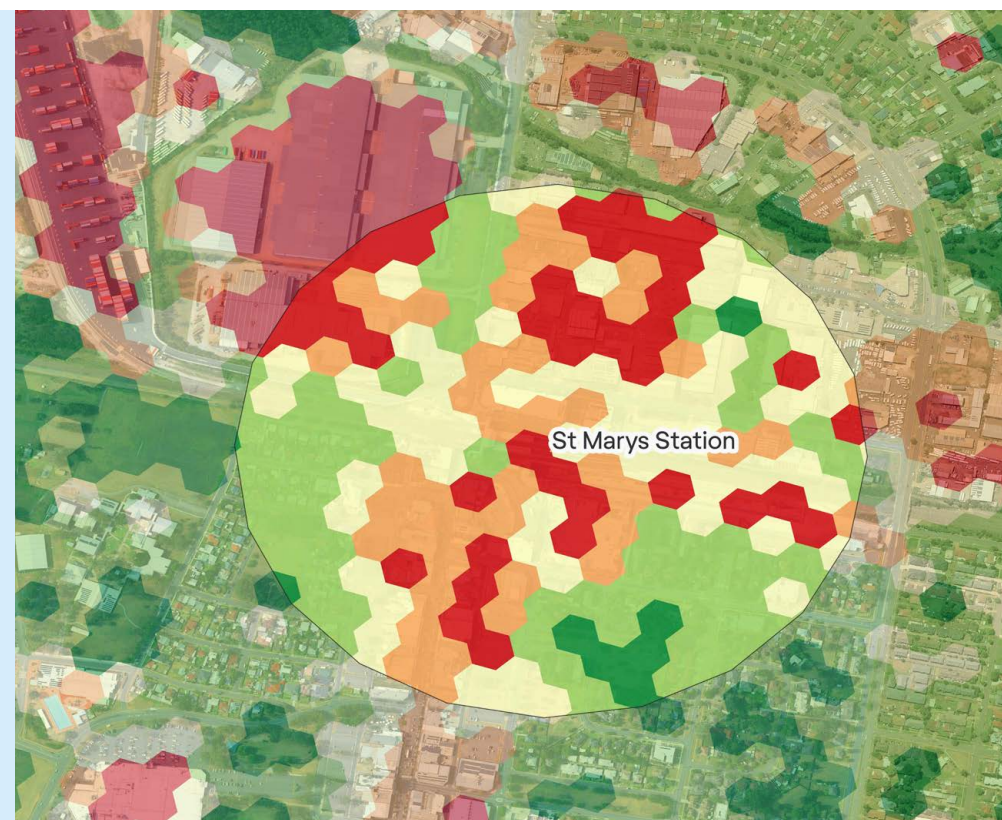


Sydney's green gap is real and complex but growth gives us a chance to close it

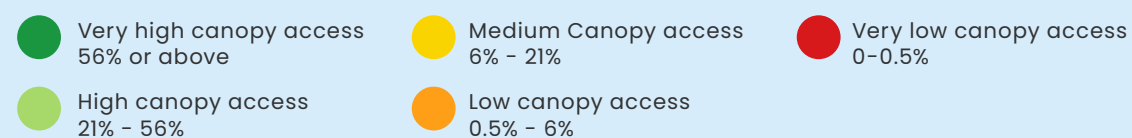
The lower tree canopy cover in Sydney's south and west reflects a range of factors — the age and layout of street networks, the presence of overhead powerlines, lot sizes, soil conditions, capacity of local councils and community attitudes toward trees that vary across the city.

These are not simple problems to solve. But Sydney's next wave of growth creates genuine opportunities to address them.

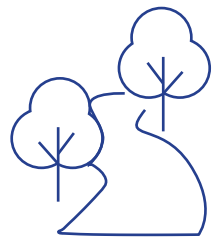
New development means new streets, new public spaces, planned footpaths and verges, the potential for undergrounded power lines, and new opportunities to plant, green, and cool the suburbs that need it most. As the evidence shows, the quality gap in green space falls hardest on those with the least financial resilience.



Tree Canopy access around TOD stations



Source and methodology: SEED,
NSW DPHI, Greater Sydney
Canopy Access (2022)



UNDERSTANDING EQUITY OF ACCESS TO WATER IN SYDNEY

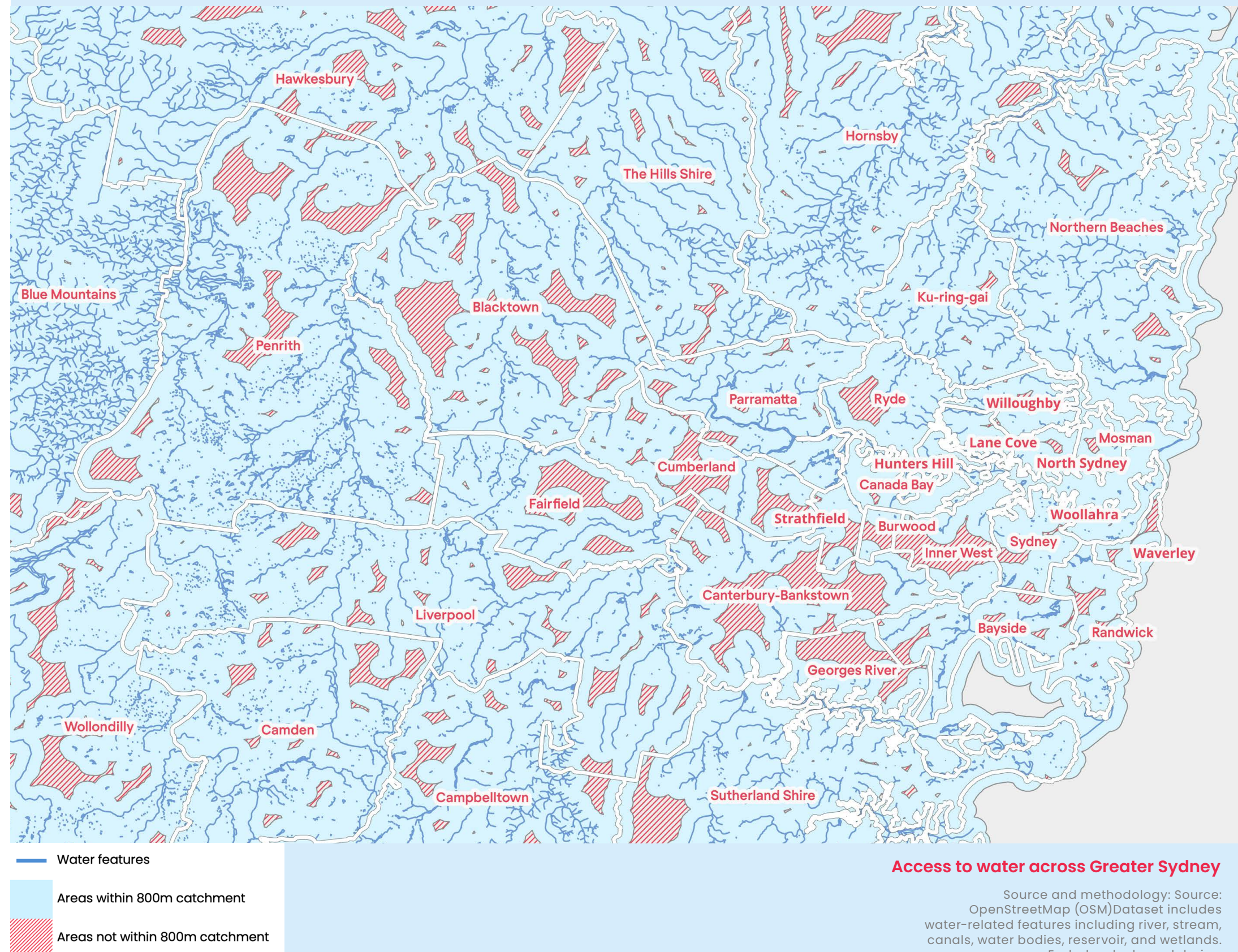
85% of Sydneysiders live within 800 metres of water.

Despite varying levels of green across the city, Sydney is deeply blue. Water, in some form, is almost everywhere. Our analysis of the NSW Hydrography dataset found that 85% of Greater Sydney's population lives within 800 metres of a water feature including rivers, creeks, lakes, wetlands, mangroves, harbour foreshores and ocean bays.

Not all of these water sources offer the same amenity. A stormwater channel is a very different experience to a harbour foreshore, and proximity to water does not automatically mean access to quality blue space. But the finding reveals something Sydney does not always recognise about itself: its blue infrastructure is vast, and much of it runs directly through the suburbs that need breathable density the most.

Living close to water brings flood risk. Nature-based infrastructure turns that risk into reward.

Having such great access to water can also mean greater flood risk, especially in the face of rapid urbanisation which often replaces naturally absorbent green spaces with hard surfaces, channelling excess surface water onto streets and aging stormwater drains.²⁴ As heavy storms become more intense and frequent across the world, countries like Denmark²⁵ and China²⁶ are integrating naturally absorbent green and blue infrastructure (such as rain gardens, wetlands, rivers and bio-swales) into urban flood management to effectively store and purify excess stormwater. Global evidence shows these 'nature-based solutions' are not only cheaper but often outperform conventional grey infrastructure, while delivering a host of co-benefits to the community including improved urban amenities, urban cooling and biodiversity.²⁷





UNDERSTANDING EQUITY
OF ACCESS TO FRESH AIR
IN SYDNEY

Sydney’s air is clean by world standards, and that fact makes the health burden easy to overlook.

But even at low concentrations, the effect is measurable: fine particle pollution was linked to 430 premature deaths in Sydney in 2007, along with 5,800 years of life lost and over 630 respiratory and cardiovascular hospital admissions.²⁸ The burden is not spread evenly, and neither are its sources.

Wood heaters are the largest source of fine particle pollution (PM2.5) in the Sydney Greater Metropolitan Region, responsible for around 24% of anthropogenic PM2.5, ahead of on-road traffic at around 17%.²⁹ Traffic and freight remain the dominant source of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), concentrated along motorways and large road corridors. The two pollutants call for different responses: cleaner heating in homes, and cleaner freight corridors on the roads that carry them.

Where you live determines what you breathe.

Air pollution in Sydney is not distributed evenly, and it is not one pattern. PM2.5, fine particles small enough to reach deep into the lungs, and NO₂, largely a marker of traffic and freight, show up differently across the city.

