



Figure 1 - Nature playground installed as part of the Preston Level Crossing Removal Project

The Level Crossing Removal Project (LXRP) is removing 110 dangerous and congested level crossings by 2030 on behalf of the Victorian Government. In 2022, four level crossings in Preston, in Melbourne's inner north, were removed by building a rail bridge over the roads, opening up 60,000 m² of previously inaccessible space, offering a unique opportunity to transform the area.

The Preston Open Space Advisory Panel (POSAP) was a distinctive engagement program implemented by LXRP to collaborate with the community on the co-design of three specific areas of new open space.

In a first for Melbourne's north, POSAP provided an inclusive and participatory approach to decision-making on open space co-design. It was developed to ensure that a broad representation of the community had the opportunity to participate in this place-making process.

In line with the collaboration level on the IAP2 engagement spectrum, POSAP was a process by which LXRP could actively partner with the community in every aspect of the decision-making. Panel members contributed advice and innovative ideas and LXRP incorporated recommendations. The process evolved in response to input from the panel, meaning the open space design, as well as the engagement approach itself, were influenced by community members.

The engagement objective of POSAP was to give the community the opportunity to influence their local environment, creating spaces that reflect their values and meet their needs.

The purpose of the panel was to collaborate with the project team to design spaces that responded to community interests and priorities, catering for both passive and active recreation.

The three key outcomes showing the impact of engagement for POSAP are:

Community involvement: The panel was a unique opportunity for community members to help to create safe, functional and beautiful open space. Feedback from panel members indicated they cared about and were invested in the project.

Community ownership and pride: The engagement process garnered overwhelming support, with over 6,000 people attending a community celebration in February 2023 to honour the co-designed space.

Legacy of local community engagement: Beyond the creation of the new open space, the POSAP engagement process reaffirmed that community involvement in decision-making produces superior outcomes.

Three key engagement takeaways for POSAP are:

- Have an adaptable, flexible process and don't be afraid to modify the approach along the way. Feedback was sought and implemented during the POSAP process, resulting in a widening of scope and an extension in consultation timeframes.
- Have a diverse membership. Part of the success of the process was having a diverse panel representing the different perspectives of local residents, special interest and community groups and local businesses.
- Third party support helps to deliver a robust process. Engaging an independent facilitator and urban design experts helped create an environment where panel members were comfortable asking questions and challenging ideas.

POSAP was a highly successful process, which delivered a truly co-designed space tailored to the Preston community.

1.0 Objectives

On behalf of the Victorian Government, the Level Crossing Removal Project (LXRP) is removing 110 dangerous and congested level crossings by 2030. LXRP removed four level crossings in Preston, with major construction undertaken between 2020 and 2022, approximately 10 km north of Melbourne's CBD.

The key objectives of the public open space engagement strategy were to:

- Involve the community in the design of new open spaces to ensure the areas reflected the values and aspirations of the Preston community
- Ensure the community had an opportunity to influence the project outcomes
- Generate community support and ownership of the project outcomes.

LXRP removed four level crossings at Oakover Road, Bell Street, Cramer Street and Murray Road, Preston and built new stations at Bell and Preston.

Elevating this section of the Mernda line opened up 60,000 m² of previously inaccessible space, offering a unique chance to transform the area.

To maximise this opportunity, an engagement program was developed to provide the community with the opportunity to work with the project team to co-design three specific areas of the new spaces, ensuring it reflected local values and needs.

The project collaborated with the community to co-design areas beneath the elevated rail, helping decide on the mix and location of different activations.

The community was engaged, the majority in a positive way, but there were some people in the community who had publicly expressed concerns about the project. They were included in the POSAP to ensure a diversity of views.

Panel members were asked to use their local knowledge and expertise and act as representatives of the wider community to:

- capture the community's values and aspirations
- understand the community's preference
- identify their needs in public and social infrastructure.

POSAP was a collaborative process, providing the community with a powerful opportunity to influence their local built environment.

The new open space affected the whole Preston community – around 30,000 people – the majority of whom were positive about the level crossings being removed and the opportunities for improved local amenity that afforded.

An engagement process to actively involve the community in co-designing the new open spaces was developed, with a view to having a number of key representatives from across the community participate in a detailed way, and who in turn could reach out to their own networks to enable broader participation.

