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Invercargill
CITY COUNCIL

play
STRATEGY

Invercargill is a city where play excites and connects everyone

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Invercargill City Council

play STRATEGY

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Executive Summary

Invercargill City Council is embarking on an ambitious journey to transform our entire district – from Makarewa to Bluff and Kennington to Ōtātara – into a vibrant, citywide playground by 2055.

This Play Strategy sets forth our vision to weave play into the fabric of everyday life, creating a more joyful, connected, and resilient community where play opportunities extend far beyond traditional playgrounds.

This transformation comes at a crucial time. Urbanisation, safety concerns, and changing lifestyles are reducing quality play experiences worldwide, even in Southland. Yet play remains vital for human development and community well-being – it is a fundamental right, essential for physical, cognitive, and social growth. Through freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and often unstructured activities, play provides the foundation for lifelong learning and community connection.

While Invercargill, has long invested in parks, green spaces, and traditional community playgrounds, this strategy marks a shift towards a more intentional, citywide approach. Our vision aligns with national recognition of play as essential for well-being and social cohesion, encouraging local government to integrate more accessible and diverse play opportunities into broader urban planning. The strategy's purpose is to harness the power of play to shape an inclusive and dynamic district while driving internal changes that enable us to meet the strategy outcomes, enhancing the lives of all residents.

To achieve this, the strategy is structured around four outcomes focused on the key themes from the community engagement process. These themes ranged from inclusivity and accessibility, improved quality and innovative urban integration, sustainable and cost-effective solutions, and strong community partnerships that foster ownership and pride in Invercargill's play environments. Success will be measured through a robust framework of indicators, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement as we implement this transformative vision.

This journey requires collaboration between council, community groups, and residents. Together, we will create spaces that spark joy, encourage exploration, and strengthen our community bonds. The ideas, involvement, and enthusiasm of our community are essential to making Invercargill a true playground for all ages.

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Play Strategy On a Page

Vision

"Invercargill is a city where play excites and connects everyone."

Purpose Statement

"This strategy guides Invercargill City Council to harness the transformative power of play, enabling initiatives and partnerships that enrich our spaces and engage people of all ages in creating a thriving, healthy, joyful, and resilient community."

Strategic Outcomes

1. **Inclusive Play Opportunities**
   Play experiences are accessible and engaging for people of all ages and abilities. Our spaces foster social interaction, creativity, and physical activity.

2. **Innovative Play Integration**
   Play is seamlessly integrated into public spaces throughout Invercargill. This encourages spontaneous play and enhances the vibrancy of our city.

3. **Community Partnership and Ownership**
   Invercargill's play opportunities are co-created through partnerships with children, youth, the wider community, and key organisations. This embeds a shared sense of ownership and pride in our play environments.

4. **Affordable, Sustainable, and Flexible Solutions**
   Investment in our play environments appropriately balances cost-effectiveness, quality, and affordability for users. Invercargill's play opportunities are adaptable to changing community needs.



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What is Play?

> **Remember the pure joy of climbing trees, the thrill of jumping rocks in a riverbed, visiting your favourite playground with the family, or the satisfaction of exploring your neighbourhood on your bicycle with your mates? These moments of play shape us in ways we carry throughout our lives. They're more than just cherished memories – they're the building blocks of who we become.**

In this strategy, we define play as Sport NZ does:[1]

Those precious moments of freedom where we choose what to do simply because it's fun.

It can include children making obstacle courses on the sidewalk, teenagers hanging out and dancing in the square, adults engaging with some interactive art, or seniors gathering for chess in the park. They're spontaneous, self-directed activities driven by our excitement and creativity, often with friends, and can look different as we grow up—sometimes it's spontaneous and wild, other times it's more organised or competitive.

We believe that play is for everyone and therefore has many forms. We are committed to ensuring opportunities meet this broad understanding, however, we also prioritise children and physical play because children have less agency to play independently like adults do, and physical play provides the most widespread benefits.



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Strategic Scope

This Play Strategy updates and replaces the 2014 Playground Strategy, expanding its focus beyond traditional playgrounds to encompass a broader range of council teams and assets, including land, facilities, and documents that contribute to creating a playful city.

The strategy provides a high-level framework to guide play opportunities across the Invercargill district, promoting inclusive, creative play for all ages and abilities. While formal field and court sports and their facilities are addressed under the Active Southland Regional Spaces and Places Strategy (to which ICC subscribes), this strategy focuses on informal play opportunities.

Creating a truly playful city requires active collaboration across our entire community. Council commits to working alongside schools, businesses, community groups, and mana whenua to maximise play opportunities throughout Invercargill. Through guidance, support, and partnership, we will help unlock the play potential of spaces beyond council control. This collaborative approach recognises that some of our city's play opportunities exist in places we don't manage directly – from school playgrounds to private facilities, shopping centres, and community spaces. By fostering these partnerships and supporting community-led initiatives, we can create a richer tapestry of play opportunities that extends far beyond council-managed spaces and truly embraces our whole city.

Strategy Development Process

To ensure our Play Strategy is comprehensive, balanced, and achievable, we have aligned it with the diverse needs of our community and the council's ability to deliver on the strategic outcomes, grounding it in both evidence and lived experiences, as well as national and local guidance. Strategy development involved:

- Review of academic research on play (e.g., benefits of play, consequences of lack of play, ideal play conditions, etc.)
- Analysis of industry reports and local government play policies
- Investigating council strategies and community feedback.

Our engagement process included collaboration with:

- Council staff
- Elected members
- Youth Council
- Partner organisations
- And a wide range of community voices, from children to parents.

