Reimagining Malahang Reserve playground

Draft Concept Report November 2026



Banyule
City Council

Acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians

Banyule City Council proudly acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the land which Council operates on. We pay our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, past, present and emerging, who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the region's history.

Diversity Statement

Our community is made up of diverse cultures, beliefs, abilities, bodies, sexualities, ages and genders. We are committed to access, equity, participation and rights for everyone: principles which empower, foster harmony and increase the wellbeing of an inclusive community.



Introduction

Malahang Reserve is one of Banyule's most loved and well-used community spaces. It is a place where children play, young people meet, families gather, people exercise and the community comes together for events and activities. For many local families, particularly those with limited outdoor space at home, Malahang is an important part of everyday life.

The existing playground is ageing and needs renewal. Rather than simply replacing old equipment with new, we have an opportunity to reimagine what this important place could offer the community now and into the future.

The way people live, play and use public spaces is changing. Malahang needs to work for children and families with different ages, abilities, cultures and needs, while providing more opportunities for young people, nature, gathering and connection. It also needs to be safe, durable and practical to care for over the long term.

Most importantly, the renewal is an opportunity to build on what people already love about Malahang. More than 900 community members shared their experiences and ideas during the first stage of engagement, helping us understand what makes the reserve special and what could make it even better.

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

The playground needs renewing, but we have an opportunity to do more than simply replace what is there. We can build on what people love about Malahang and create a welcoming, inclusive and enduring place that better supports play, nature, culture and community, now and into the future.



Strategic Alignment

Every day, Council progresses work to make our Community Vision 2041 a reality:

“We in Banyule are a thriving, sustainable, inclusive and connected community. We are engaged, we belong, and we value and protect our environment.”

Reimagining Malahang Reserve playground will be guided by Council strategic documents relating to the environment, community wellbeing, public realm and more.



Council's strategic documents that will guide reimagining Malahang Reserve playground

Setting the scene

History of Malahang Reserve

Malahang Reserve has changed over time to meet the needs of local community. Understanding its history helps us recognise what is valued about the playground and the wider reserve. Malahang Reserve has a long history as a place for community life in Heidelberg West. Its story is connected to the development of the surrounding Olympic Village, built for the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games and subsequently used for housing. Over time, Malahang has grown into an important place for play, recreation, events and community connection, a role it continues to play for Heidelberg West's diverse community today.

Site analysis and past masterplans

We looked closely at the playground and its surroundings to understand how the site works today. This included access, play equipment, paths, trees, planting, shade, seating and connections to the wider reserve. We also reviewed the 2004 masterplan, which has guided the location of paths, play and connection for more than twenty years. A new toilet was installed in 2021.

What's working well

People love elements of the playground. These strengths provide a foundation for the renewed playground and should be retained or built upon where possible. Existing shade is also provided by large structures and mature trees.

The challenges

Malahang is a busy and well-loved reserve. Keeping its spaces safe and working well requires ongoing care. In the past, features have been removed because they were unable to be maintained within this park.

The renewal provides an opportunity to think differently about how we provide challenging and active play that can also stand up to heavy use and be effectively maintained over time. Durable materials, thoughtful design and practical maintenance will help keep Malahang safe, welcoming and enjoyable for years to come.

Trends

As our community grows and more people live with less private outdoor space, public parks and playgrounds have an increasingly important role to play. Well-designed and maintained open spaces provide free places for everyone to play, be active, connect with nature, spend time together and feel part of their community.

Playground design is also evolving, with greater emphasis on inclusive and adventurous play, nature, shade, accessibility and spaces for different ages to gather and connect.

THE MEANING OF MALAHANG.

Malahang is an Indigenous Taiwanese concept about caring for one another through relationships and shared responsibility. While this is not the origin of Malahang Reserve's name, the idea reflects how the community uses and values the reserve today.

The concept design builds on this spirit of care for people, culture, community and nature.

MALAHANG RESERVE
Existing Conditions Plan



Community engagement summary

We started by listening

Before developing a concept plan, Council asked the community to share their experiences of Malahang Reserve, what they love about it, what could work better and their ideas for its future.

From October to December 2025, we went beyond surveys and pop-up sessions and met people where they already spend time, including at the park, schools, kindergartens, playgroups, community organisations and the Malahang Festival. A community prioritisation workshop in January 2026 then helped test the emerging priorities and identify what mattered most

More than 900 voices

The engagement was one of Council's most highly participated consultations, with more than 900 people contributing. Around 789 people participated through face-to-face conversations and activities, reflecting the project's focus on reaching people who may not usually participate in formal consultation.