Originally planned as a five-session in-person workshop, the POSAP program was adapted to an online format due to COVID-19 restrictions. In response to members' request for more time and greater capacity to engage with their networks and provide meaningful feedback, a further session was added to the schedule. The use of online engagement tool Mural allowed for members and their networks to provide direct feedback and suggestions to the project team. Mural is a digital workspace for online collaboration, effectively replicating the interactive activities that would have been used at face-to-face meetings. The panel members were able to place digital sticky-notes with ideas, example images and questions. This tool meant panel members were able to show draft open space designs to their networks and provide extensive, detailed feedback that was more far-reaching than simply the views of panellists themselves. This was a huge benefit.

Three areas of open space were identified for POSAP to co-design:

- 1: Bell Street to Cramer Street (15,905 m²)
- 2: South of Miller Street (1,895 m²) to Showers Street (5,895 m²)
- 3: North of Murray Road (1,086 m²).

During discussions, panel members felt that the areas identified didn't provide enough open space for community input. Responding to this feedback, LXRП identified an additional 4,000 m² of open space to be co-designed by POSAP.

The responsive nature of the process, seen in both the increase in area available for influence and the addition of an extra panel meeting, demonstrates the level of influence the group had and the commitment of the project to work collaboratively with the community.

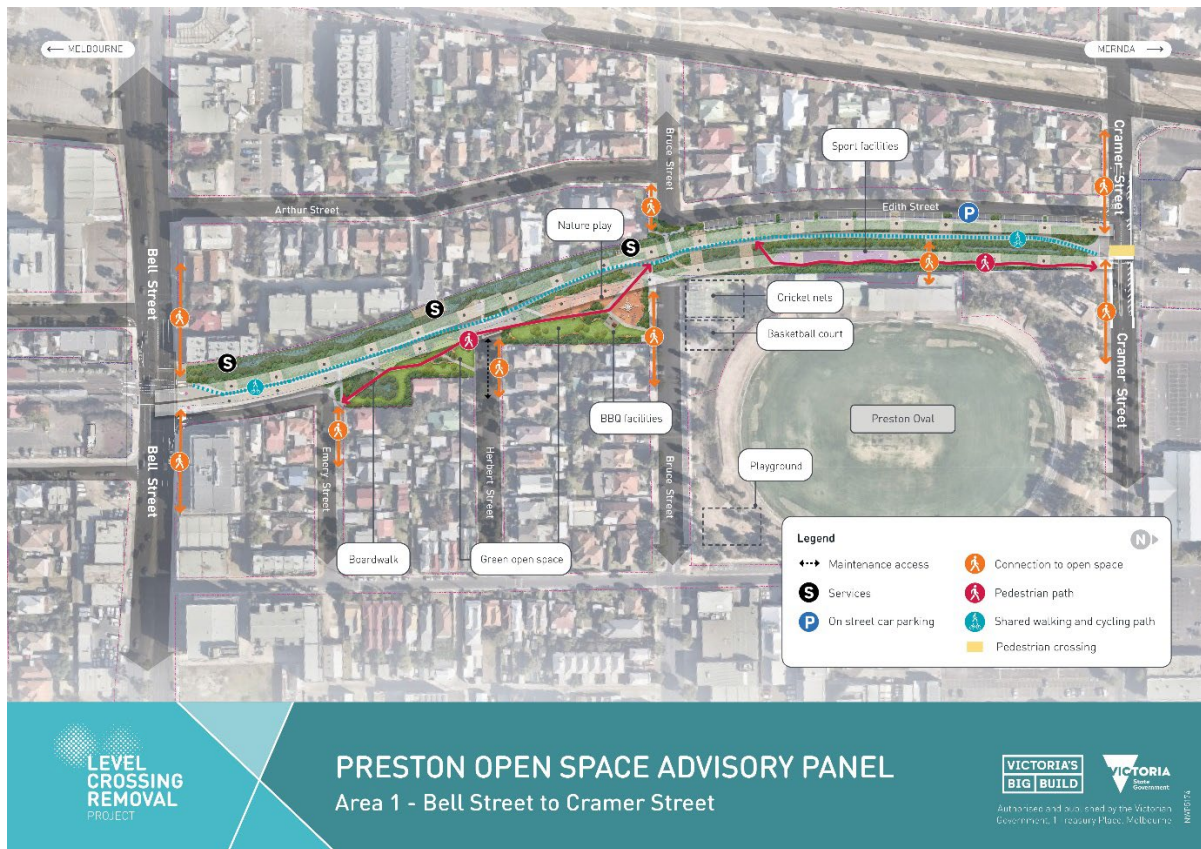


Figure 2 – POSAP areas of influence



Figure 3 – POSAP areas of influence



Figure 4 – POSAP areas of influence

2.0 Methodology

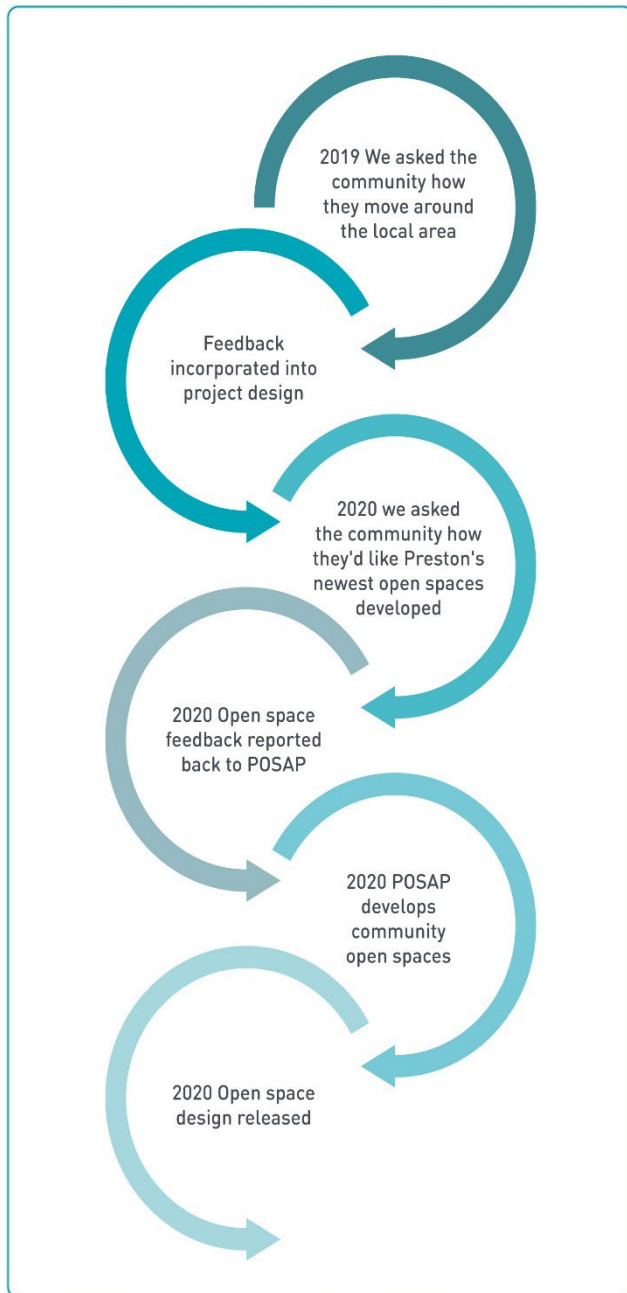


Figure 5 - Engagement timeframe