The pre-draft engagement period ran from June 22nd to July 28th 2024, coinciding and in partnership with He Waka Tuia and their 3rd annual PLAY Exhibition. He Waka Tuia extended the PLAY Exhibition, and so the Play Strategy engagement was extended to August 10th. Across all of our pre-draft engagement methods, we asked the following questions about play in Invercargill:

- **What do you love about our existing play opportunities?**
  - E.g., What's your favourite play space/ opportunity in the city? What do you love about it? What do you think we do well?
- **What play opportunities do you wish for?**
  - E.g., What's missing or what would you like to see more of? What do you want to see or experience, where would you want it and why?
- **What about play are you wondering about?**
  - E.g., What could be possible if we made a change, big or small, about our approach to play, or looked at using our existing resources differently?

Close to 400 pieces of commentary were received across the various methods. This information was analysed to determine the key themes and develop the completed first draft Play Strategy.

See Appendix A for more detail.

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Introduction

Why Play and Why Now?

Play is not just a leisure activity but our species key learning mechanism[2] and is foundational to creating vibrant, healthy communities.

While play may seem spontaneous, its value is profound, contributing not only to personal development but also to the collective well-being of communities. Its role in fostering creativity, resilience, and connection is vital to the future of Invercargill. Here we examine the key drivers pushing us to act now, the evidence-based benefits that play delivers, and the unique opportunities we have to enhance play across the district.

Drivers

Life in Invercargill is changing and several critical factors are driving the need for a strategic approach to play in our city:

- In Southland, only 23% of young people aged 5–17 years meet the physical activity guidelines of being active for at least 60 minutes per day (12 to 14-year-olds were least likely to meet these guidelines at 14%, while 5 to 7-year-olds were most likely to at 42%).
- Play is recognised internationally as a fundamental human right for children, yet research shows concerning trends in insufficient investment and inadequate protective measures for play opportunities.[3, 4]
- Today's children have significantly fewer opportunities for quality independent outdoor play than previous generations.[5] In Southland, only 34% of young people were involved in general outdoor play in the last week and 32% on playgrounds or games with friends.
- Multiple factors are restricting play opportunities:
  - Increased urbanisation and housing density, and loss of open community spaces.[6, 7]
  - Traffic safety concerns and crime fears leading to restrictions on young people.[8]
  - Decline in outdoor play and increased sedentary activities,[9] including screen time and digital technology, impacts physical activity,[10] though gaming also provides valuable social connections.[11]
  - Over-supervision and over-scheduling lead to increased anxiety, depression, and reduced physical and social activity.[12]
- Growing regulations and risk aversion have led to play spaces prioritising compliance over developmental needs.[13]
- Insufficient attention to children's needs in planning and policy-making is contributing to constrained opportunities for spontaneous and creative play.[14]

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Benefits

Play is like a treasure chest filled with surprises - we engage with it on our terms, driven by joy rather than external goals. While the act itself is spontaneous and fun, research demonstrates its profound impact on individual and community well-being:

- Play is integral to children's well-being, supports well-being throughout life, and significantly contributes to family and community well-being.[15]
- Local government plays a pivotal role in providing high-quality play opportunities that are essential to social, economic, cultural, and environmental well-being.[16]
- Every $1 spent on physical activity in New Zealand (including play) yields a $2.12 return in well-being benefits.[17]
- Play is crucial for children's physical, cognitive, and social development,[18] enhancing:
  - Motor skills and physical health.[19]
  - Brain development and problem-solving capabilities.[20]
  - Academic readiness through improved concentration and motivation.[21]
  - Cooperation, conflict resolution, and empathy.[22]
  - Emotional resilience and stress management.[23]
- Play delivers broader societal benefits:
  - Develops critical future workforce skills, boosting productivity and innovation capacity.[24]
  - Soft skills become increasingly crucial for economic success as technology reshapes the job market.[25]
  - Fosters environmental appreciation, crucial for addressing future climate challenges.[26]
  - Strengthens social connections across generations.[27]
- The absence of play can lead to:
  - Social isolation and impaired social skills.[28]
  - Reduced physical competency.[29]
  - Cognitive deficits.[30]
  - Inactivity and associated health issues.[31]

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Opportunities

Invercargill has important opportunities to enhance play across our city, building on our existing strengths while embracing innovative approaches:

- Involve children, youth, and the broader community in co-creating play spaces as it helps rebuild vital neighbourhood connections.[33, 34]
- Create environments that support independent play[35] by integrating play opportunities throughout the city,[36] in all environments, from neighbourhood streets to community facilities.[37]
- Designing safe routes for independent mobility,[38, 39] while addressing safety and accessibility challenges[40] to build stronger community relationships and expanded social networks.[41]
- Allow young people to directly influence policy and design decisions to create spaces that meet their real needs rather than just perceived ones.[42]
- Use nature-based approaches to encourage lifelong active lifestyles and improve health outcomes.[43, 44]
- Incorporate accessible design alongside adventurous elements to create inclusive spaces that build confidence while supporting diverse needs and abilities.[45, 46]
- Apply creative design solutions and artistic elements to help reimagine streetscapes and the city centre, to reverse the decline in outdoor play and increased sedentary activities.[47]
- Strategic placement of play opportunities to address contemporary challenges like children's declining roaming range while supporting community safety through increased activity and natural surveillance.[48]

By taking action now to enhance play opportunities across Invercargill, we can create a more vibrant, inclusive, and playful district that supports the well-being of all residents while addressing current and future urban challenges. This strategy provides a framework for achieving this vision through evidence-based approaches and community-led solutions.



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Local Context

Invercargill holds one of the highest parks and playgrounds per capita ratios in the country, with Invercargill City Council managing over 3000 hectares of green space across 166 reserves.

This includes 88 diverse play spaces ranging from playgrounds to bike and skate parks. Queens Park is a community favourite, celebrated for its beautiful gardens, animal reserve, and variety of play opportunities. Invercargill's educational institutions play a crucial role in outdoor play provision, with 30 schools and numerous early childhood centres offering playgrounds used by over 10,000 children. Many schools allow community access after hours, expanding play options.