NSW EPA monitoring data consistently shows higher PM2.5 readings in Western Sydney than in the east – driven by a combination of industrial activity, traffic patterns, and the

topography of the western basin which traps pollution in still conditions.³⁰

NSW EPA monitoring shows PM2.5 concentrations highest in Liverpool, Cumberland, Canterbury–Bankstown and the Inner West.³¹ Wollondilly records the cleanest air in the dataset, and it is the only LGA that meets the WHO’s 2021 health guideline of levels below 5 µg/m3.³² Every other LGA measured, including Campbelltown and Camden, sits above that guideline, even where they read as comparatively clean within Sydney. Liverpool, at the top of the range, is 36% above it.

NO₂ draws a different map. Campbelltown, one of the cleanest LGAs for PM2.5, records the highest NO₂ of anywhere in the dataset, close to double the WHO guideline. Cumberland, Canterbury–Bankstown, Parramatta, Sydney, Liverpool, Randwick and the Inner West also exceed it. Only Wollondilly, Hawkesbury, Ryde, Camden and The Hills Shire meet the NO₂ guideline.

The overlap is what matters for planning. Canterbury–Bankstown, Cumberland, Parramatta, Liverpool, Inner West, Randwick and Sydney all exceed the WHO guideline for both pollutants. Canterbury–Bankstown is also one of the growth corridors carrying Sydney’s housing targets, with Bankstown itself named an Accelerated Precinct. Investing in clean air here is not a separate task from investing in green and blue infrastructure. It is the same task, aimed at the same streets.

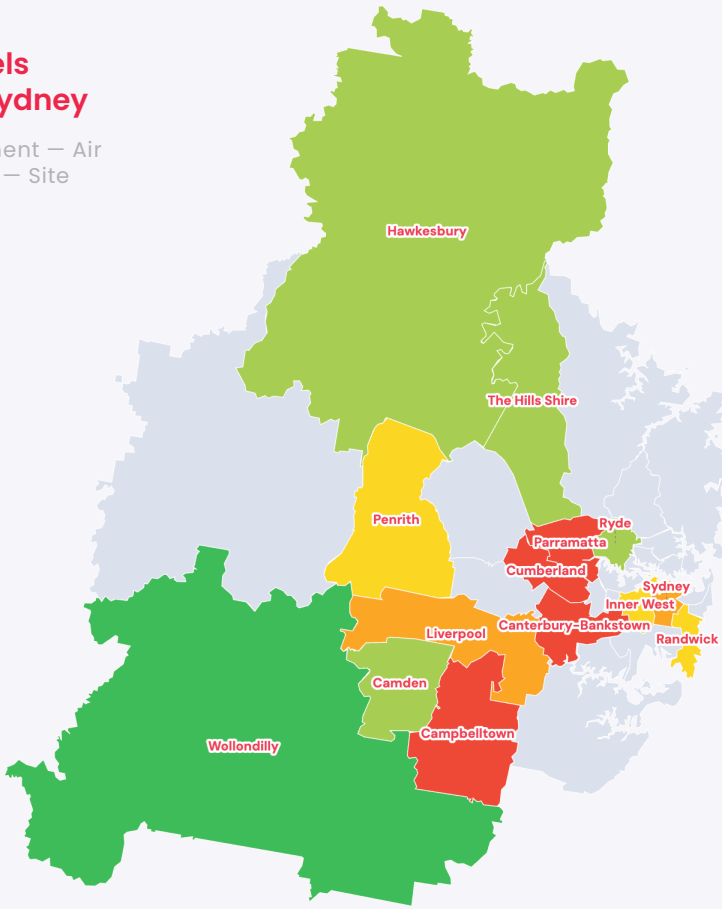
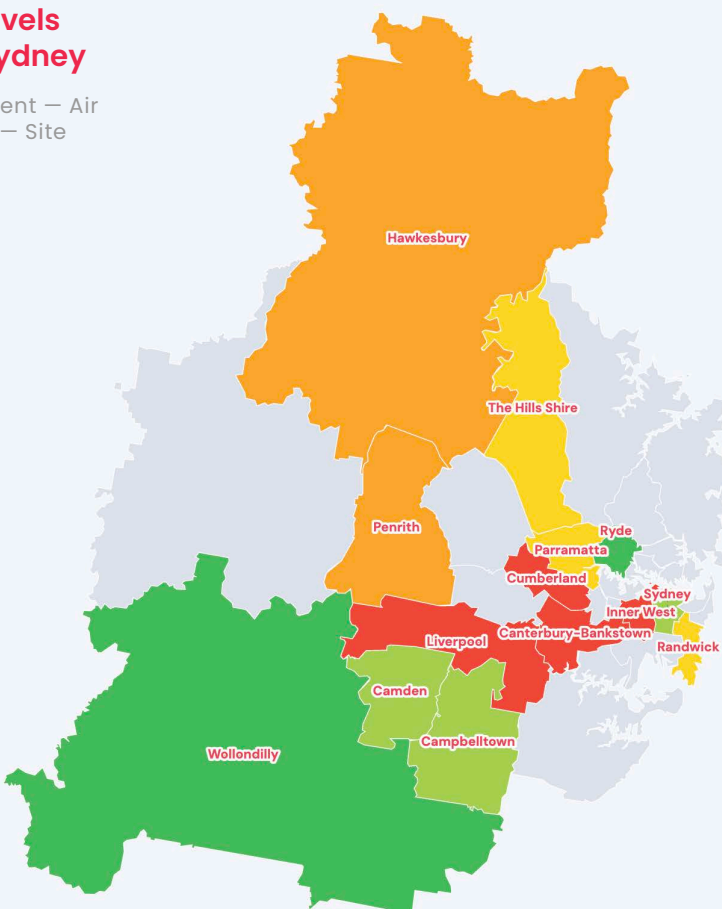
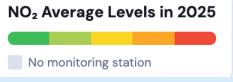
**PM2.5 average levels
across Greater Sydney**

Source: NSW Government — Air Quality Data Services — Site averages 2025



**NO₂ average levels
across Greater Sydney**

Source: NSW Government — Air Quality Data Services — Site averages 2025



LGA Rankings

PM2.5 µg/m³ · 2025

Cleanest → Most polluted

1	Wollondilly	4.8
2	Ryde	5.4
3	Campbelltown	5.8
4	Sydney	5.8
5	Camden	5.9
6	Parramatta	6.1
7	Randwick	6.1
8	The Hills Shire	6.1
9	Hawkesbury	6.3
10	Penrith	6.4
11	Canterbury-Ban...	6.5
12	Inner West	6.5
13	Cumberland	6.5
14	Liverpool	6.8

LGA Rankings

NO₂ pphm · 2025

Cleanest → Most polluted

1	Wollondilly	0.1
2	Hawkesbury	0.2
3	Ryde	0.2
4	Camden	0.4
5	The Hills Shire	0.5
6	Penrith	0.6
7	Inner West	0.6
8	Randwick	0.6
9	Liverpool	0.7
10	Sydney	0.8
11	Canterbury-Ban...	0.8
12	Parramatta	0.8
13	Cumberland	0.9
14	Campbelltown	1.0



Sydney's air quality is improving but climate change threatens to undo that progress

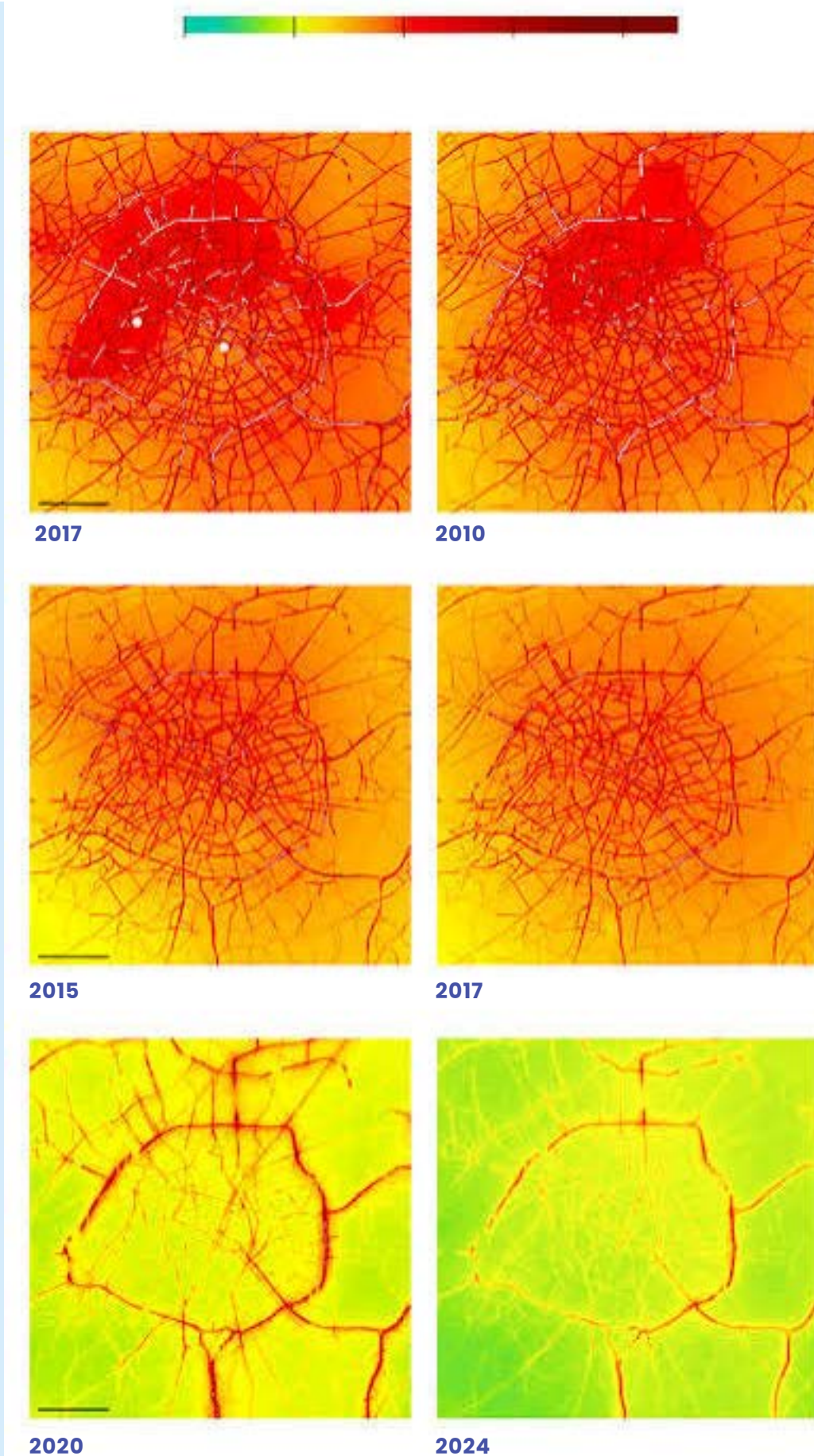
Over the last 25 years, nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), produced mainly by vehicle exhausts, has gradually come down as more electric vehicles reach Sydney's roads. But that steady progress masks a growing threat. Fine particle pollution, $\text{PM}_{2.5}$, spikes sharply during bushfire events, and climate change is making those events more frequent and severe. During the 2019–20 Black Summer, $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ levels in Sydney reached $13.2 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, almost three times the World Health Organization guideline of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Events like this are set to become a regular feature of city life, not a rare exception.