We heard from:

- 220 school and kindergarten students, including 35 First Nations students
- 103 playgroup participants, including children, parents and carers
- 185 parents, carers and other park users
- 221 Malahang Festival 2025 participants
- 39 representatives from nine community organisations
- 17 Banyule Community Champions
- 72 online survey respondents
- 42 contributions to the interactive map.





Children, young people, First Nations families, culturally diverse communities, people with disability, carers, older people and local organisations were deliberately included so the design could respond to different experiences and needs.

What we heard

One message came through loud and clear: people love Malahang. The reserve is much more than a playground. For many people it is part of everyday life and an important place to play, meet, exercise, spend time outdoors and connect with others. Some families described it as a “second home.”

Across the different conversations and activities, the community consistently asked for:

Play for everyone

A greater variety of play, with spaces for different ages and abilities and more challenging opportunities for older children and young people.

A safer and more inclusive park

Better visibility, fencing and containment in key areas, lighting, safer toilets, accessible paths and spaces where people with different needs can feel comfortable.

More shade and comfort

Shade, weather protection, seating, BBQs and welcoming places for families and groups to spend time together.

Nature and biodiversity

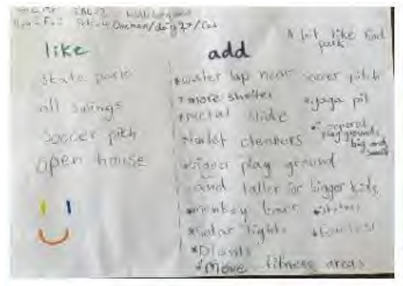
More trees, planting and opportunities to connect play with Malahang Reserve's natural environment.

Culture and community

Places where Malahang's diverse cultures and connection to Country can be expressed, and spaces that support gathering, events and community activities.

More for young people

Dedicated opportunities for teenagers and young people, including challenging play, social spaces and improvements to sport and active recreation.



FROM LISTENING TO DESIGN

What we heard has directly shaped the project vision, guiding principles and concept design. Rather than simply replacing ageing playground equipment, the project is looking at how Malahang can better support play, nature, culture, connection and everyday community life into the future.

Whole of park plan

While this project focuses on reimagining the playground at Malahang Reserve, community also provided feedback about the whole park.

This whole of park plan acknowledges the ideas and feedback we heard regarding the whole park. This feedback will be used as a reference for future implementation.



Vision

A project vision is a shared picture of what we want the place to become. It reflects what we have heard from the community, the qualities of the site, and what the project needs to achieve. It helps keep the design focused on what matters most.

Malahang Reserve is a vibrant, inclusive and culturally grounded destination where play, nature, community and wellbeing come together.

Inspired by the voices of more than 900 community members, the renewed playground celebrates what makes Malahang unique: its diverse community, its connection to Country, and the rich natural environment that supports Banyule's iconic wildlife. Through adventurous and nature-based play, learning and storytelling, children and families are invited to explore and connect with Banyule's flagship species, including the Platypus, Powerful Owl, Eltham Copper Butterfly, Krefft's Glider, Swift Parrot and Growling Grass Frog.

Together, these species and the people who call Malahang home become ambassadors for local biodiversity. By fostering curiosity, stewardship and a deeper connection to nature, the reserve will inspire the community to care for and protect the habitats, landscapes and wildlife that make Banyule special. In doing so, Malahang Reserve will help nurture a shared commitment to a future with no local extinctions, where people and nature thrive together.

More than a playground, Malahang Reserve is a place where children feel proud, families feel safe, young people feel valued, and culture, community and the natural environment flourish for generations to come.



Guiding principles

Guiding principles describe the things that matter most when designing the space. They are shaped by what we have heard from the community, what is important about the site, and what the project aims to achieve. They help guide choices about how the space will look, feel and function.

Principle 1: Respect and celebrate what makes Malahang Reserve special

Build on what people already love about Malahang Reserve.

Keep and strengthen the features, character and connections that make the park special, while creating new opportunities for play, gathering and community life. The renewed playground should feel like it belongs at Malahang and reflects the people who use and care for it.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

- Retain key elements of the existing playground that are well used and loved by community
- Add more places for community to gather both in the playground and outside the playground
- Ensure materiality and artwork represent the local community



Principle 2: Create a place where everyone feels welcome

Make Malahang Reserve a place where people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds can feel comfortable and included.