The city's indoor play landscape features several key venues that provide weather-protected options, crucial given Southland's climate. Facilities such as Splash Palace, the library, and ILT Stadium Southland contribute to year-round, varied play opportunities. These spaces host events, programmes, and activities that promote active and imaginative play for different age groups. The new Invercargill Central Mall has enhanced indoor play opportunities with its pop-up play space, though community feedback indicates an appetite for even more weather-protected play options.

Public and private partnerships further enrich the play environment through popular events like the ILT Kidzone Festival and PLAY exhibition at He Waka Tuia. Other non-profit organisations, community groups, and private enterprises provide a mix of free or low-cost activities to pay-to-play experiences in indoor activity centres and themed play areas. These initiatives contribute to Invercargill's strong sense of community, though residents see the potential for even more vibrant community-led activities and events that cater to diverse interests and age groups.

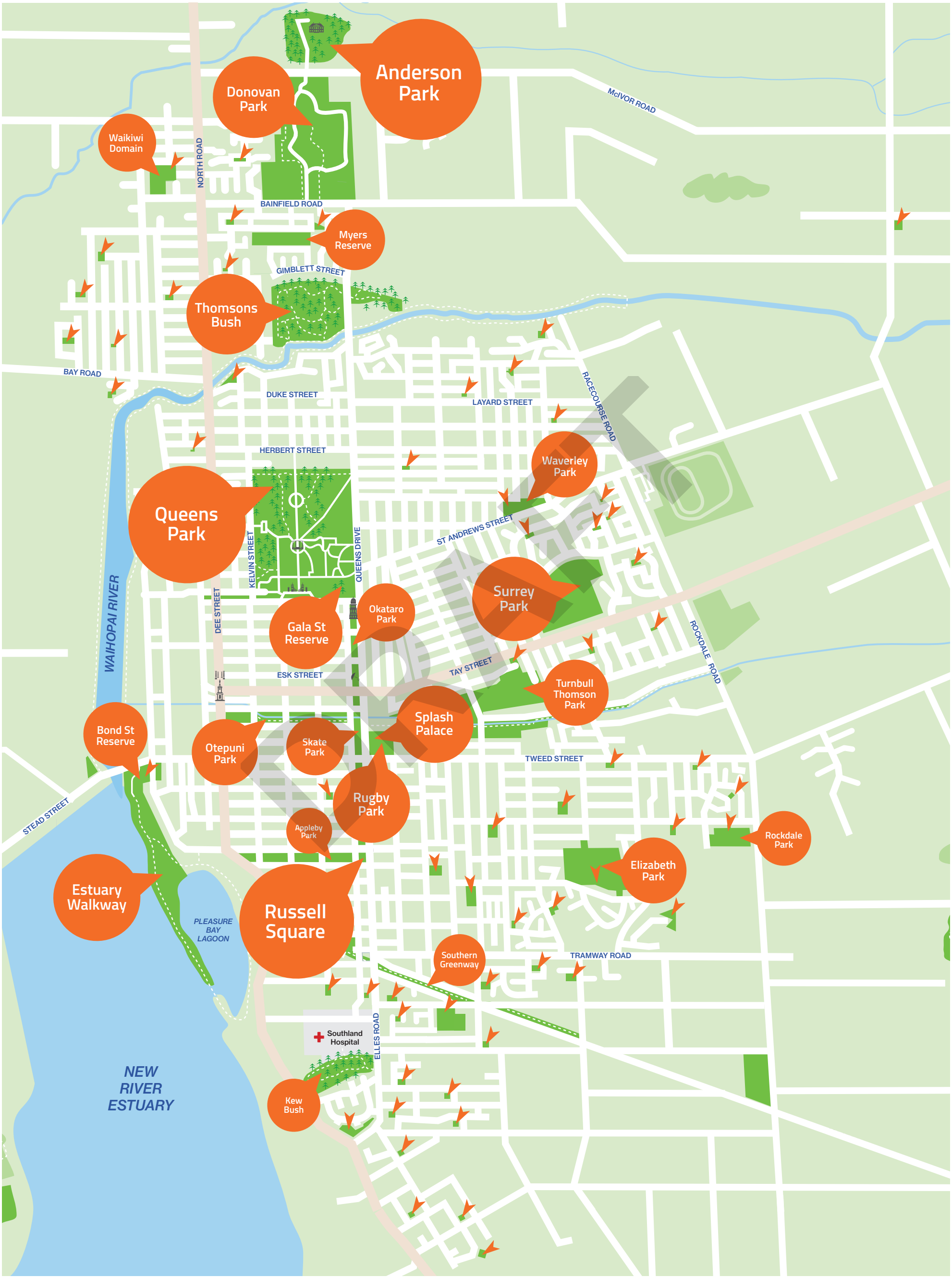
The 2021 Southland Play Report highlighted Invercargill's strengths, including community ties and abundant playgrounds, while noting the need for improvements such as better quality play equipment, improved traffic safety, mobility, and accessibility, and expanded natural and inclusive play. Recommendations also pointed to the value of co-designing play spaces with the community and adapting to local weather. The city's heritage as a family-friendly destination aligns with the community's desire for playful urban spaces that celebrate art, culture, and heritage.

Recent urban developments, like the city centre revitalisation, have inspired hopes for more creative public spaces. The community envisions streetscapes that invite spontaneous play and social interactions, reinforcing Invercargill's identity as a city committed to play, creativity, and connection.