You can't fix what you can't measure: Sydney's 21 monitors cover a city of 5 million

The NSW EPA operates 21 monitoring stations across Greater Sydney, enough to track broad city-wide trends and warn of hazardous days, but not enough to say what the air is like outside a particular school, along a particular freight route, or in the months after a change to a street. Cities that have committed to street-level monitoring can prove their interventions work. London runs over 350 low-cost sensors on top of its reference network, at schools, hospitals and roadsides. Paris has gone further still, with a fleet of up to 400 sensor-equipped vehicles sampling air street by street at head height. Both pair fixed monitors with mobile units to map pollution at a resolution of metres rather than kilometres.

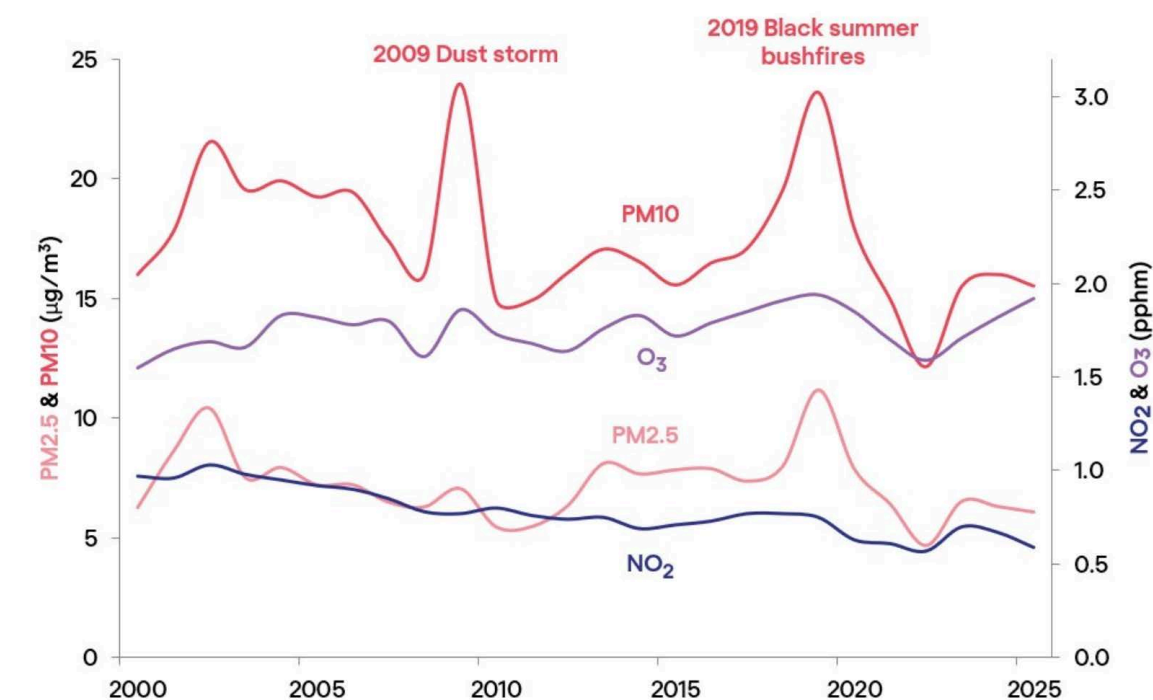
That granularity is what lets a city prove a change worked. When London closed roads around 18 primary schools to traffic at drop-off and pick-up, sensors from its network measured nitrogen dioxide falling by up to 23 per cent during the morning peak. Without street-level monitoring, that result is invisible: the nearest regional station averages it away. A resident of Granville and a resident of Mosman cannot presently find out, with any precision, how the air they breathe compares, and Sydney cannot yet show which of its own interventions are working.

Sydney's network is built for a different job: tracking regional trends, not measuring the street. As the city's population and traffic grow, and as bushfire smoke becomes a more frequent visitor, a street-level monitoring capability would give Sydney the ability to prove which interventions work, and to direct them to the places and people who need them first.



Average NO_2 concentration in Paris over time

Source: Airparif via the Washington Post 'Paris said au revoir to cars. Air pollution maps reveal a dramatic change. 2025'



Air Quality Trend in Greater Sydney from 2000–2025

Data source: NSW EPA Air Quality Data Services



Principles for breathable density

Breathable density is not achieved through a single intervention. It emerges from many decisions made at different scales by planners, designers, developers, government, councils and communities.

Four principles capture these qualities: Green at every turn, streets for all, every space counts and places that breathe in and out.

They are not prescriptive rules but principles that can be applied at every scale of the city, from how a building orients its balconies to how a whole precinct connects to its waterways.

What each principle looks in practice will differ depending on context, but together they describe the qualities that make density genuinely liveable.

Bourke Street Cycleway, Sydney



Eat Street, Parramatta



Green Roof, Rotterdam



Flour Mill, Summer Hill



**GREEN AT
EVERY TURN**

**STREETS FOR
ALL**

**EVERY SPACE
COUNTS**

**PLACES THAT
BREATHE IN
AND OUT**



Green at every turn

Density integrates nature at all scales, supporting mental well-being, sensory comfort, and connection to places.

- Green corridors that connect neighbourhoods, parks, and transit.
- Layered greenery—canopy trees, understory plants, green roofs, and vertical gardens.
- Blue-green infrastructure like rain gardens and bioswales
- Visual and physical access to nature from home and work.

Streets for all

Density prioritises people on streets, transforms them into places of interaction and belonging.

- Safe, active and pedestrianised streets: wide footpaths, good lighting, passive surveillance
- Micromobility prioritised walking, cycling, prams, and mobility aids.
- Recharge points: seating, water fountains, shade, and art.
- Play and colour elements that promote engagement and joy

Every space counts

Density brings life to the in-between and overlooked spaces, turning them into meaningful places for connection, rest and daily life.

- Activated laneways, rooftops, and verge space
- Green walls, balconies, podiums, shared indoor spaces
- Multifunctional public spaces
- Art, texture, materials

Places that breathe in and out

Density offers multifunctional, flexible, and adaptable spaces that expand and contract to support both everyday life and collective moments.

- Multi-functional streets, plazas and parks
- Temporal events - markets, festivals and community gatherings
- Temporary, pop up use of public space and community led activations
- Adaptable urban form that allows collective retreat and interaction



Breathability can mean different things to different people

Breathable density is not achieved through a single intervention, and it is not experienced the same way by everyone. The four principles set out what breathable density looks like. How each one is felt depends on who is using the space.

Breathability can mean different things to different people. A place should offer a balance of active, focused, and restful public spaces that support wellbeing for young and old alike. Personas ask us to see a place through someone else's eyes. They build an understanding of the needs and aspirations of the people who use public spaces, and this matters most for often overlooked groups. Four personas – an older adult, a teenager, a parent with child, and a neurodivergent individual – have been created as a starting point for thinking about the different people who live in and move through the city.



Older adult



Teenager



Parent with
child



Neurodivergent
individual



Older adult

What does breathable density mean to them?

- Multiple sensory cues (like visual, auditory, and tactile elements) to navigate streets better, especially when senses are diminished
- Shortened crossing distances with curb extensions and median islands to cross streets more safely, with space to rest if needed. Leading Pedestrian Intervals for a head start to cross before vehicles move.
- Reduced vehicle speeds through road narrowing and street trees for safer environments
- Seating and shade for rest and avoid health risks from extreme temperatures
- Good lighting for visibility and security, especially at night.

Top five things this person needs

01

Visual and physical access to nature

02

Safe streets for independent movement

03

Comfortable seating areas to rest and socialise

04

Step free access, accessible and naturally well lit, and ventilated accessible interiors

05

Easy and safe access to public transport, health care, amenities, and community spaces for social gatherings

Teenager

What does breathable density mean to them?

- Places for social interaction that offer privacy, safety, novelty, and freedom along with necessities like seating, shelter, lighting, and Wi-Fi.
- Spaces activated through a program of free or affordable events
- Increased foot traffic and the presence of helpful bystanders, avoiding isolated or poorly lit areas to reduce fear and enhance safety.
- Easy access to (reliable) public transport, local amenities, parks, and recreational spaces for independent movement and social engagement.

Top five things this person needs

01

Green spaces for activities like sports or recreation

02

Safe, activated streets for independent movement and engagement

03

Intentional social and engaging outdoor spaces like skate parks

04

Buildings with informal social areas, tech-enabled zones, and active spaces (to help study or for creative pursuits)

05

Easy access to universities and libraries and leisure options like cafés and entertainment



Parent with children



What does breathable density mean to them?

- Surveillance, raised crossings, narrow lanes, curb extensions and other urban design interventions to prioritise people, especially near homes, parks and schools.
- Wide sidewalks and protected bike lanes so kids can move around safely on their own.
- Playful elements and safe places to gather in streets, plazas, and neighbourhoods—not just parks.
- More road space for buses and bikes, especially in areas where kids and families live and travel.
- Transit stops that are safe, shaded, and stroller-friendly with easy crossings and seating.
- Streets with joyful details like public art, colour, and playful textures that spark imagination
- Parks edged by homes to allow passive surveillance

Top five things this person needs

01

Quiet zones in nature for personal rest and reflection

02

Streets that supports easy navigation with children

03

Spaces for socialising with other parents and the local community

04

Child-friendly spaces with safe playgrounds and activity areas close to work and home

05

Close proximity to essential services, schools, and transport



Examples of child-friendly spaces



Neurodivergent Individual



What does breathable density mean to them?