Governance model and engagement program

An extensive program of engagement gathered initial feedback from the community; how they moved in the area and would like to see the new space utilised. This informed the creation of the POSAP to co-design the new open space.

The panel process was developed by LXR P, with support from an independent facilitator and urban design advisory group called The Place Agency.

Nominations for POSAP were sought through an Expression of Interest process that was open to all members of the community and promoted via LXR P social media, a direct email campaign to project subscribers, and on the Engage Victoria online engagement hub. Panel members were selected following assessment against key criteria, including age, background, housing type and community connections. The assessment sought to ensure diverse representation. The panel included members who had publicly expressed concerns about the project, as a way of ensuring various perspectives were considered. The local government – Darebin City Council – was also represented on the panel.

The independent facilitator chaired meetings and provided meeting minutes. The urban design agency

attended three sessions with project representatives attending all meetings.

Engagement methods and delivery

POSAP met six times, with all sessions held online. Engagement with the broader community was undertaken prior to the start of the POSAP process and following the final POSAP meeting. This sequence was to ensure the sentiment of the community could be considered throughout the POSAP process, and that the work of POSAP could be tested with the broader community prior to finalisation of the open space design. Online collaboration tool Mural was used as a way of allowing POSAP members to engage with

their networks. Online surveys, community newsletters and digital channels were used to keep the community engaged and informed about the process.