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Invercargill Area Play Map



Otatara/Sandy Point/Bluff Area Play Maps

Otatara



Key

- Parks and Reserves
- Walking tracks
- Forest/Bush
- Neighbourhood Playgrounds

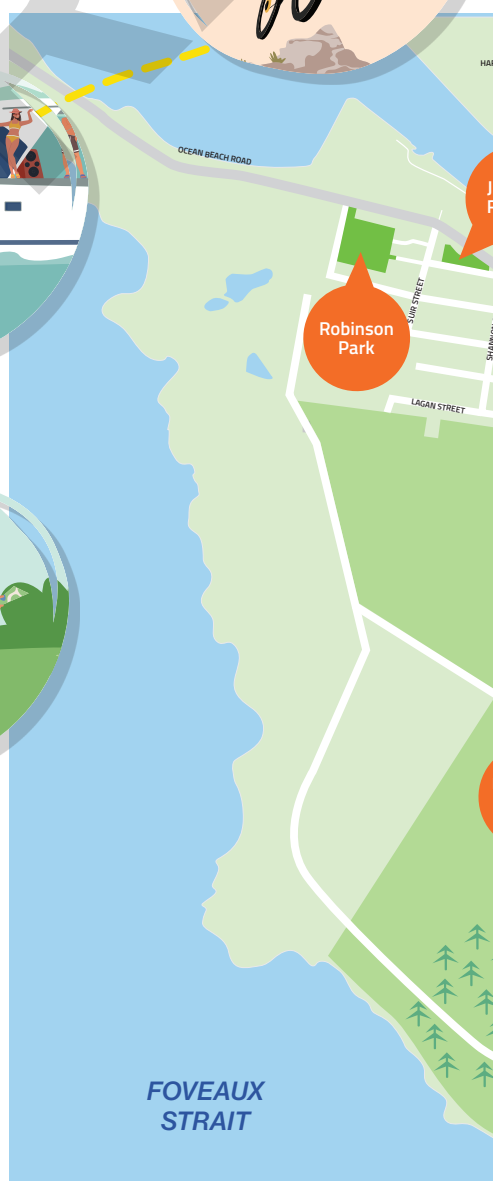


Bluff

Key

- Parks and Reserves
- Walking tracks
- Forest/Bush
- Neighbourhood Playgrounds









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Strategic Context

The Play Strategy is situated within and aligned to a framework of national legislation, regional and local strategies, plans and guidance documents.

It is therefore an integral part of a wider vision for community well-being, sustainable development, and quality of life in Invercargill and the broader Southland region. By considering this diverse range of strategic documents, the Play Strategy aims to create synergies and contribute to a cohesive approach to urban planning, recreation, and community development.

National

Legislation

- Local Government Act 2002
- Resource Management Act 1991
- Reserves Act 1977
- Sport and Recreation Act 2002
- Health Act 1956
- Health and Safety at Work Act 2015

Regional

Strategies and Policies

- Southland Spaces and Places Strategy 2023 (Active Southland)
- Beyond 2025 Southland Regional Long Term Plan (Multiple agencies)
- Murihiku Southland Destination Strategy 2023 - 2029 (Great South)
- Southland Cycling Strategy 2016-2026 (Multiple agencies)
- Bluff Motupōhue 2020 Tourism Master Plan (Great South)

Local

Invercargill CITY COUNCIL Strategies and Policies

- Invercargill City Council District Plan
- Long Term Plan
- Reserve Management Plans/Masterplans
- Asset/Activity Management Plans
- Infrastructure Strategy 2021-2051
- City Centre Master Plan
- Invercargill City Centre Retail Strategy
- Arts, Culture and Heritage Strategy 2021
- Heritage Strategy
- Equity and Access for People with Disabilities Policy
- Te Haeata Invercargill City Council Libraries Strategic Plan 2022-2027
- Tree Plan

This comprehensive strategic framework provides the foundation for Invercargill's Play Strategy, ensuring its alignment with broader community goals and regulatory requirements.

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The Play Strategy

This section sets out our roadmap for transforming Invercargill through play. It includes:

Our **Vision**, which paints a picture of Invercargill's future – what our city looks and feels like when play is woven into its very fabric by 2055. It describes the vibrant, connected community we aspire to create.

The **Purpose Statement** explains why this strategy exists and how Invercargill City Council will implement strategic internal changes to guide decisions, enhance collaboration, and empower our community to embrace play in all its forms, while also outlining the internal commitments needed to achieve these outcomes.

Our **Strategic Outcomes** define the specific, measurable changes we'll make to bring this vision to life. These are our markers of success – the concrete ways we'll know we're creating a more playful city. They speak to the key themes from our community engagement process and seek to capitalise on the opportunities available. They are heavily interconnected and should not be read or considered in isolation.

Vision

Invercargill is a city where play excites and connects everyone.

When we've achieved the vision, Invercargill pulses with playful energy as spaces come alive throughout the day and seasons. Our city's places flex naturally between activities, supporting diverse ways of playing, gathering, and connecting. These dynamic environments invite discovery and interaction, enriching daily life with opportunities for spontaneous play and shared experiences.

Building on our city's rich foundations – from our cherished gathering places to our distinctive streets and neighbourhoods – Invercargill draws people seeking a vibrant, balanced life in a city that prioritises joy and connection. As a city dedicated to the wellbeing of children, youth, and families, we create spaces where people thrive:

Children explore confidently through play-rich neighbourhoods, while youth feel welcome to claim spaces that spark their creativity and energy. Active streets and inviting spaces encourage everyone to linger and connect, ensuring our older residents remain engaged in community life through playful encounters and shared moments of joy. Our community embraces play as essential to city life, understanding its power beyond traditional playgrounds. This playful spirit strengthens 'He Ngākau Aroha – Our City with Heart', driving economic vitality, attracting new residents, and fostering innovation. Through play, Invercargill builds not just a healthier, more connected community, but a more prosperous and liveable city that adapts and thrives.