- Public spaces with varied zones: active (play, movement exploration), focused (reading, resting quiet engagement), and restful (soft seating, hammocks, and shaded spots).
- Modular, flexible layouts of street furniture that allow personal choice and social distancing.
- Buildings and streets with materials that offer diverse sensory experiences—rubber, turf, and wood.
- Options for high and low stimulation to suit different sensory needs

Top five things this person needs

01

Access to restorative spaces

02

Clear navigation with easily identifiable streets and areas

03

Places that offer diverse sensory experiences

04

Buildings with soft lighting and sound control offering quiet and social zones

05

Reliable transport options with well-marked areas



Clear and intuitive wayfinding and spaces offering diverse sensory experiences





Breathable density at scale

Breathable density applies as much to the local pocket park as it does to the strategic planning of Greater Sydney. The four principles of breathable density can be delivered across all scales, but what they look like and who is responsible for them changes depending on context.

A local resident can tend planter boxes. An architect can design for natural cross-ventilation. A council can invest in greening school streets. The state government can plan for a city of greenways. Each action is different in scale and ownership, but all of them contribute to a more breathable city.

This section explores how the breathable density principles apply across four scales: city, neighbourhood, street and building. It also provides one policy or design idea that can bring 'breathable density' to life at each scale.



City scale



Neighbourhood scale



Street scale



Building scale



Thornton, Penrith. Image: Landcom



At a city-scale



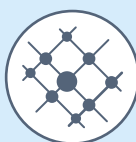
The blue-green grid is one of the city's greatest assets. Sydney's growth agenda is the opportunity to fully realise it.

The logic of Sydney's blue-green grid is well established: connecting waterways, public parks, sports spaces and green corridors to create a legible, accessible network across the city. It represents one of Sydney's most significant city-shaping opportunities.

Developed by the Government Architect's office, Sydney's blue-green grid has been in place since 2016, but delivering it cuts across multiple agencies, each with their own core mandates, as well as complex questions of funding, land ownership and alignment across council boundaries. These are solvable problems, but require sustained coordination and leadership.

The case for getting it right is compelling. As the evidence in this report shows, quality green and blue space delivers measurable improvements in mental health, loneliness, cardiovascular health and community connection. A connected blue-green network across Sydney would deliver those benefits at city scale.

Sydney's existing green and blue network
Tyrell Studio and Government Architect NSW
2017



At a city-scale

CASE STUDY

Diagnosing a city's air quality health: Breathe London programme, Greater London Authority

Currently, NSW EPA operates 21 monitoring stations across Greater Sydney, this granularity is enough to track broad trends, but not enough to guide targeted actions. London shows what more detailed, place-based monitoring looks like in practice.

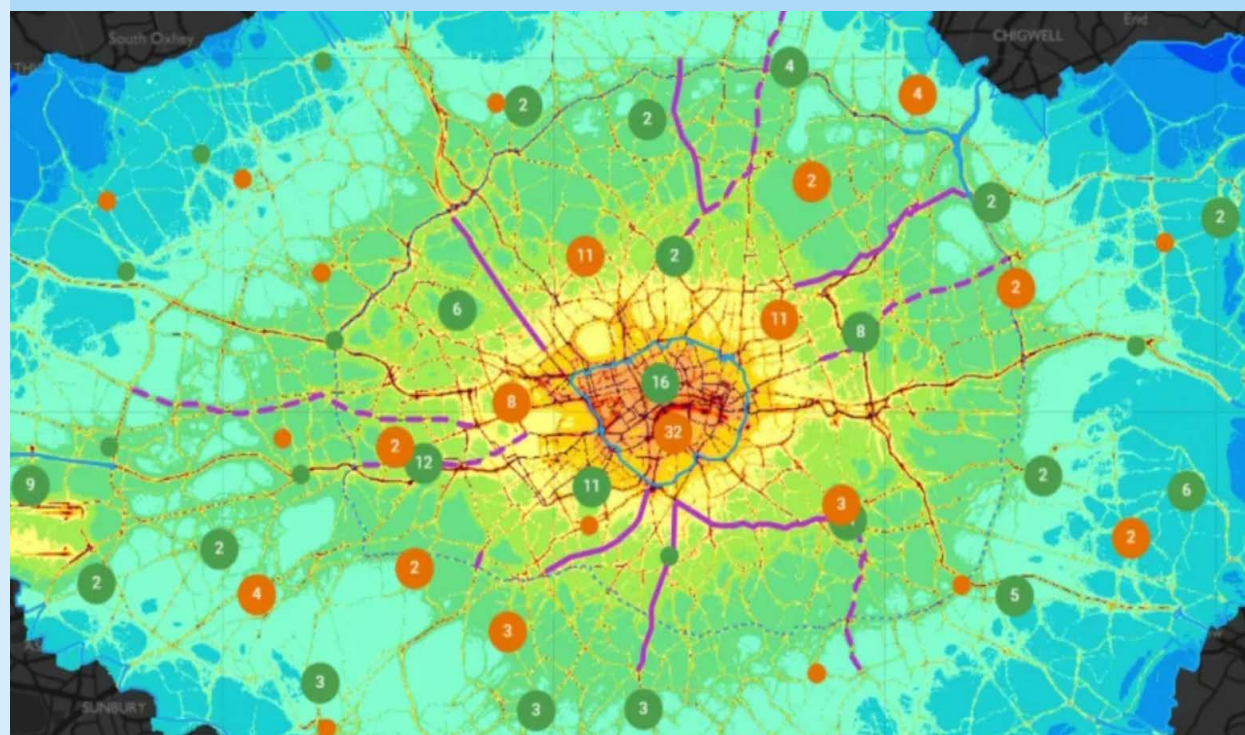
In 2018, Mayor Sadiq Khan launched Breathe London, the world's most advanced urban air quality network at the time. It combined 100 fixed sensors across the city with two Google Street View cars taking air quality readings every 30 metres as they drove around.

The programme was built to measure the efficiency of policies such as the Congestion Charging Zone. Sensors were also placed at schools, nurseries and hospitals to understand the impacts to those most vulnerable to air pollution.

Why is this important?

You can't manage what you don't measure. As more areas in Sydney densify, air quality will need to be treated as an equaliser rather than a divider, and better data monitoring would be a strong first step toward achieving that.

Source: Greater London Authority³³



CASE STUDY

Spaces that breathe in and out: Tumbalong Park, Sydney, Placemaking NSW

On a Tuesday lunchtime, Tumbalong Park is a neighbourhood park. Office workers eat on the grass, parents push prams past the playground, people sit by the water. It is quiet, restorative, and ordinary in the best possible way. On Saturday evening it holds tens of thousands. State of Origin on the big screen, Vivid projections, Chinese New Year, community markets, outdoor cinema — Tumbalong swells to become one of Sydney's great civic gathering places. The same lawn. The same park. A completely different scale and intensity.

Why is this important?

This ability to transform from quiet weekday respite to city-scale celebration, is what the principle "Places that Breathe In and Out" looks like in practice. It works because the design allows it: a flexible lawn large enough to hold a crowd, a cantilevered sound shell, active edges that generate life even on slow days, and management that programs the space across the full week.



Image: Hassel

CASE STUDY

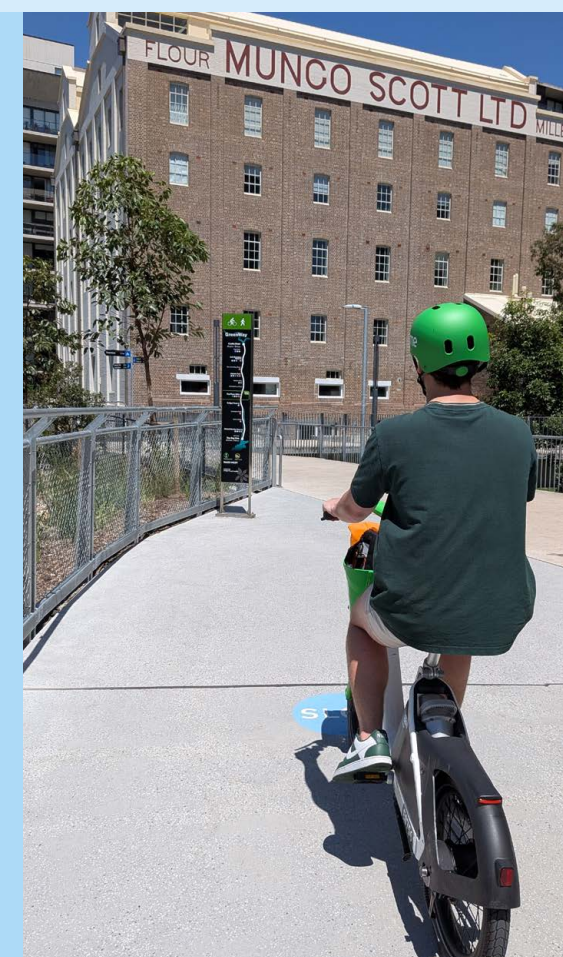
Building a city of Greenways: Cooks River to Iron Cove GreenWay, Sydney, Inner West Council, City of Canterbury Bankstown

Since the Inner West Greenway missing links opened through Marrickville, Dulwich Hill, and Summer Hill in December 2025, businesses at the Mungo Scott Flour Mill precinct in Summer Hill have seen a 47% increase in average monthly revenue, a 21% increase in employees, and a 43% increase in social media following.³⁴

Why is this important?

The GreenWay is not just a recreational asset — it connects up and improves access to existing blue and green places, unlocks publicly-owned land for multiple uses, provides a valuable alternative to the car for local journeys, enhances community connections, supports local businesses and combats loneliness. Sydney is not starting from scratch: the Sydney Green Grid (2017) has already mapped the network logic, and Idea #1 (page 64) sets out how to build on it.

Source: The Little Big House, Flour Mill Precinct





At a neighbourhood-scale





At a neighbourhood-scale

1



Neighbourhood gathering spaces

A defined multi-use plaza or shared meeting space that can 'breathe in' – filled with events like markets or festivals, and breathe out – spaces that are comfortable and easy to rest in, and suitable for smaller groups and passive recreation.

2



Greening from above

Green rooftops that add planting and reduce surrounding heat.