Enabling factors and conditions

POSAP members were selected from a diverse cross-section of the Preston community, representing different ages, genders, cultures and backgrounds.

Nominees were assessed on the following criteria:

- Those who could represent minority and disadvantaged groups who may not normally participate in this community-led process
- Different age groups and genders
- Locality to the area
- Residents of high/low density housing
- Variety of interests, including environment, sport, arts and music.

Members were selected to provide a fair and balanced representation of the Preston community, and included:

- A Justice of the Peace
- Local volunteers
- CEOs of an Indigenous organisation and a not-for-profit organisation
- Members of local resident groups
- Residents near the two train stations
- Parents to school-aged children and on school committees
- A youth social worker
- Preston sporting group members
- City Design Team Leader, City of Darebin Council.

The engagement program was supported by an independent facilitator who led POSAP discussions, helping connect group ideas, progress conversations and assist the group to reach consensus. The Place Agency provided subject matter expertise in place-making and assisted POSAP members to identify what made Preston unique and how they could use their local knowledge to co-design spaces that reflected the community and what they would embrace.

Data collection tools

The broader project engagement program used a number of tools to collect initial input from the community, which fed into POSAP. These included a Vision and Values phase in late 2019, with 22,000 letterbox drops directing readers to participate in the survey online or in-person; 247 surveys completed

online via the Engage Victoria online engagement hub; five conversation booths at local stations; and more than 20 meetings with local schools and community groups.

The Open Space phase included online consultation in 2020 via Engage Victoria, with results illustrated in the infographics below. Questions could be answered through the online platform, as well as through the LXRP Contact Centre.

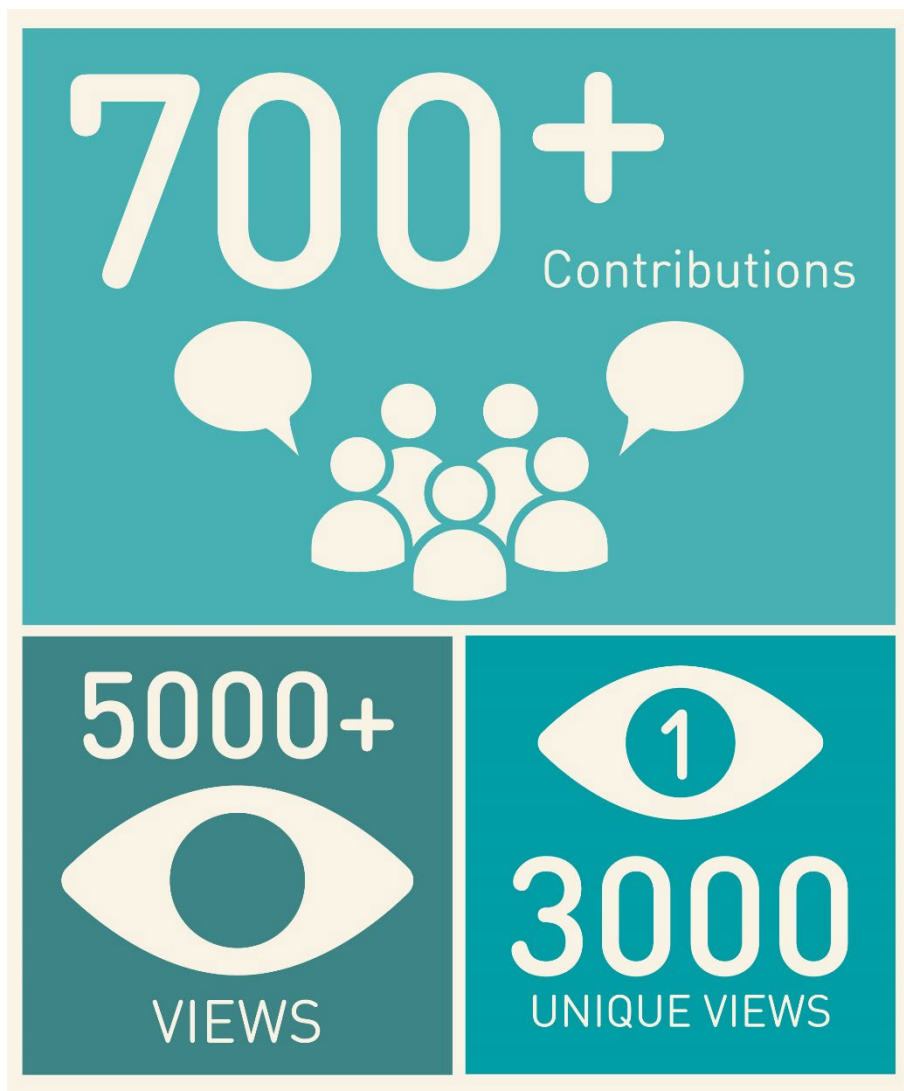


Figure 6 – Engage Victoria consultation statistics for Open Space engagement, 2020