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> **This strategy guides Invercargill City Council to harness the transformative power of play, enabling initiatives and partnerships that enrich our spaces and engage people of all ages in creating a thriving, healthy, joyful, and resilient community.**

Purpose Statement

This strategy guides Invercargill City Council to harness the transformative power of play, enabling initiatives and partnerships that enrich our spaces and engage people of all ages in creating a thriving, healthy, joyful, and resilient community.

Invercargill City Council is committed to embedding play as a core value throughout our community, recognising that realising this vision requires strategic internal changes and enhanced coordination across departments. By adopting procedural and policy adjustments, we aim to take play beyond traditional playgrounds, advocating that it be woven into all public spaces. This will make play a seamless and sustainable part of urban life, balancing new opportunities with the ongoing support of our current assets and programmes.

This strategy exists to leverage the power of play in advancing multiple city outcomes, from health and well-being to community resilience and urban vibrancy. It aligns with our city's trajectory toward an inclusive, playful Invercargill and responds to our community's call for more diverse, accessible play opportunities.

To achieve the outcomes outlined in this strategy, we commit to the following internal initiatives:

- **Expanding Policy and Permissions to Support Play Beyond Parks:**
  We will update policies to encourage playful uses across various public spaces, ensuring that permissions support playful environments in public squares and green corridors.
- **Enhanced Cross-Departmental Collaboration for Integrated Play Solutions:**
  We will foster ongoing collaboration across departments to embed play opportunities in all relevant council projects, creating a holistic approach that expands our play vision into diverse community settings.
- **Strengthening and Innovating Play Assets to Meet Diverse Needs:**
  We commit to maintaining and improving existing play infrastructure while implementing innovative, adaptable solutions that provide flexible play options in spaces lacking formal equipment.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making for Asset Renewal and Development:**
  Data will inform decision-making, allowing us to prioritise resources based on usage patterns and community needs, leading to responsive investments that enhance impact.
- **Transparent Community Engagement, Even When Challenging:**
  We pledge to communicate openly with the community about difficult decisions affecting play spaces, ensuring we explore alternatives and maintain active play throughout Invercargill.

Through these internal mechanisms, Invercargill City Council will strengthen its commitment to delivering the outcomes of the Play Strategy. This dual focus on enhancing existing assets and embracing new opportunities enables us to support play in every aspect of city life, making Invercargill a district where play excites, connects, and builds community resilience.

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Strategic Outcomes

Our Play Strategy for Invercargill presents four interconnected outcomes that will guide the development of play in our city.

Through inclusive play opportunities, innovative integration of play throughout our spaces, strong community partnerships, and sustainable solutions, we aim to create a more playful, vibrant, and connected community.

The following outcomes provide a framework for transforming Invercargill's play spaces to better serve current and future generations.

Outcome 1. Inclusive Play Opportunities

Play experiences are accessible and engaging for people of all ages and abilities. Our spaces foster social interaction, creativity, and physical activity.

Play experiences in Invercargill should welcome and engage people of all ages and abilities, creating environments that foster connection and growth for everyone.
Our approach focuses on developing spaces that balance safety with freedom in play, incorporating accessible design features alongside adventurous elements that build confidence and social skills. Weather-responsive elements ensure year-round accessibility, recognising Invercargill's unique climate challenges while supporting continuous engagement with play spaces.



Best practice example:
Sensory Dome climbing structure at Hamilton Zoo, designed for sensory interaction and children with different abilities to play together (image by Georgina Hailwood).

By designing inclusive environments, we create opportunities for diverse groups to interact, learn from each other, and build lasting connections. These spaces encourage multi-generational play, supporting both structured and spontaneous activities that bring people together. Our inclusive approach extends beyond physical accessibility to consider social, cultural, and emotional aspects of play, ensuring everyone feels welcome and valued in our play spaces.



Best practice example:
Intergenerational park 'Rocks on Wheels' in Melbourne, Australia, designed to provide adventurous opportunities for all ages (design and image by Mike Hewson).

Success looks like:

- Welcoming and accessible environments that preserve adventurous play opportunities.
- Inclusive design features that accommodate diverse needs while promoting exploration.
- Versatile spaces that engage multiple age groups simultaneously.
- Evidence of diverse community groups actively using and enjoying play spaces.
- Weather-conducive areas that enable year-round play accessibility.
- Observable social interaction and relationship-building across different user groups.

You said:

"I wish there were more play opportunities that cater to adults because kids also feed off our play energy."

"I wish young people with disabilities were able to easily access play without this needing to be an organised event."

"I wish the council would put solid pathways around playing fields... to create multi-dimensional spaces in all weathers for walkers, caregivers with prams, kids on scooters, walkers, bikers, skateboarders."