5



Parks with eyes on them

Parks edged by homes and active areas to allow passive surveillance and a sense of community ownership.

3



Spaces for every mood

Public space with varied zones – active, focused, and restful – offering diverse sensory experiences.

4



Easy to navigate

Clear street navigation and intuitive wayfinding so people can move independently.

6



Activated neighbourhood streets

Activated streets with ground-floor uses that generate life at all hours.



At a neighbourhood-scale

CASE STUDY

Enjoy Waltham Forest Program, London

In 2014, Waltham Forest was one of three outer London boroughs selected for Transport for London's Mini-Holland Programme, securing £27 million to build a borough-wide network of protected cycle tracks, pedestrian-priority crossings and low-traffic residential areas — part of a citywide push to prove that high-quality walking and cycling networks could work beyond London's inner boroughs. The programme's remit was deliberately broad: protecting footfall for local high streets, making school commutes safer, and improving wayfinding across the borough.

Why is this important?

A decade on, Waltham Forest is the top outer London borough for active and sustainable mode share (69%). Cycle journeys rose 56% between 2017 and 2023 while traffic fell 11% on average, and transport-related nitrogen oxide emissions dropped 25%. Building one connected network and refining it over ten years, rather than scattering pilot schemes across the borough, is what let these health, mobility and community gains compound together instead of trading off against each other.

Source: Transport for London³⁵



CASE STUDY

City of Sydney Urban Forest Strategy, Sydney

Trees are essential urban infrastructure — they reduce heat, improve health and wellbeing and enhance the biodiversity of our cities. In 2008, the City of Sydney launched its Urban Forest Strategy with the aim of enhancing green cover across the city's streets, parklands and private lands to 40% — including 27% tree canopy cover — by 2050.

At a time when cities around the world are losing green space to competing land-use priorities, the City of Sydney's Urban Forest Strategy has seen the city's tree canopy coverage grow from 15% in 2008 to 21.7% in 2026. This has been supported by a targeted planting agenda backed by rigorous, street-level measurements of canopy and green cover every two years. The strategy also includes provisions to achieve an equitable distribution of canopy coverage across the city, while designing urban forests to support diverse species and habitat.

Source: City of Sydney^{36,37}

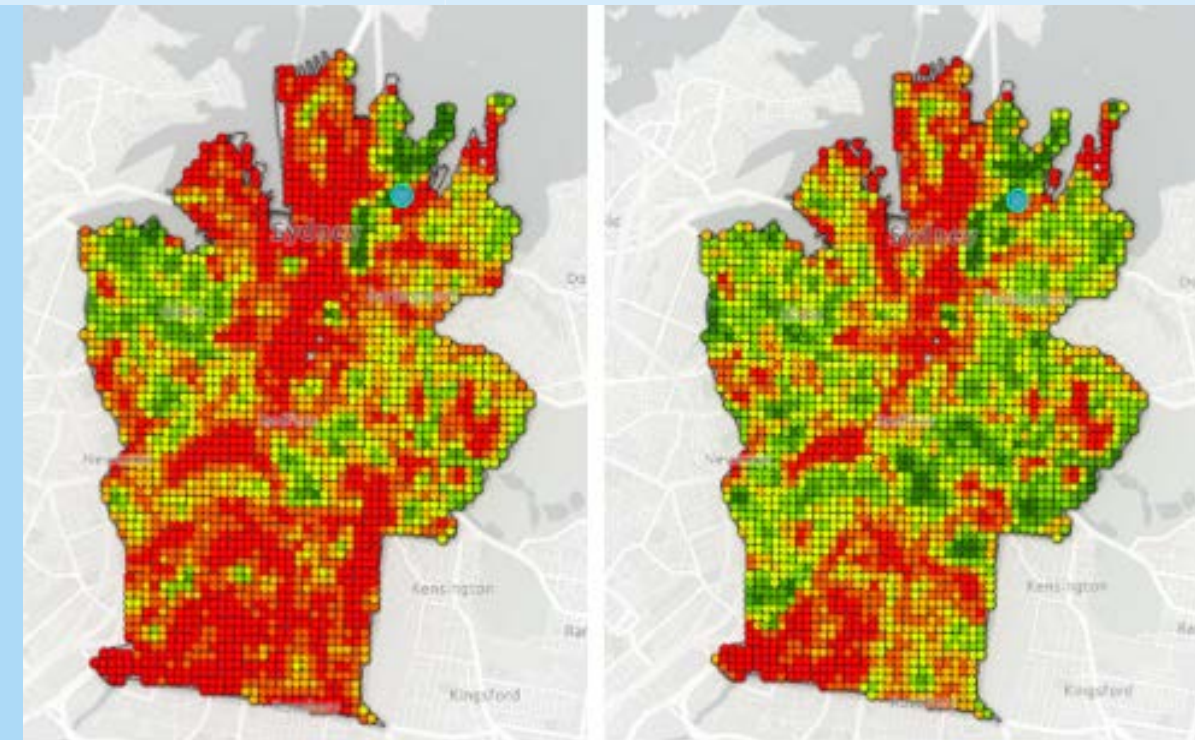


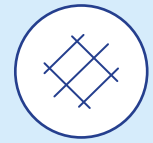
Image: BVN

CASE STUDY

Green Square Public School, Sydney

Green Square is one of Sydney's densest precincts. Private open space is scarce, and residents depend entirely on shared public infrastructure to find relief, gather, and play. So when a new school was needed, the NSW Government and City of Sydney did something simple and smart: they designed it for everyone.

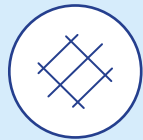
Opened in October 2025, Green Square Public School (designed by BVN) includes a communal hall, dedicated community spaces, a games court, courtyard, and a rooftop playground — all available for community use outside school hours. It is publicly funded education infrastructure that pulls double duty as neighbourhood infrastructure. This is what the open school grounds rec looks like in practice. Not an afterthought — a design intention from day one, delivered through genuine partnership between School Infrastructure NSW, City of Sydney, and the local community.



At a street-scale



Blocking streets to cars and opening them up for play with creative traffic calming measures.



At a street-scale

1



Wide shaded walks

Wide sidewalks with continuous shade from canopy trees that define and cool the street

2



Safe movement for all

Protected bike lanes and safe, stroller-friendly transit stops

5



Living green buffers

Green buffers, verge planting, and bioswales that manage stormwater and add ecology

6



Streets as destinations

Play elements and outdoor seating that make streets destinations, not just routes

3



Warmth and joy

Soft lighting, coloured paths, public art, and playful textures that create warmth and joy

4



Accessible by design

Tactile elements, differentiated pavement materials, and clear wayfinding for all abilities

7



Active and engaging edges

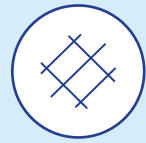
Active building frontages that bring eyes to the street and life to the edges

8



Streets that breathe

Flexible bollards and closures that allow streets to breathe — opening for markets, play, and community events



At a street-scale

CASE STUDY

School Streets in Paris and Willoughby, Sydney

The concept of school streets is gaining momentum around the world for enabling children to commute to school safely and independently. Paris has delivered more than 300 school streets through its “Rues aux Écoles” programme, closing roads to traffic and rebuilding them as places for play, learning and community life, all shaped with input from the children who use them.

Closer to home, Willoughby City Council pursued the same. In 2022, the council launched the Resilient Willoughby Schools Active Travel Program at Willoughby Public School after finding that over half the students at the school were being driven to school despite most living within a 15-minute walk. The curriculum-based program began with the students mapping proposed walking and cycling routes to school. Four routes were confirmed by council, safety checked, marked with decals and an active map developed for use by the school community. Minor improvements to footpaths and street crossings were undertaken and some parking adjustments made along the routes. Modifications that safeguarded children’s commute were added, such as pavement decals and traffic rule changes near the school gates. That groundwork was reinforced by road safety education, cycling lessons, promotion of ‘walk and ride to school’ days and parent engagement, with 92% of parents supporting the initiative in a follow-up survey. The results followed quickly: walking and cycling rose by up to 11% after launch, moving Willoughby toward its target of 60% active travel by 2024.

Source: Willoughby Council, *Future Design of Streets*³⁹



CASE STUDY

Streets that Breathe in and out: Open Streets Program, TfNSW

Transport for NSW’s Open Streets Program treats the street itself as public space, not just a corridor for cars.

The \$15 million program, part of the Vibrant Streets Package, has funded 46 councils across NSW up to \$350,000 each to host recurring festivals and markets by closing streets to traffic. Parramatta Lanes turns city laneways into a dining and culture precinct, while Liverpool’s Starry Sari Night activates streets for a celebration of South Asian food and fashion.

Source: Transport for NSW⁴⁰, Liverpool City Council⁴¹



CASE STUDY

Tree Canopy in Oran Park and Blacktown, Sydney

In Sydney’s growth corridors, closing the canopy gap takes different tools.

At Oran Park, a greenfield community in the Camden LGA, sub-arterial roads use a five-row planting configuration (verge, verge, median, verge, verge). A standard road reserve would plant only a single verge, leaving the edge closest to homes bare. Here the canopy runs right up to the residential frontage, so people get shade at their doorstep and a shaded link to nearby parks and the town centre, supporting a shift toward active travel over car dependence.

In Blacktown, the tool was evidence-led community engagement. The Cool Streets pilot on Boonderoo Avenue, Glenwood, developed by Gallagher Studio with CRED Consulting and Blacktown City Council in 2015–16, turned research into a decision residents could make themselves. Dr Libby Gallagher’s research showed a modified street tree layout could achieve almost seven times the carbon reduction of a standard design and cut household electricity bills by over \$400 a year. Rather than presenting a finished plan, the project team shared this evidence with residents, who then led the decision on the layout and species of trees on their street through a three-phase engagement process. Ten years on, most of the trees are still standing, now taller than a two-storey house and providing significant canopy. Some residents still have their Cool Streets watering can, and are sharing the value of trees with friends and neighbours.

Source: Gallagher Studio⁴²





At a building-scale



1



Operable Windows to allow buildings to breathe. Banksia, Norwest Quarter, Sydney (23 storeys), uses framed glass louvres, where blade geometry itself restricts the gap to under 125mm, satisfying D3D29 without a restrictor and achieving 80-90% effective area fully open.



At a building-scale

1



Buildings that breathe

Operable windows allowing natural ventilation and fresh air through living and working spaces

2



Nature in every outlook

Visual connection to at least 3 trees and greenery from every window and opening.