Create safe and accessible ways to move through the space, good visibility, places to rest and gather, and different ways to play and participate. Consider the needs of children, young people, parents, carers and Elders so more people can enjoy the reserve with confidence.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

- Provide areas of fully fenced playground
- Provide walking paths around the playground, so dogs do not walk through the playground
- Provide gathering spaces outside of the playground
- Make sure the paths to and around the playground are accessible for all users
- Accessible seats are provided at key locations in the playground and along paths



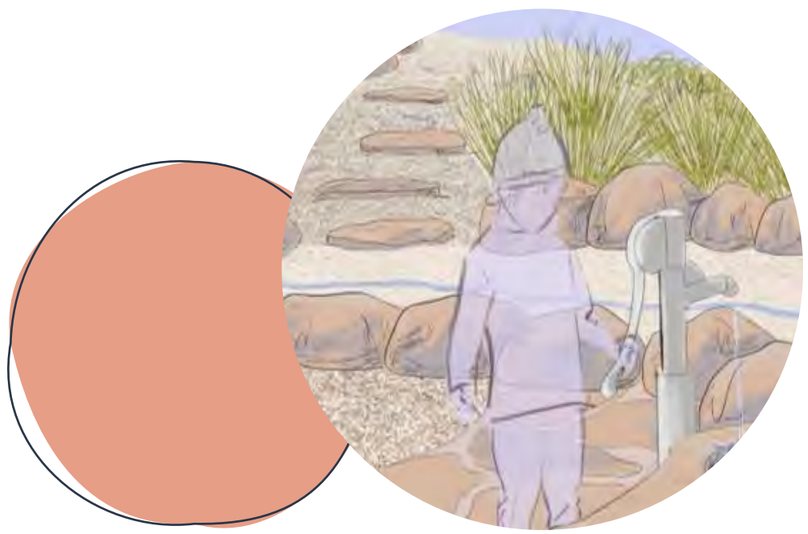
Principle 3: Provide different ways to play

Create a playground with something for everyone, with different ways to play, explore and challenge yourself.

Provide opportunities to climb, swing, slide, balance, imagine, discover, take risks and play together. Include experiences for different ages and abilities, from quieter and more predictable play through to challenging and adventurous play.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

- Zone the play area into big and little play, catering for different ages and abilities
- Provide areas of quiet nature play
- Provide areas of fully fenced playground
- Priorities interactions with the natural environment and discovery play experiences
- Provide sensory play through water, materials and planting



Principle 4: Bring play and nature together

Make nature an improtant park of how Malahang looks, feels and is experienced.

Build on the reserve's trees and landscape with more shade, planting, natural materials and opportunities for nature-based play. Use play, storytelling and discovery to help children connect with local plants and wildlife and understand why caring for nature matters.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

- Mature trees will be retained
- Banyule's flagship species will be celebrated and represented throughout the playground in various ways - Platypus, Powerful Owl, Eltham Copper Butterfly, Krefft's Glider, Swift Parrot, Growling Grass Frog and Blue Tongue Lizard
- Informational signage will help community connect with nature

Principle 5: Reuse, chose carefully and design to last

Make thoughtful choices about what we keep, reuse and build with.

Retain and reuse existing materials and features where they still have value, reduce waste and choose new materials that are durable and have less impact on the environment. Design for heavy use and ongoing maintenance so Malahang continues to look good, work well and be enjoyed for many years.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

- Refurbish the existing shelter
- Retain popular play elements, including the double flying fox and big basket swing
- Reimagine the Malahang boat play structure
- Retain all existing trees
- Consider and prioritise locally sourced, sustainable materials.

Principle 6: Celebrate diverse culture and connection to Country.