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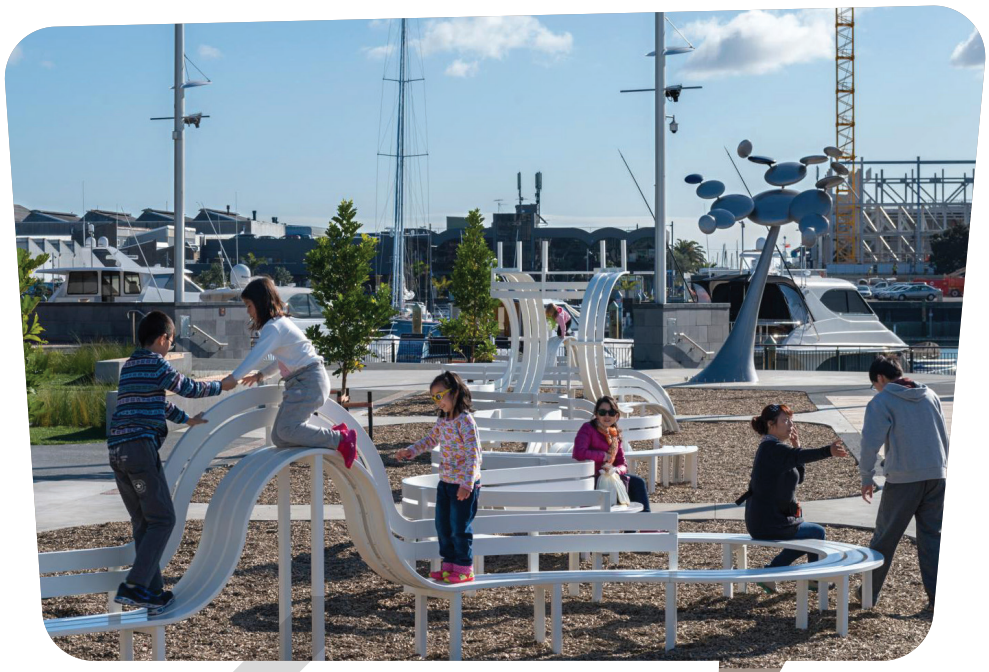
Outcome 2. Innovative Play Integration

Play is seamlessly integrated into public spaces throughout Invercargill. This encourages spontaneous play and enhances the vibrancy of our city.

Our vision transforms Invercargill's public spaces into vibrant, interactive environments that encourage spontaneous play and social connection across all ages. By weaving play opportunities throughout our city, we create a more engaging and dynamic urban environment that reflects our community's identity and aspirations. This integration of play extends beyond traditional playground spaces to encompass our streets, alleyways, and urban infrastructure.

A key aspect of this integration is the meaningful incorporation of Māori history and tāonga tākaro, enriching our play environments with cultural significance and educational value. Through creative design solutions and artistic elements, we reimagine our streetscapes and urban centre while preserving and enhancing valued accessible outdoor spaces.

Digital innovations enhance the playability of our public spaces creating additional layers of engagement and interaction in our public spaces.



Best practice example:
Playable and functional art in the form of the 'Long Modified Bench' at Waitematā Green, Auckland (design and image by Jeppe Hein).



Best practice example:
Māori taniwha embedded into skatepark design in Whakatāne (new artwork by Te Marunui Hotene, image by Troy Baker)

Success looks like:

- Visible increase in spontaneous play and social interactions throughout public spaces.
- Higher foot traffic and positive community feedback in pedestrianised streets and interactive zones.
- Creative elements and play successfully integrated into urban infrastructure and streetscape design.
- Meaningful integration of Māori history and tāonga tākaro in play space design.
- Digital innovations effectively enhance physical play experiences and engagement.
- Increased independent mobility and environmental navigation, particularly for young people.

You said:

"Turn some roads into pedestrian-only zones and create interactive areas similar to Cuba Street in Wellington. These areas can be perfect for cafes, outdoor games, art installations, and pop-up events."

"I wish culture and heritage were celebrated outside of 'Language Weeks'."

"I wish there were more surprises in and around the city. Cues to activate my imagination and inspire me . . . I would love to think that the alleyways we have led to adventure . . . I wish there were more artworks in the public eye, built into our infrastructure to provoke thinking and a playful mindset."

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Outcome 3. Community Partnership and Ownership

Invercargill's play opportunities are co-created through partnerships with children, youth, the wider community, and key organisations. This embeds a shared sense of ownership and pride in our play environments.

Strong community partnerships are fundamental to creating meaningful play opportunities that truly serve our community's needs. By actively involving children, youth, and the broader community in co-creating play spaces, we ensure these environments reflect real needs and desires rather than just perceived ones. This collaborative approach strengthens neighbourhood connections and builds a sense of shared responsibility for our play environments.

Our partnership model emphasises ongoing dialogue and active participation in both planning and implementation phases. This includes regular opportunities for community input, youth-led initiatives, and partnerships with local organisations. When communities are deeply involved in creating their play spaces, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and pride, leading to better maintenance, more frequent use, and more vibrant community.



Best practice example:
'Deconstructed Heart', a playable hang out space designed in partnership with teenage girls in Kitchener, Canada (design and image by Earthscape Play).



Best practice example:
Community-led placemaking intervention part of the Seattle Design Festival in Washington, USA (image by Trevor Dykstra).

Success looks like:

- Diverse voices, especially young people, actively shape play space design and decision-making.
- Regular community workshops and feedback sessions generate innovative play solutions.
- Local organisations and community groups lead play initiatives in their neighbourhoods.
- Play spaces reflect local heritage and cultural stories through community input.
- Feedback shows strong community pride and ownership in play spaces.
- Increased independent use of play spaces by children and youth.
- Strong partnerships between council, schools, and community organisations.
- Regular evaluation shows play spaces meeting real community needs.

You said:

"What if we really explored what youth and young adults want to see and we all (funders, ICC, Great South, Active Southland, etc.) worked together to achieve those goals?"

"I'd like to be involved in designing the kind of play my friends and I would enjoy."

"I wonder if we could have an always open 'ideas tank' that could feed play ideas into it?"

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Outcome 4. Affordable, Sustainable, and Flexible Solutions

Investment in our play environments appropriately balances cost-effectiveness, quality, and affordability for users. Invercargill's play opportunities are adaptable to changing community needs.

Our approach to play investment strategically balances community aspirations with fiscal responsibility. We recognise that high-quality play experiences come in many forms - from signature destination playgrounds that serve the wider community to neighbourhood spaces rich in natural elements that spark creativity and open-ended exploration. This diversity allows us to create engaging play opportunities while maintaining long-term sustainability.