5



Climate-responsive design

Building orientation that minimises western sun in summer and captures northern sun in winter

6



Shade and privacy

Extra shading at lower levels for privacy and pedestrian comfort

3



Living green architecture

Green roofs, green walls, and planted podiums that reduce surrounding heat and add ecology

4



Balconies for living

Balconies large enough for seating and planting without air conditioning units blocking them

7



Warm and enduring materials

Warm materials like wood, brick, stone, that age well and connects to place

8



Buildings that contribute

Green laneways and activated ground floors that contribute to the public realm



At a building-scale

CASE STUDY

LUSH program, Singapore

In Singapore, greening is part of building upwards. Under the Urban Redevelopment Authority's LUSH programme, new buildings in growth areas must replace all the green space their footprint takes away. It's a mandatory planning control, enforced the same way as any other building code requirement. This can be delivered through ground-level gardens, planter boxes, sky terraces, green roofs or green walls, similar to the vertical greenery features at Sydney's Central Park Mall.

What Sydney is missing is a single standard. Greening rules are currently split across council Development Control Plans, the voluntary Tree Canopy Guide, and the Apartment Design Guide, and none of it is mandatory. Singapore's programme shows the possibility of one citywide minimum, written into the NSW Sustainable Buildings SEPP and applied the same way everywhere. This removes the guesswork and builds greenery into the initial design rather than treating it as an afterthought.

Source: Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority⁴⁵



CASE STUDY

Buildings that Breathe, Brisbane City Council

Brisbane City Council's Buildings that Breathe guide does something deceptively simple: it calls sky terraces and podium gardens "recreation infrastructure" rather than optional amenity — and excludes them from floor area calculations to make their inclusion financially rational.

The result is a city where elevated green space is a standard expectation of density, not a luxury. NSW can adopt the same principle and go further making the FSR exclusion mandatory rather than aspirational, and setting minimum standards for size, planting, and accessibility that ensure the actually works for residents.

Source: Brisbane City Council⁴⁶

CASE STUDY Same rules, but better windows: Riviere and Banksia, Sydney and Brisbane, Bates Smart

Two recent buildings show better ventilation is achievable within existing rules, no alternative solution or performance pathway needed.

Rivière, Kangaroo Point, Brisbane (12 storeys), uses fixed perforated screens with full sliding windows behind them. Because the screen satisfies the fall-prevention requirement, the glazing opens completely, achieving 60-70% effective ventilation, a five-fold improvement on a restricted awning.

Banksia, Norwest Quarter, Sydney (23 storeys), uses framed glass louvres, where blade geometry itself restricts the gap to under 125mm, satisfying D3D29 without a restrictor and achieving 80-90% effective area fully open.

Why is this important?

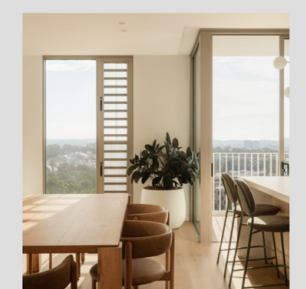
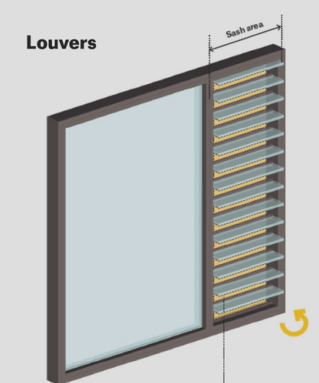
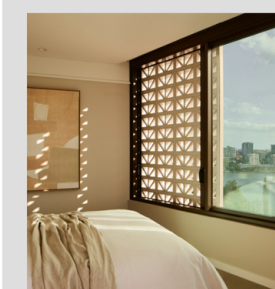
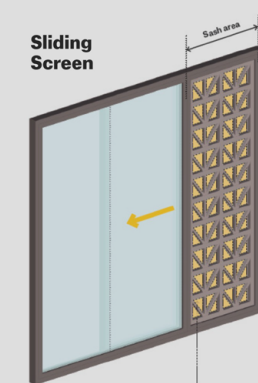
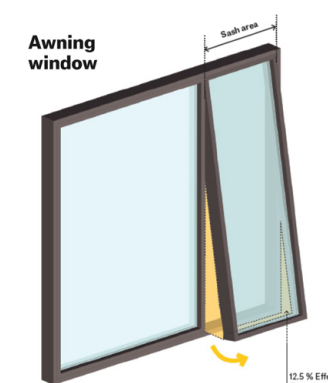
Both were delivered via standard Deemed-to-Satisfy compliance, no special certification, no compromise on safety. The difference is a design team treating the window as a system from the outset, proof that habit, not regulation, is the barrier to breathable apartments.

The problem with awning windows

- Awnings are the default in high-rise apartments — watertight, weatherproof, and cost-effective
- But restrictors limit the opening to 125mm — just 12.5% of the sash area is actually open to fresh air
- The NCC requires 5% of floor area to be naturally ventilated — but measures sash size, not effective opening
- The result: apartments are compliant on paper but barely breathe in reality

Better alternatives exist

- A sliding window and fixed screen can achieve 60-70% effective open area
- Louvre windows can achieve 80-90% effective open area
- Built examples achieve this with standard NCC compliance
- The barrier to better ventilation isn't regulation — it's habit



Source: Bates Smart



Five ideas to bring breathable density to life



Potential future of prospect pipeline, part of the proposed Prospect to port greenway' brought to life by Warren and Mahoney Architects



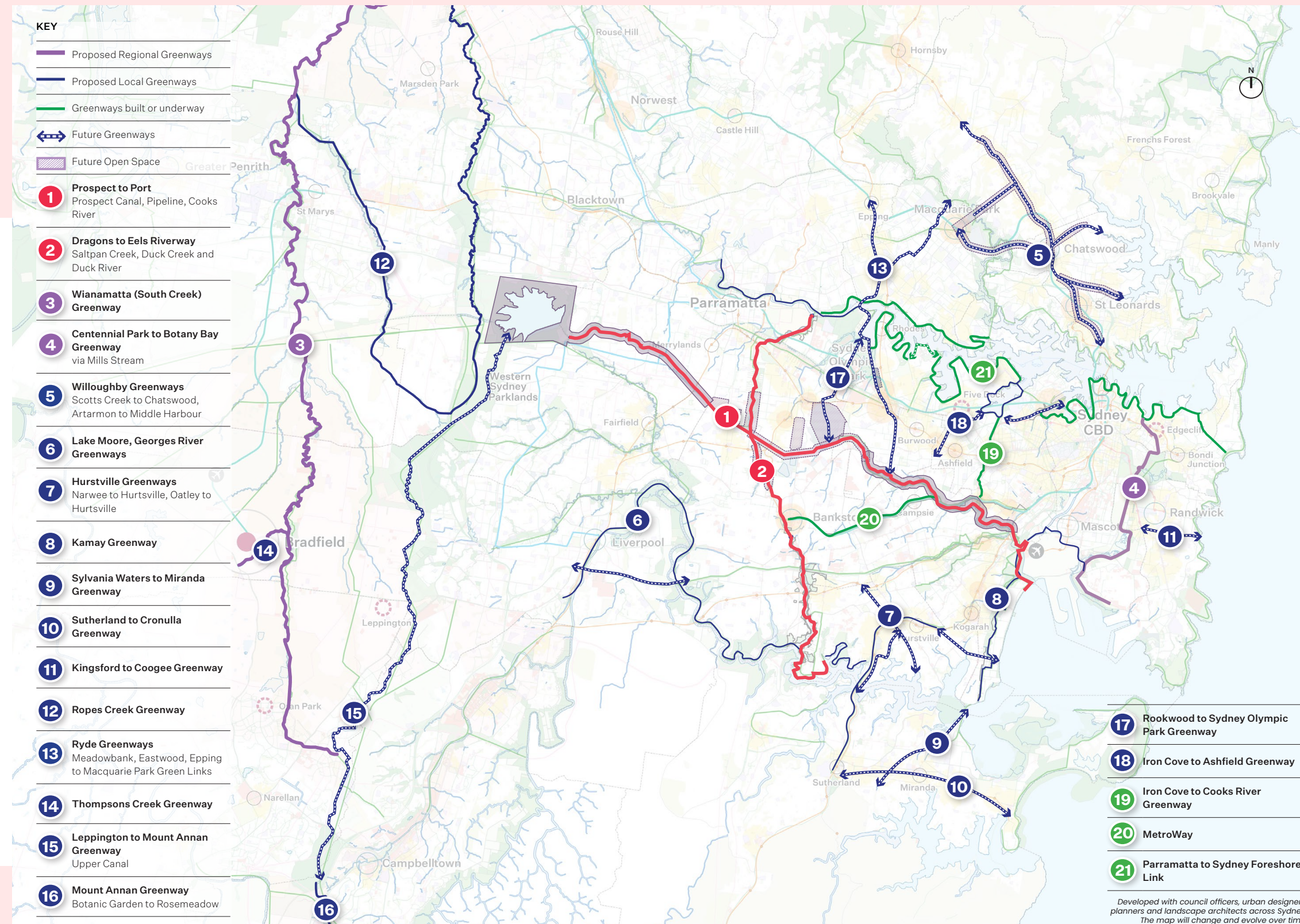
Idea #1 to bring this to life: Building a city of greenways

What is a city of greenways?

A city of greenways is a connected network of green and blue corridors that stitches parks, waterways, streets and recreation spaces into a system that people can move through across the whole city. Think of them as recreation highways: major routes that carry people through the city not by car, but on foot and by bike, through green space and nature.

Sydney already has the bones of one. Its harbour foreshores, river corridors, creek lines and rail easements run through every part of the city, including the suburbs absorbing the most growth. The opportunity is to stitch these together into a true network that connects people to regional open space, to Greater Sydney Parklands, to major sporting and recreation facilities.

Done well, a city of greenways gives every Sydneysider – not just those in leafy suburbs with waterfront access – a recreation highway from their front door into a city-wide system of parks, pools, rivers and open space.



Proposed network of Greenways, brought to life by Warren and Mahoney Architects



Idea #1 to bring this to life: Building a city of greenways

400,000+

Existing Sydneysiders would benefit from the Prospect to Port Greenway, and Dragons to Eels Riverway. This could grow if we build more housing along these corridors.