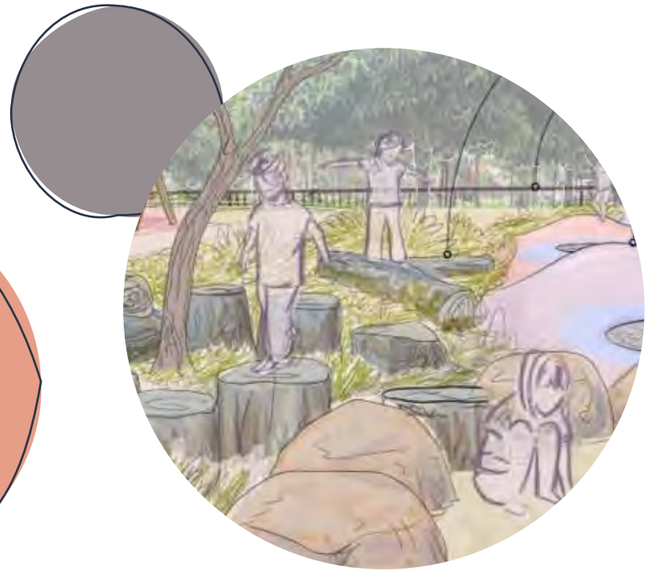
Create a place that reflects the cultures, stories and connections that make Malahang Reserve unique.

Work with first nations and local communities to respectfully bring diverse culture, Country and storytelling into the design. Create opportunities for people to see themselves reflected in the space, learn from one another and strengthen their sense of connection and belonging.

What this looks like in the draft concept:

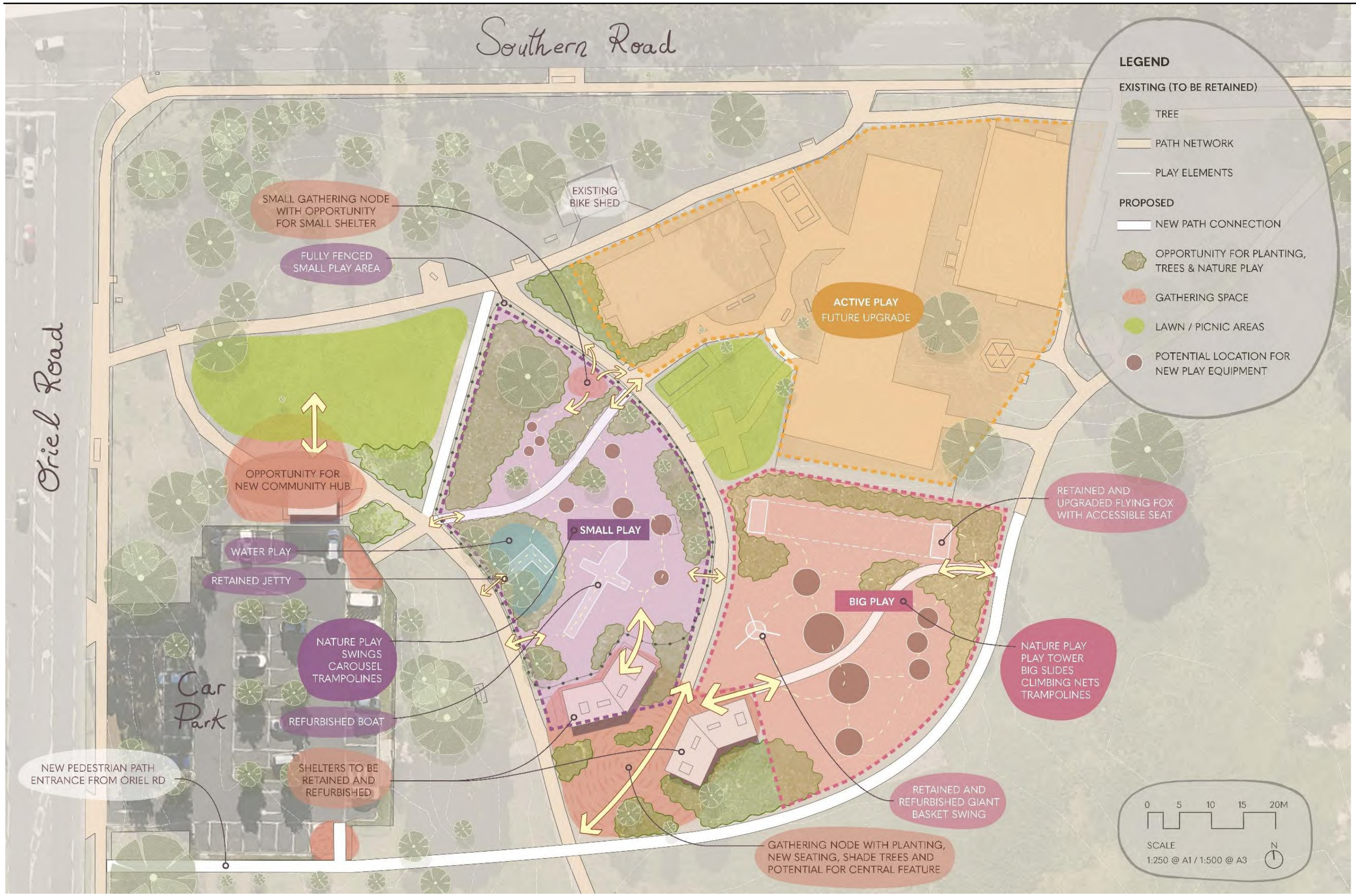
- Supports a diverse range of cultural practice with opportunities for sharing of cultural knowledge
- Prioritisation of natural materials that are reflective of the natural landscape
- Providing new opportunities for nature play, with native plants and water play