By prioritising adaptable, flexible designs, we can maximise play value while ensuring responsible use of resources. Natural materials and loose parts offer sustainable, low-maintenance alternatives that often provide richer play experiences than traditional equipment. At the same time, we will strategically invest in modern play elements where they add significant value to our play network. This balanced approach supports environmental and financial sustainability while creating a mix of high-quality play spaces and opportunities that can grow and evolve with our community's changing needs.



Best practice example:
Living igloo / willow play huts grown at Ahimate Reserve, Palmerston North (image by Manumea Durie).



Best practice example:
Temporary junk playground in Groningen, The Netherlands (photographer unknown).

Success looks like:

- Strategic development of diverse play opportunities, from destination playgrounds to neighbourhood natural play spaces.
- Play spaces demonstrate high play value through both natural elements and carefully selected modern equipment.
- New play concepts are tested and evaluated to ensure they meet community needs and provide lasting value.
- Investment decisions are data-driven and respond to documented community use patterns and preferences.
- Play spaces show environmental and financial sustainability while maintaining high-quality play experiences.

You said:

"Invercargill desperately needs to keep up with other cities across NZ (and internationally) in terms of modern play spaces for children. We need a destination playground."

"Why does play require shaping? I thought play was about spontaneity . . . You don't even need play equipment if you have trees, places to hide or throw a ball"

"I would love to see nature parks. Playgrounds made out of wood tree trunks, piles of stones and gravel and sand so that children can build and engineer and feel the earth . . . an area with planks of wood and ropes, all open-ended play that invites cooperation, construction, communication with others."

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Next Steps

The development of the Play Strategy has already influenced our processes, resulting in new play opportunities being integrated into our current initiatives. Looking ahead, we are committed to aligning all applicable 2024-2034 Long-term Plan projects with the Strategy to ensure that play elements enhance both current and future developments throughout Invercargill.

Of particular relevance at this time are the City Centre Urban Play Programme, the Bluff Safe Swimming project, work achieved against the Donovan Park and Sandy Point Master Plans, and the future Elizabeth Park and Queen's Park Master Plans.

A comprehensive Implementation Plan will be created to outline the specific actions and operational work needed to achieve our strategic goals. This plan will include indicators and measures to assess the success of our initiatives and support continuous improvement. To facilitate these changes, we will review and refine our internal processes, implementing necessary adjustments that promote a culture of play throughout the council. This includes addressing change management components to ensure that our teams are equipped and motivated to embrace these new approaches. Examples of this work includes the development of our investment framework to support better play equity in places like Bluff and suburbs in the south of Invercargill, and improved categorisation of our play offerings to account for all forms of play including destination play spaces, neighbourhood playgrounds, natural play areas, partnership situations, play trails, and moveable play assets.

By embedding play into the fabric of our community, we will enhance well-being, foster connections, and ensure that Invercargill meets the diverse play needs of all its residents.



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Appendix: Community Engagement Key Themes

What we love about what we've got...

1. Queens Park:
Queens Park stands out as a cherished asset, widely appreciated for its diverse offerings. The community values its beautiful gardens, the animal reserve, and the variety of play spaces it provides, including the water play area and disc golf. The park's ability to cater to different age groups and interests makes it a popular destination for families and individuals alike. Its well-maintained grounds and regular upgrades are noted and appreciated by residents.

> "Queen's Park in general is a fantastic play space for all members of the community to enjoy. There is a great mixture of things to occupy children and adults, from the playground to the paths and tracks. It is very well maintained by the council."

> "We love the library. It's got bathroom and change facilities for the littles, there's always some little challenge or the librarians giving their top picks. Also love the drop-in sessions that they run."

2. Comprehensive Community Facilities:
Invercargill's range of community facilities is highly valued. The library, with its resources and programmes, is seen as a vital hub for learning and community engagement. Splash Palace is praised for its aquatic facilities, catering to both recreational swimmers and those who just want to play. The stadium complex is appreciated for hosting various events and activities, including its informal play resources. The new Invercargill Central Mall with its pop-up play space has also received early praise. These facilities, along with others, are recognised for providing diverse, year-round opportunities for recreation, education, and community gathering, regardless of weather conditions.

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What we love about what we've got...

3. Accessible Outdoor and Natural Spaces:
Residents of Invercargill highly value the city's abundance of accessible local playgrounds, parks, and natural spaces, including the skatepark and pump track, which provide diverse, low-cost play opportunities that are usually close to home. The city's green spaces, including parks, reserves, and the beach, are appreciated not only for their proximity but also for their natural beauty and diverse landscapes. These outdoor areas encourage regular outdoor activity and offer peaceful environments for relaxation, play, and a connection with nature. The community's appreciation of these assets underscores the importance of preserving and enhancing them, ensuring that all residents can continue to enjoy their aesthetic and recreational benefits.

> "I love being able to access the beaches and foreshore areas in Bluff as well as Bluff Hill to explore, build huts, and forage kai."

> "Invercargill is such a family-oriented place and I love that about it — we have so many community events and groups, but we need better spaces for our children."

4. Vibrant Community Groups and Events:
Invercargill's strong sense of community is reflected in the appreciation for local groups and events. Residents value the variety of community-led organisations and activities that cater to diverse interests and age groups. These groups and events play a crucial role in promoting play by providing informal and structured opportunities for social interaction, creative expression, and physical activity. Regular events, festivals, and markets are celebrated not only for bringing people together and fostering social connections but also for enhancing play value by offering diverse and engaging environments where children and adults can explore, learn, and have fun. These community initiatives are seen as vital in creating a sense of belonging, enriching the social fabric of Invercargill, and supporting a playful, active lifestyle for all ages.

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What we wish we had more of...