Key stats on our top two greenways:

Prospect to Port Greenway

35km

92,000 people within a 5minute walk

240,000 people within a 15min walk, or 5min bike

Dragons to Eels Riverway

21km

95,870 people within a 5minute walk

162,740 people within a 15min walk, or 5min bike



Visualisation of future Dragons to Eels Riverway by Warren and Mahoney Architects

How to make it happen

What can state government do?

- **PLAN:** Publish a Greater Sydney Greenways network plan: a formal spatial plan that maps priority corridors and establishes a logical sequence for delivery
- Where development adjoins or could activate a greenway corridor the planning approval process should require a meaningful contribution to corridor delivery.
- **GOVERN:** Establish a cross-agency governance body by standing up the Green-Blue Grid Committee. This will help generate shared ownership of the plan and enable cross-agency input. Local Government should also have a solid link to this governance framework.
- **INVEST:** Commit multi-year funding tied to the Greenways plan. A dedicated program budget that enables councils and agencies to plan and deliver with certainty. This can be achieved by allocating a consistent proportion of Housing Productivity Contribution (e.g. 1% annually).

What can local government do?

- **JOIN UP:** Sign up to the Greenways network plan and commit to delivering corridor sections within your LGA
- **WORK TOGETHER:** Enter joint delivery agreements with other councils across LGA boundaries for corridors that span multiple councils.

What can public land and utility providers do?

- **STREAMLINE:** Activate residual public land for greenway use through streamlined and standardised 'Asset Activation Agreements'.
- **SPEED-UP:** Identify which pieces of water land, rail easements, utility corridors and road reserves can serve community purpose without compromising operational function.

What can developers do?

- **PARTNER TO DELIVER** Contribute land and connections through the planning system.
- **REORIENT:** Think about how sites that adjoin greenway corridors can reorient towards them and active the corridors.



Idea #2 to bring this to life: More places to swim and play in our big parks

What's the opportunity?

Sydney's five big parklands are the lungs of the city. Until recently, they were mainly places to stay dry, with little opportunity to cool off, swim or engage with water.

That is changing, and the parklands agency does not need to start from scratch. Callan Park's tidal baths open on the Iron Cove foreshore this summer, a \$3.8 million jetty, pontoon and shark-netted swim site built into the parkland itself. Fernhill Estate's Landscape Master Plan already commits to a 300 metre boardwalk around its Northern Dam with kayak access. Western Sydney Parklands has floated a "Blue Seam" water corridor in its Southern Parklands design framework, a 1 kilometre link between Liverpool Offtake Reservoir and Hinchinbrook Dam, opening new opportunities for water play, swimming and paddling through the Cumberland Plain. Lake Parramatta, a short ride from Parramatta Park, reopened for swimming in 2015 after 72 years closed.

Five parklands, five different kinds of water: harbour, river, lake, dam and beach. The opportunity is not to invent new swim sites everywhere, but to treat the ones already open, funded or floated as one connected system, and make sure people can get to them, and that the water is safe when they do.

Centennial Park shows what the connection piece looks like close to the city. It already has a dedicated cycle lane on Grand Drive, and the ride to Bondi Beach is closer to finished than most people realise: an existing route runs from the park's northeastern corner through the completed Bondi Junction cycleway, with Waverley's Curlewis Street cycleway now extending it to the beach. What is missing is not new corridor, but continuity and wayfinding.



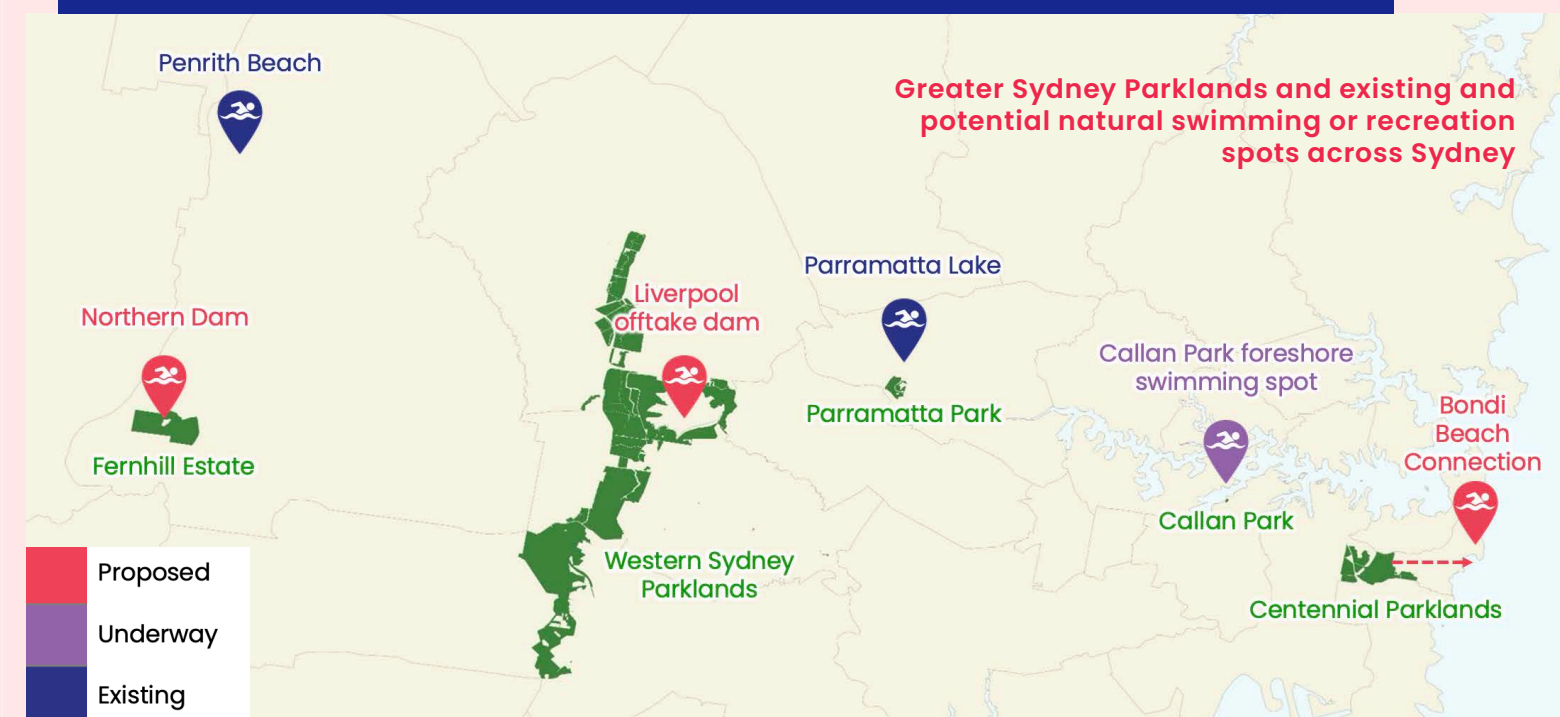
How to make it happen

What can state government do?

- **PLAN:** Map the short, missing links between each of the five parklands and its nearest swimming or paddling spot, prioritising the gaps rather than the whole network.
- **GOVERN:** Get Greater Sydney Parklands, Transport for NSW, and relevant councils coordinating delivery, building on what's already committed at Callan Park, Fernhill, and the Southern Parklands framework.
- **MONITOR:** Extend Sydney Water's RiverWatch program, already used to test and clear sites like Bayview Park and Putney Beach, to cover all

prospective parklands swim spots, including inland dams. Twelve months of monitoring ahead of any opening, and continued monitoring after, so water quality keeps pace with visitor numbers.

- **FUND:** Back the last-mile links, the cycling and walking connections, signage, and shade, with the same seriousness as the swim sites themselves. A pontoon or a dam boardwalk nobody can reach easily, or can't safely swim in, is only half the job done.





Idea #3 to bring this to life: Close Sydney's green gap and heat gap together

What does this mean?

We need greening in the places that need it most by analysing areas vulnerable to urban heat, and areas with low levels of tree canopy together.

While greening all of Sydney is important, +A grant-based funding system favours councils with the resources and expertise to apply. This leaves those with less capacity, who are also often the same councils with the lowest canopy cover, further behind. State-level coordination is required to direct investment where it is most needed.

Lead with public land. The City of Sydney demonstrates that canopy can grow even during intense densification, rising from 15.5% in 2008 to 21.7% in 2026 driven primarily by streets, parks and verges.⁴⁷ Growth corridors cannot wait a generation for private redevelopment, the heavy lifting must happen in the public realm.

How to make it happen

What can local government do?

- **LEAD** on public land, maximising canopy on streets, parks and verges
- **SET** canopy targets for streets, parks and private land, weighted toward heat-vulnerable areas
- **UNLOCK** street planting opportunities by auditing capacity and coordinating with utilities to resolve blockages from powerlines and easements
- **GREEN** parks with ambitious park-by-park targets, prioritising parks in dense, lower-canopy precincts
- **DIVERSIFY** species selection by applying genus and family diversity benchmarks and selecting for the climate of 2050
- **PROTECT** trees through stronger protection orders, increased penalties for unlawful removal, and meaningful replacement multipliers

What can state government do?

- **TARGET** canopy investment using heat vulnerability and demographic data, not just gap analysis
- **FUND** consistent multi-year canopy investment for councils, shifting from competitive grant cycles and prioritising highest-gap corridors
- **SEQUENCE** canopy planting with utility undergrounding, road renewal and transport works to capture planting opportunities systematically
- **GUIDE** councils in setting stratified, capacity-based targets by publishing a NSW future-climate species list and canopy framework



Putney Hill, COX Architecture



Idea #4 to bring this to life: Build a city of safe and shaded school streets

What is a school street?

A school street is a road around a school that has been redesigned around the safety and experience of children. That means either temporary restrictions on motor vehicles at drop-off and pick-up times, or street designs and speed limits that make the road safe for an eight-year-old at all times.

The concept is well established internationally. Paris has delivered more than 300 school streets, the UK has over 650, and Sydney's very first school street opened at Fort Street Public School in February 2026. Studies in the UK have recorded a 30% increase in children walking to school, an 18% drop in parents driving, and a 23% reduction in air pollution after school

streets were introduced. Eighty-one per cent of parents support the changes once they are in place.

Done well, school streets are more than just car-free zones. They are landscaped, planted with continuous tree canopy that provides shade and cooling, and designed with seating, play, and active edges. They demonstrate what a calm, walkable, neighbourhood street can look like for everyone who uses it, not just children. If a street works for an eight-year-old walking to school, it works for everyone.