Draft concept plan



Big play area



Above: existing view from under the double flying fox

Right: what is proposed in the draft concept design



Little play area



Above: existing view of the Jetty and boat play

Right: what is proposed in the draft concept design



Little play area



Above: existing view of the swings

Right: what is proposed in the draft concept design



Gathering node



Above: view of existing shelters

Right: what is proposed in the draft concept design



Appendix 1: How will we measure success?

The guiding principles will be used throughout design and delivery to check that the project stays true to what we heard from the community and what we want Malahang to become. After the playground opens, they will also help us understand what is working well and where we can continue to improve.

Principle / measure	We will know we have succeeded when
0. Project budget and timeline - Make the investment count - Deliver what we promised	The project is delivered within the approved budget, with funding focused on the features and improvements that provide the greatest value and benefit for the community.
	The project is delivered in line with the agreed program, with changes or delays identified and managed early and clearly communicated.
1. Respect and celebrate what makes Malahang special	Features and qualities that people value about Malahang are retained or strengthened.
	The playground feels connected to the wider reserve, rather than like a separate space.
	Community feedback can be clearly traced through to design decisions.
	The renewed space reflects Malahang's identity and continues to support gathering, play and community life.
2. Create a place where everyone feels welcome	People of different ages and abilities can access and enjoy the playground.
	Accessible paths connect key play areas, facilities and gathering spaces.
	There are choices for active, social and quieter experiences.
	Seating, shade and places to rest are provided for children, families, carers and Elders.
	Sightlines, entrances and the arrangement of play areas support safe and confident use.
	Accessibility and inclusion are considered throughout the design, rather than added later.
3. Create different ways to play	The playground offers a broad mix of physical, imaginative, sensory, social and nature-based play.
	There are experiences for different ages, abilities, interests and confidence levels.
	Children can progressively challenge themselves as their skills develop.
	There are opportunities for both independent and shared play.
	Older children and young people have meaningful opportunities for challenge and activity, not just younger children.
	Play experiences encourage repeat visits and different ways of playing over time.
	The playground offers a broad mix of physical, imaginative, sensory, social and nature-based play.

Principle / measure	We will know we have succeeded when
4. Bring play and nature together	Trees, planting and natural elements are an important part of the playground experience.
	Existing healthy trees and valuable landscape features are protected where possible.
	Shade and vegetation are increased.
	Children can interact with and learn about nature through play and discovery.
	Planting provides habitat and contributes to local biodiversity.
	Local wildlife and Banyule's natural environment are reflected through play, storytelling or interpretation.
5. Reuse, choose carefully and design to last	Existing materials, equipment or landscape features are retained or reused where practical.
	Waste is reduced during construction.
	New materials are chosen with their environmental impact, durability and maintenance needs in mind.
	Equipment and landscaping can withstand the high level of use expected at Malahang.
	Maintenance considerations are built into design decisions from the beginning.
	The playground can be repaired, maintained and adapted over time without unnecessarily replacing whole elements.
	The playground remains safe, attractive, functional and maintainable as it ages.
6. Celebrate culture and connection to Country	Traditional Custodians are meaningfully involved in the development of relevant cultural and Country-based elements.
	Cultural stories and knowledge are incorporated respectfully and with appropriate permission.
	The design reflects the diversity of the local community.
	Culture is integrated into the experience of the place rather than treated as decoration.
	The playground creates opportunities for people to learn, share stories and connect with Country, place and one another.
	Different members of the community can see something of themselves and their connection to Malahang reflected in the space.