1. Nature and Loose Parts Play:
There's a strong desire for more natural and open-ended play opportunities. Many respondents are calling for playgrounds that incorporate natural elements such as trees, sand, water, and stones, as well as spaces for self-constructed play using loose parts like sticks or other found items. They envision play spaces that foster creativity, cooperation, and exploration, reflecting a preference for more organic and adaptable play environments. These areas could also incorporate artistic elements like sculptures or themed play areas that blend with the natural setting, stimulating both creativity and engagement with nature.

> "More open-ended play. Think water, sand, stones. More natural playgrounds, like the one at Queens Park"

> "I wonder if the playgrounds could be designed. There's no flow between the play opportunities that guide you from place to place, they're just plonked in the parks."

2. Modern and Inclusive Play Spaces:
There is a strong desire to upgrade and modernise existing play areas to meet contemporary standards and trends. These requests are to go beyond simply placing equipment in parks; they call for thoughtful, well-designed play spaces that integrate into their surroundings and serve multiple functions. Residents are advocating for the development of larger, destination playgrounds with modern, versatile structures catering to all ages and abilities, from toddlers to adults, fostering intergenerational opportunities. There is also a call for more inclusive designs that address diverse needs, such as accessible equipment, communication boards, and sensory play areas for children with disabilities. In addition, the community has highlighted the need for supporting amenities like toilets, shade, drinking fountains, and seating to enhance comfort and convenience. Emphasis is placed on creating high-quality play spaces that serve as central attractions, providing engaging environments where both children and adults, regardless of their abilities, can enjoy and participate in play, fostering a sense of community, ensuring equitable access for everyone, and enticing visitors.

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What we wish we had more of...

3. Indoor and Weather-Protected Play Areas:
Many comments emphasise the need for more indoor or weather-protected play facilities. Given the region's frequent adverse weather, there's a push for covered playgrounds, indoor play spaces, and activities that can be enjoyed regardless of weather conditions. This includes suggestions for covered picnic areas, all-weather resources, and repurposing unused buildings for indoor play areas. The desire for indoor options during winter is particularly emphasised and ensuring these facilities are free or affordable is also a recurring theme. Further activation of Invercargill Central (the mall) is requested, including maintaining and improving the existing pop-up play space and providing for youth by attracting a vendor for an arcade. These indoor spaces could also serve as venues for community events, markets, and cultural activities, creating vibrant hubs that blend play, art, and community interaction.

> "We need more indoor/ sheltered activities. Maybe do some research on what activities the colder European countries have for 'winter' entertainment and play."

> "I wonder if we could have interactive art installations that encourage all ages to stop and play."

4. Community and Artistic Enhancements:
People are expressing a strong desire to see Invercargill's public spaces transformed into vibrant areas that celebrate art, creativity, and culture. There is a call for more artistic and imaginative elements throughout the city, such as colourful street art, interactive sculptures, musical installations, and themed play areas that reflect local heritage and cultural stories. Residents envision a city that is visually stimulating and full of life, where public spaces serve multiple purposes and engage the senses. They hope to see local artists play a key role in this transformation, contributing to the city's unique identity and fostering a deeper sense of community ownership. In other words, create a cityscape where art and play are incorporated into everything, enhancing cultural richness and providing spaces where all residents can connect, relax, play, and be inspired.

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What we've been wondering about...

1. Balancing Safety with Freedom in Play:
The community is curious about how to create play environments that balance safety with the freedom to explore and be adventurous. There is a recognition of the need for safe, accessible spaces for younger children and those with higher needs (e.g., fencing), but also a concern that overly restrictive attitudes to safety have also limited creativity and more adventurous play, especially for the city's youth. Residents are wondering how spaces might be both secure and stimulating at the same time or whether it is possible to have a greater spectrum of self-directed opportunities that support diverse needs in some areas while encouraging resilience in others.

> "My son is autistic and just loves climbing, the ground is lava, parkour. Would love to see more of those opportunities to further his skills because he's done everything there is to do."

> "It matters to young people to have things tailored to their needs, and where they can also meet each other and socialise safely. Treat young people as unimportant and they can feel alienated and that does have social repercussions. I believe that spending a bit to help keep young people gainfully amused is not wasted money but an investment in the well-being of young people."

2. Exploring Cost-Effective Play Solutions:
With concerns about the financial implications of any large-scale play developments alongside other important city projects, residents are questioning how play can be expanded or improved without imposing a heavy financial burden on ratepayers. The community is open to exploring creative and cost-effective solutions that maintain a high play value while keeping costs manageable. They recognise that this requires creativity, innovation, and potentially new ways of delivering play experiences.

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What we've been wondering about...

3. Enhancing Community Collaboration and Engagement:

There is a strong sense among residents that community collaboration could be improved, particularly in involving young people, schools, and various community organisations in the planning and design of play opportunities. People are asking how the council might better engage and partner with the community to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and play environments reflect the needs and values of all residents. Simplifying council processes would significantly enhance this effort, making it easier for community members to contribute ideas and deliver play initiatives. This would foster a sense of shared ownership over these spaces and ensure that the play environments are truly representative of and responsive to the community's needs.

> "Spaces and places for rangatahi – we have a heavy tamariki focus which is great but more spaces that work for our rangatahi and asking them what they want/need in a space."

> "I wonder if we can close Esk St. to traffic. Even if only weekend closures were possible, it would make it so much better and attractive to visit."

4. Expanding Play Through Innovative Urban Design:

Following the positive response to the city centre redevelopment on Esk and Don Streets, residents are curious about how Invercargill can continue to innovate its urban design to further encourage play and social interaction. They are wondering if more areas in the city could be redesigned or even pedestrianised to promote spontaneous play, turning ordinary spaces into playful environments. There is interest in how streetscapes could be reimagined to include interactive installations or elements that invite exploration and engagement. People are asking how the city might build on the successes of its recent projects to create a more playful and connected urban centre, where community life is enlivened through thoughtful design that prioritises both functionality and enjoyment.

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