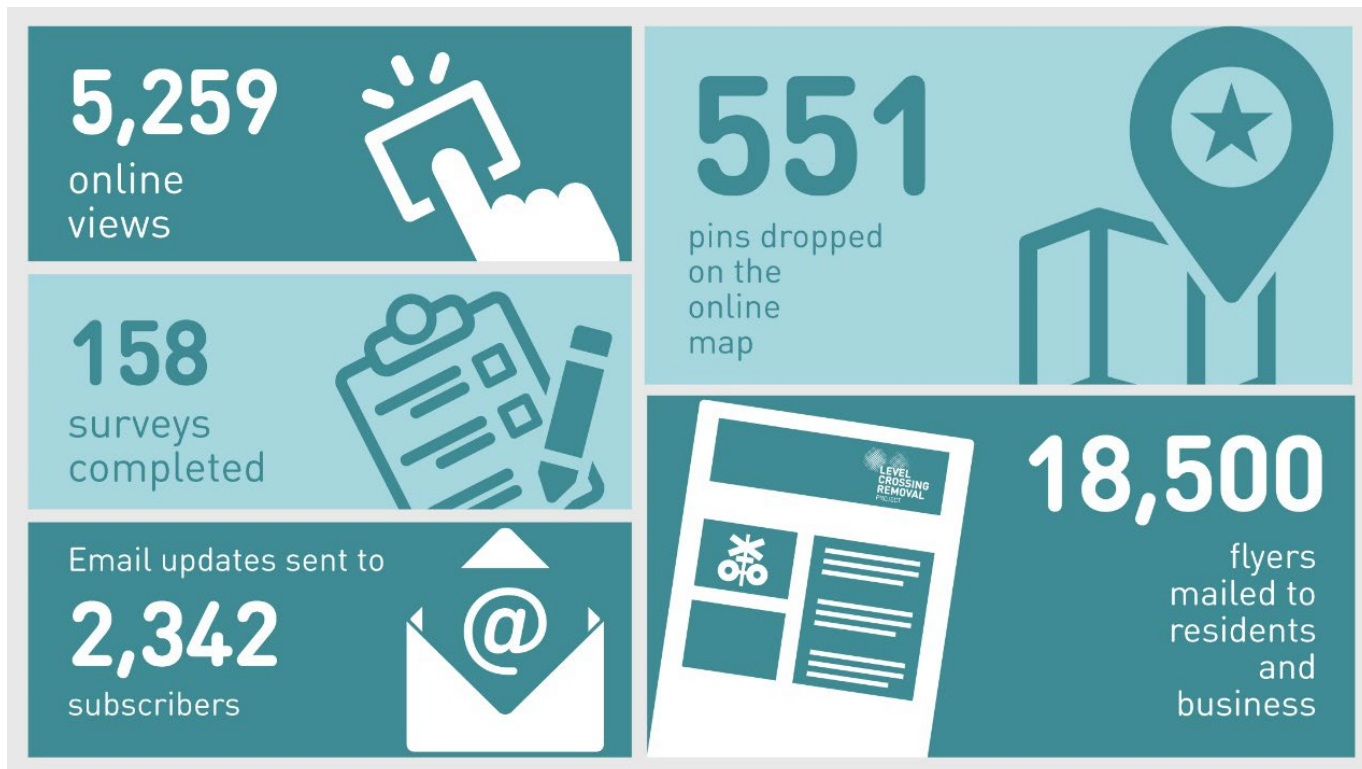


Figure 7 – Engage Victoria participation statistics for Open Space engagement, 2020

The data collected informed POSAP, allowing for the new spaces to reflect the community's values and meet their needs. The *Preston Open Space Feedback Report*, published in March 2021, was provided to POSAP members at the first meeting to be considered during the process.



