

Darby Street – Streets as Shared Spaces Trial

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What is Streets as Shared Spaces?

The Streets as Shared Spaces (SaSS) Round 2 program is run by the NSW State Government. The purpose of SaSS is to fund trial changes to the streetscape, to support immediate community needs and test and build the case for more permanent changes that positively impact local economies and community health and wellbeing. For more information search 'Streets as Shared Spaces' on the Transport for NSW website, or visit: <https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/industry/cities-and-active-transport/cities-revitalisation-and-place/festival-of-place/grant-0>.

Why did City of Newcastle choose Darby Street for the Streets as Shared Spaces trial?

Darby Street is a high priority for infrastructure renewal under the Local Centres Program. It is a complex commercial precinct with varied stakeholder groups, which suffered a downturn during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The trial offered an opportunity to provide an instant economic boost to the Darby Street business precinct, whilst testing ideas and generating lived experience of new ways to use the public domain.

We collected data and community feedback to ascertain what worked and what didn't work. We did this via community surveys and collected data (eg expenditure, foot traffic, transport mode and traffic speed) during the trial to compare with pre-trial baseline data to ascertain what works and what doesn't work.

This information will be applied to a future renewal of the Darby Street Precinct and to other commercial centres across the Newcastle LGA.

How long is the trial?

The trial duration is approximately 6 months. It started in September 2022 and will end on 28 February 2023.

What are the objectives of the trial?

Specific project objectives are as follows:

- Make Darby Street safer for cyclists through reduction of vehicle speed allowing cyclists to command the lane
- Make it safer for pedestrians to cross Darby Street through reduction of vehicle speed and by trialling a temporary pedestrian crossing
- Improve pedestrian access by widening the footpath on the eastern side of Darby Street between the Council Street intersection and Aidens Lane. This area is currently congested with outdoor dining taking up space on a narrow footway
- Improve the local business environment by encouraging visitation and increasing space for outdoor dining
- Attract visitors and encourage people to stay longer
- Enhance after dark activation and boost the night-time economy
- Increase safety from crime, through increased streetscape activation, particularly after dark
- Use community feedback and data collected before and after the trial to inform potential permanent future changes

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What did the trial deliver?

The trial delivered the following elements:

- Installation of traffic calming infrastructure and a 30km/h zone to reduce traffic speeds (cushions and road narrowings)
- Extended outdoor dining space and widened footpath between Sanctum and Goldbergs.
- A movable parklet trailer
- A temporary mid-block pedestrian crossing
- A drop-off pick-up point
- A 5 minute parking zone for takeaway food collection
- Activation of Darby Street's Headphones courtyard with street furniture, surfacing and lighting
- Wall and ground murals linked with the citywide Big Picture Festival and Chalk the Walk Festival under the banner of the New Annual Festival, to promote visitation
- Conversion of existing paid all day parking in Queen Street car park into free 2hour parking spaces to compensate for approximately 18 on-street parking spaces lost as part of the trial
- Motorcycle parking near to the dining deck
- A marketing campaign encouraging people to visit Darby Street

How was Darby Street activated as part of the SaSS Trial?

Along with the physical improvements, City of Newcastle (CN) ran a program of events. These included:

- 20 September to 2 October – New Annual Festival – a temporary Chalk the Walk pavement mural was created at the corner of Council and Darby Streets
- 15 October – official opening - Street Party at the eastern end of Council St
- 12 November - art competition in the Darby Street headphones courtyard

Why did Darby Street need more outdoor dining space?

Darby Street is a popular 'Eat Street' but it has narrow footpaths which limit the opportunity for outdoor dining. Current outdoor dining on the footpath leaves limited room for pedestrians to move along the street, resulting in congestion. Through the creation of additional space for outdoor dining, we made it possible for eateries to host more customers and provide sufficient circulation space (including adequate footpath width) to improve accessibility and meet any current or future COVID-19 requirements.

Where is the extended outdoor dining/trading?

We converted seven existing parking spaces into an additional 120m² of outdoor dining space outside the most concentrated run of restaurants (between Sanctum and Goldbergs cafés), using raised decking. This frees up the full footpath width in front of businesses for pedestrian access and provides businesses with increased outdoor dining space.

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What is a parklet?