Sydney has a handful of school streets. Paris has more than three hundred. Closing that gap is one of the most achievable and high-impact opportunities for breathable density at the street scale.



Image: Willoughby City Council

How to make it happen

What can state government do?

- **PLAN:** Publish a Sydney school streets program that identifies priority schools for delivery, where canopy cover is lowest and population growth is highest. Embed school street design standards into NSW street design and planning frameworks.
- **GOVERN:** Coordinate across Transport for NSW, Schools Infrastructure NSW, and Health to align school siting, street design, local government and active transport investment. Build on the lessons of Fort Street Public School and the existing Get Kids Active program.
- **FUND:** Commit multi-year funding for a coordinated school streets rollout. A dedicated program budget would enable councils and agencies to plan and deliver with certainty.

What can local government do?

- **PLAN:** Use school catchments as the sequencing logic for streetscape improvements. Map safe walking and cycling routes to every school and prioritise upgrades within those catchments first.
- **PLANT:** Invest in continuous tree canopy along school walking routes, prioritising the streets that connect homes, parks and schools.
- **PROTECT:** Slow vehicle speeds, install safe crossings, and connect footpaths within school catchments as a baseline standard, whether through temporary restrictions or permanent design changes.
- **ENGAGE:** Involve children, parents, schools and the broader community in designing and using their local streets. Trials are an effective way to demonstrate the benefits before permanent changes are made.



Image: Willoughby City Council



Idea #5 to bring this to life: Better benchmarks for buildings that breathe

What better benchmarks are needed?

A building can be fully compliant, on greening and on air, and still fail the people living in it. Greening sits across council Development Control Plans, a voluntary Tree Canopy Guide, and the Apartment Design Guide, with no consistent baseline. Ventilation standards are met on paper without delivering fresh air in practice. Neither problem requires new rules, just clearer standards, consolidated and consistently applied.

Greening

The Sustainable Buildings SEPP plays an important role in lifting the sustainability of new buildings across NSW, setting standards for energy efficiency, water use, and embodied emissions. It does not yet address greening. That work currently sits across council Development Control Plans, the voluntary Tree Canopy Guide for Low and Mid-Rise Housing, and the Apartment Design Guide, resulting in inconsistency across councils, late-stage uncertainty, and uneven outcomes.

Embedding greening into the Sustainable Buildings SEPP would create a clearer, more consistent baseline across NSW. Done well, with industry input, it would simplify the system for developers and lift outcomes for residents. The most cost-effective greening is greening designed in from day one.

A balanced approach combines minimum standards with performance benchmarks. Minimum standards set a predictable floor for the things that can be specified consistently — deep soil dimensions, tree planting zones, canopy replacement rates. Performance benchmarks reward better design on outcomes that vary with context, such as overall canopy cover, biodiversity, and urban heat reduction. The intent is to replace inconsistency with clarity, not to add burden.

In a market where buyers and renters increasingly value access to greenery, light, and outlook, getting this right is also good business.

The SEPP should set:

- Minimum deep soil standards sufficient for canopy trees (at least 3 metres by 3 metres).
- A minimum tree-planting zone for every dwelling, including in low density and greenfield contexts.
- Canopy cover benchmarks for each development type, calibrated by lot size, density, and location.
- Replacement multipliers for canopy that cannot be delivered at ground level. Where podium or rooftop greening is used, replacement should be required at 2 to 3 times the equivalent ground area.
- A clear hierarchy: deep soil first, podium greening second, green roofs third. Green walls should not be relied on, as they are high cost, high maintenance, and frequently fail.

Ventilation

Almost every new high-rise apartment uses the same window: top-hung, opening outward at the bottom, restricted to less than 125mm, in practice often closer to 90mm. It's the default because it's weathertight, cost-effective, and suits tall narrow formats.

The problem in practice

An awning sash opening against the restrictor delivers only around 12.5% effective ventilation area in practice, even though the full sash counts as 100% on paper, a narrow strip along the bottom and two triangular gaps at the sides.

Why this happens: a compliance gap

The NCC requires natural ventilation equal to 5% of floor area (F6D7), but measures it against sash area, not effective opening, so a restricted window can still comply. The restrictor itself comes from a separate rule, D3D29, preventing a 125mm sphere passing through windows with a fall risk, a requirement that varies genuinely by room type and context. In practice, industry has applied 125mm restrictors uniformly regardless of context, turning a nuanced safety rule into a blanket one. The ADG's own ventilation objective already specifies effective openable area, but this is overridden by NCC certification practice.

Two reasonable provisions, a ventilation target and a fall-safety requirement, combine through habitual over-application to produce apartments compliant on paper but poorly ventilated in practice.

Better alternatives already achieve this within standard NCC compliance, no special pathway required (see case study on page 59). If density is to be accepted by communities, the apartments delivering it need to perform, for thermal comfort, indoor air quality, and health, avoiding mould, VOC build-up, elevated CO₂, and asthma triggers. Breathable density is achievable, proven, and within reach today, it simply requires the industry to stop defaulting to habit, supported by better benchmarks.



Idea #5 to bring this to life: Better benchmarks for buildings that breathe

How to make it happen

What can state government do?

- **REVIEW:** Update the Sustainable Buildings SEPP to include greening minimum standards and performance benchmarks, developed in partnership with industry and aligned with deep soil, tree planting, canopy cover, and replacement requirements by development type and location.
- **ADVOCATE:** Push the Australian Building Codes Board to close the NCC's ventilation loophole, aligning national standards with the ADG's existing objective on effective opening area.

What can local government do?

- **ALIGN:** Strengthen Development Control Plans with consistent greening standards and benchmarks. Councils that lead now will help shape the state-wide baseline over time.
- **VERIFY:** Build canopy and deep soil compliance into DA assessment, occupation certificate conditions, and post-occupation auditing.

What can federal government do?

- **REVIEW:** Direct the Australian Building Codes Board to amend NCC F6D7 to measure natural ventilation compliance against effective opening area rather than sash area, closing the loophole that allows restricted windows to comply on paper.

What can industry do?

- **DESIGN:** Treat window and screen design as a first-order amenity decision, not a late-stage facade detail. The barrier to breathable apartments is convention, not capability.
- **EXPLORE:** Look beyond proven models, carefully placed windows and alternative facade strategies designed for effective opening are likely to unlock further options.

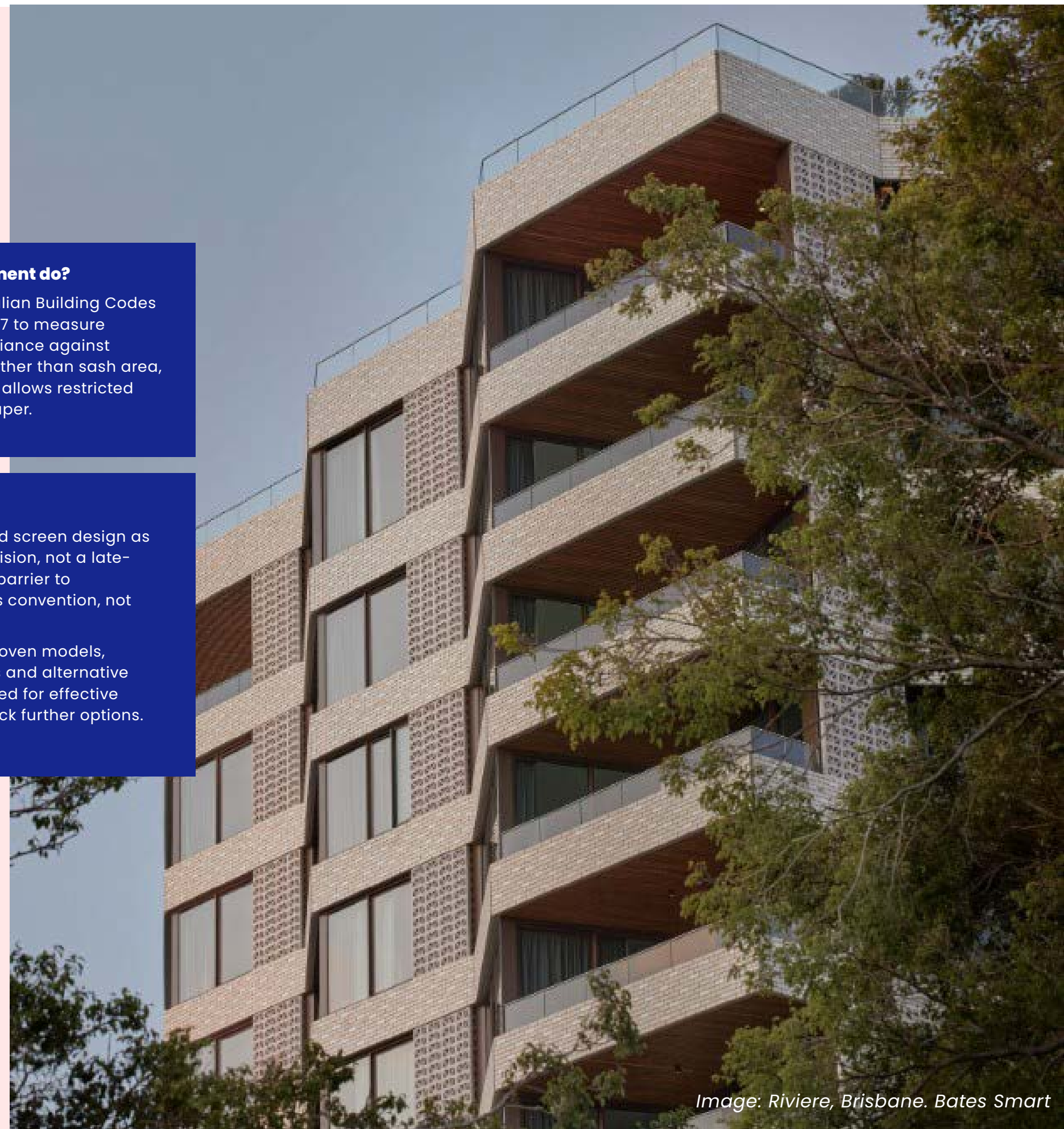


Image: Riviere, Brisbane. Bates Smart

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Innovation Fund Partners

We would like to thank our Innovation Fund Partners for their support of the Committee for Sydney’s research.

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