Figure 8 – Front cover of feedback report

POSAP members used Mural to collect information from and share information with their own networks, as well as each other.

Feedback during POSAP meetings was captured via the online meeting chat function and minute-taking by the facilitator.

19:12:18 I like the way the space “flows” from different locations. I would like some sort of current theme that goes through all the areas (maybe the indigenous theme and/or the trams). I like the spread of options so that there is “something for everyone”.

19:12:29 From : Wetland, boardwalk, love the exercise concept.

19:12:43 From : Gaining the space back again for humans/pedestrians; also, new access across/under the line.

19:12:48 From : Green space, nature based play planting, bike path

19:12:57 From : Inclusivity. A well thought out space.

19:13:05 From : It has a lot of different activities that will make it more enjoyable for the public.

Figure 9 – Copy of the conversations taking place in the Zoom meetings

Resources

POSAP was delivered over a six-month period by an internal LXRP team led by the Communications and Engagement function, with strong support from the project’s construction, engineering, and design teams. External resources, including The Place Agency, the independent facilitator and the use of Mural, were contracted to support the engagement program.

Alignment with IAP2 Core Values for the practice of public participation

IAP2 Core Values	Example of how this was considered in the design of your project methodology
1. Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process	POSAP members were selected from a diverse range of local residents representing various age groups, genders, family backgrounds, and housing types.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public’s contribution will influence the decision	Throughout the process, clear community expectations were established, delineating negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of the project.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers	At the outset, the project team explained the engineering and operational constraints that had to be considered in the design of the open space. Feedback from the broader community was shared with POSAP prior to meeting one, enabling the panel to consider the insights and incorporate them into the process.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those	LXRP actively sought the involvement of those who lived close by, had a cause to use the new open space or were

potentially affected by or interested in a decision	<p>interested in the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process.</p> <p>This was achieved through proactive and early engagement with the local community and key stakeholders, ensuring their awareness of the project and opportunities for meaningful involvement.</p> <p>Selection for POSAP was through an Expression of Interest, ensuring that the panel comprised individuals with a keen interest in the project and capable of representing a broad range of perspectives. There were various levels of support for the project within the group.</p>
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate	<p>The adaptable, flexible nature of the process contributed to its success. POSAP member feedback was actioned during the six-month process, rather than simply being recorded for future engagement activities. This demonstrated the project's willingness to genuinely work with panel members and respond to feedback.</p>
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way	<p>Pre-reading materials were provided to POSAP members before each meeting. Subject matter experts from the project and The Place Agency were available to answer questions at meetings.</p> <p>Online collaboration tool Mural was available for POSAP members to use outside of the meetings to contribute ideas. They could use the tool with their broader networks and see the input made by other members.</p> <p>Minutes were distributed after the meetings and a summary was published online for the broader community to stay informed.</p>
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision	<p>The project team regularly reported back to the community via consultation reports, web updates, social media posts and community newsletters, which were delivered to homes and businesses and published online.</p> <p>Using this range of tools, the project was able to clearly demonstrate how the input of members had influenced the design.</p>

‘It is always important to us that the local community has a meaningful voice and actively help shape the space they live in. POSAP enhanced our engagement by providing invaluable local insight and feeding into the final design, improving the open space outcomes – and the benefits are now being enjoyed by all.’

Jennifer Kaye, Director, Strategic Communications, LXR

‘These infrastructure projects go beyond improving just the road and rail network – removing these four level crossings gave us the chance to create brand new community spaces in a previously inaccessible rail corridor, and the community were a vital part of bringing this area to life.’

Andrew Peplinkhouse, Program Director, North Western Program Alliance, LXR

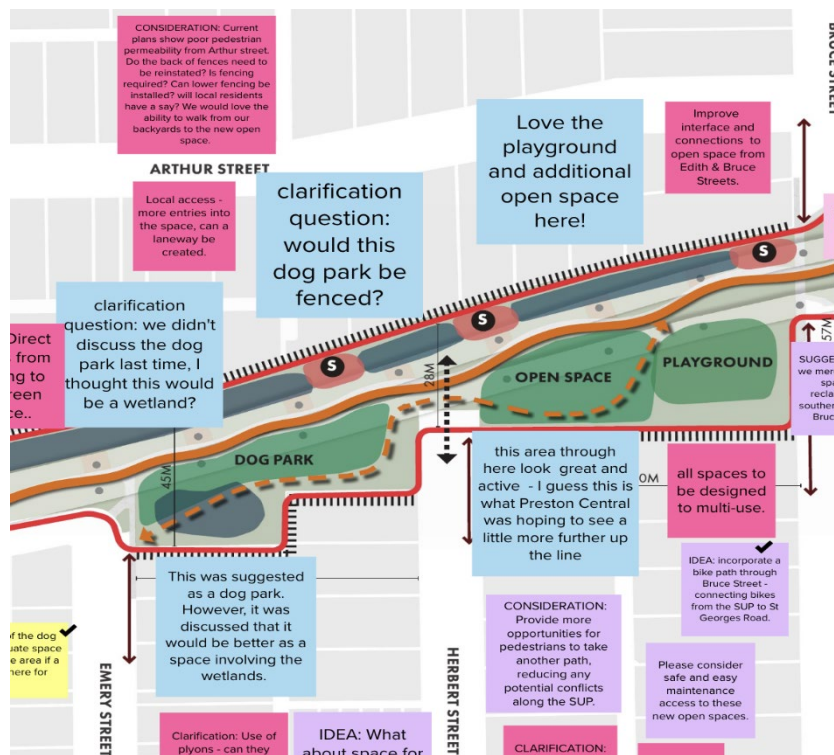


Figure 10 – POSAP utilising Mural to share their thoughts and seek feedback

3.0 Manage engagement

One of the challenges LXRP faced was ensuring that the engagement process was inclusive and representative of the diverse Preston community. The project team recognised that different segments of the community have varying levels of interest and capacity to be involved in the project, and that some groups may be more difficult to reach than others. To address this challenge, the team used a range of methods to promote participation, including public meetings, online surveys, social media and targeted outreach to specific community groups.

Another issue was managing expectations and balancing competing priorities among different stakeholders. Some community members had prioritised the creation of new open space, while others were concerned with matters such as parking, noise and traffic flow. To address this, the project team facilitated open and transparent communication among POSAP members, identifying areas of common ground where possible and supporting discussions with different perspectives.

LXRP was also clear with participants about the elements the group could not influence, explaining the reasons why (generally technical or project-specific). This helped ensure the panel focussed its attention on the areas where it could have the most impact.

The project team was responsive to feedback throughout POSAP, willing to modify the process as required to address any unintended outcomes or challenges that emerged. Two specific instances occurred where modifications were able to be made in response to direct challenges to the process by POSAP, as outlined earlier, extending the scope of area for co-design, as well as extending the consultation timeframe. These amendments generated goodwill with POSAP and helped to build a strong and genuine foundation for engagement.

The team recognised that some community members may feel intimidated during public meetings so they worked to create welcoming and inclusive online spaces for discussion.

Overall, the project team took a proactive and flexible approach to addressing the challenges of POSAP, and worked to ensure it was transparent, inclusive and responsive to feedback.

4.0 Outcomes, impact and insights

Appropriateness and effectiveness of the engagement program

POSAP was highly effective in achieving its engagement objectives. It succeeded in fostering collaboration among community members with diverse views, and the project team. The inclusion of an additional 4,000 m² of open space for co-design as a result of early POSAP discussions validates the effectiveness of the engagement program. It had tangible results.

POSAP was effective in creating a forum for open dialogue, exchanging ideas and enabling direct community input into the project decision-making process.

The process helped create public spaces that have been embraced by the community and helped increase support for the project overall.

Evaluation of the engagement undertaken, insights or lessons learned

Feedback from participants was sought at the end of the process to help LXR P assess the effectiveness of the engagement program, identify strengths and weaknesses, and identify insights and lessons learned.

The evaluation revealed that POSAP was effective in achieving its engagement objectives, with high levels of satisfaction reported by participants.

Reporting processes and feedback-shaped decisions made

The reporting processes for POSAP were effective in ensuring that feedback from participants was incorporated into decision-making. LXR P distributed minutes to panel participants after each meeting and provided regular updates on the progress of the panel to the broader community. This ensured the community was able to clearly see the evolution of the open space design and how it had been shaped by community input. This ongoing reporting process helped to build trust in the outcome.

PRESTON OPEN SPACE ADVISORY PANEL

The Preston Open Space Advisory Panel (POSAP) comprised local residents, community group members and a representative from Darebin City Council.

POSAP meetings were held between May and November 2020, online via Zoom due to government restrictions to help stop the spread of coronavirus.

Over six meetings, POSAP members discussed opportunities, shared ideas and provided feedback on how the new open spaces could be designed to reflect the character of Preston, facilitate social interaction and improve the local area.

Process

POSAP areas

Due to the many project site constraints and considerations, three key areas of open space were identified for discussion with POSAP. These designated POSAP areas were identified to ensure the process focused on areas where the panel could have the most influence.

These areas were:

1. Bell Street to Cramer Street
2. Miller Street to Showers Street
3. North of Murray Road

POSAP members

- Rowena Archer, Community Member
- Shez Bakhuri, Bell Residents Group
- Esme Bamblett, Aboriginal Advancement League
- Ainsley Bedgood, Community Member
- Neil Boland, Community Member
- Lucinda Hartley, Community Member
- Chris Lombardo, Bridge Darebin
- Jennifer Louie, Darebin City Council
- Michael Webb, Community Member



Figure 11 – Front cover of POSAP final report

Levels of participant, stakeholder, and organisational satisfaction

POSAP achieved high levels of satisfaction among participants and LXRP. Feedback showed that participants felt that their voices were heard and that their input was taken seriously. Many panel members reported that they felt POSAP was a truly collaborative and inclusive decision-making process.

LXRP team members also reported high levels of satisfaction, with the engagement program providing valuable insights into community needs and preferences and contributing to the development of an excellent open space that has been embraced by the community.

Innovation and uniqueness

POSAP expanded on LXRP's existing community engagement activities, providing an opportunity for more meaningful community input into the open space design. While a similar process has previously been used in another level crossing removal, POSAP evolved the format via:

- A wholly online approach, including use of the Mural collaboration tool
- Adapting the process while it was running, to respond to member feedback
- Ensuring opportunities for broader community input at both the start and the end of the process.

Following are 'before and after' images from the project area showing the stark improvement in amenity, as well as shots from the 'Thank You Preston' event where 6000 local community members gathered to celebrate the new open spaces, and quotes from POSAP members regarding their involvement in the co-design process.



Figure 12 – Area 1 before and after, exercise zone near Preston Oval

Thanks so much for the opportunity – lovely to see how our feedback has been interpreted and obviously valued unity and a variety of play spaces – POSAP panel



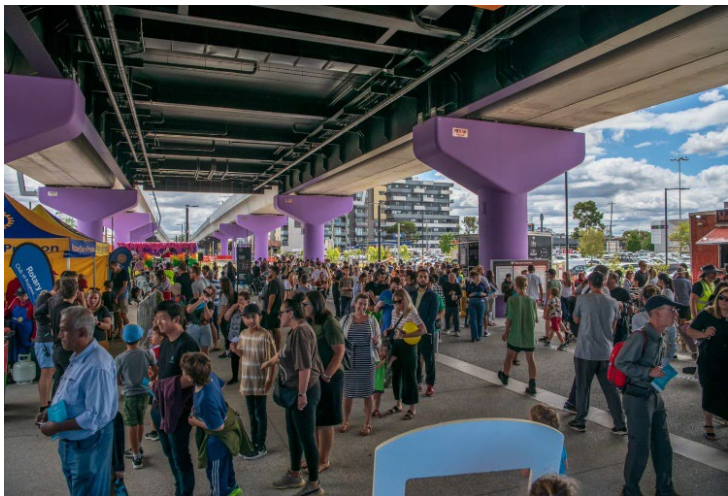
Overall, it's positive to see so much consideration of spaces, consideration of culture community and a variety of play spaces – POSAP panel member

Figure 13 – Area 2 before and after, Oakover Green



Figure 14: Smoking Ceremony in new open space, 'Thank You Preston' event, February 2023

Photos from the 'Thank You Preston' event in February 2023







LEVEL CROSSING REMOVAL PROJECT

Acknowledgements and to find out more:

We would like to thank the Level Crossing Removal Project (LXRP) for agreeing to share this case study and insights to advance engagement practice. This case study was authored by Georgia Halliday, Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Manager, Level Crossing Removal Project.

For more information about this project see:

- [Level Crossing Removal Project – Victoria’s Big Build](#)
- [levelcrossings – YouTube](#)
- [Preston Open Space Advisory Panel \(POSAP\) meeting summaries - Victoria’s Big Build](#)

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