A parklet is a parking space which has been converted for recreational use, such as outdoor dining or seating and parklets often include planting and shade. As part of the trial, we provided a mobile parklet trailer with seating and planting, which can be moved around at the request of businesses. This gives businesses outside of the extended outdoor dining area between Sanctum and Goldbergs cafés an opportunity to have extended outdoor trading for a short period. Research has shown that parklets generate an economic boost for businesses by creating an inviting space that encourages people to stay longer and connect with each other and businesses.

How has the Darby Headphones Courtyard been activated?

The Darby Street Headphones Courtyard was an under-utilised space which presented an opportunity for additional activation. New seating, a small stage and landscaping has been provided to provide a friendly place to play and relax. Chalk the Walk artist Zac Craig refreshed the existing wall mural by Shannon Crees (2014 Hit the Bricks Festival) by turning horses into winged unicorns. CN worked with the Darby Street Traders group to upgrade the existing Headphones Sculpture, which plays music by local musicians and contains amplifiers which are available for free use by musicians.

Why was it important to reduce traffic speed on Darby Street?

Although Darby Street was a 40km/h zone, it did not have any speed control devices. Average speeds measured in January 2022 were 41.8 km/h, with the 85th percentile moving at 48.0 km/h. Darby Street is very busy with an annual average daily traffic volume of 9621 vehicles. The high traffic volume and speed made it difficult for pedestrians and cyclists to move through the busy precinct safely.

Transport for NSW data has demonstrated that the risk to pedestrians and cyclists is significantly reduced when vehicle speeds are lowered. The chance of survival for a pedestrian hit by a vehicle at 50 km/h is just 10% while for a vehicle at 30 km/h this jumps to a 90% survival rate.

Additionally, studies published in the Australasian College of Road Safety have proven that the introduction of lower speeds has minimal impact on travel times. A review of travel data in Sydney showed that a reduction of speed limits from 50km/h to 30 km/h over a 14km urban journey affected travel time by less than one minute.

How was speed reduced?

To actively lower vehicle speeds, we implemented a 30km/h speed zone supported by traffic calming infrastructure including signage, speed cushions and a raised pedestrian crossing, at intervals along Darby Street from the Newcastle Art Gallery to 188 Darby Street. The road narrowing for extended outdoor dining also helps to reduce traffic speed.

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Why was a trial pedestrian crossing installed?

The only safe places to cross Darby Street were the two sets of traffic lights (at the intersection of Queen Street and south of Council Street) which are 270m apart. The wide gap between safe places to cross resulted in people crossing unsafely mid-block (dodging in between parked and moving cars). For this reason a pedestrian crossing was trialled approximately half way between the two sets of existing traffic lights, at Darby Street's Headphones Courtyard. The raised pedestrian crossing forms a speed control device as part of the overall traffic calming scheme. The 30km/h zone also makes it safer for pedestrians to cross Darby Street between formal crossing points.

How has the trial affected parking?

When CN was applying for the grant we consulted local business groups and they told us the availability of 2 hour timed parking is very important to businesses. One of the business groups suggested compensating for any on-street free 2 hour parking used by the trial, with free 2 hour parking in the Queen Street car park. We listened and designed the trial to have zero impact on the quantity of free 2 hour parking in the Darby Street precinct.

In total we converted 32 paid all day commuter parking spaces in Queen Street car park into free 2 hour parking spaces. These spaces compensate for approximately 18 on-street parking spaces used by the Darby Street SaSS trial and a further approximately 10 on-street parking spaces which were impacted by a work zone for the Newcastle Art Gallery project.

The main impact of the trial has been on the quantity of commuter parking, however 68% of respondents to our community survey supported the conversion of commuter parking into free 2-hr parking in the Queen Street carpark. The change to commuter parking aligns with Newcastle's Parking Plan – On the street – A plan to better manage parking in the Newcastle LGA. Alternative commuter parking is available at the Gibson Street Parking Station car park and Number 2 Sports Ground.

During the trial, we heard concerns from businesses related to compliance with existing 2 hour parking restrictions on Darby Street. We responded with increased patrols, and active monitoring of recorded non-compliances and staff resourcing in the area.

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How will CN know if the trial has been successful?

We consulted businesses and the broader community to find out about their lived experience and what has worked well and what hasn't. We undertook the following community consultation as part of the trial:

- Pre-trial online survey from 16 May to 13 June 2022
- Pre-trial online workshop with businesses on 26 July 2022
- During-trial online survey questionnaire from 5 December 2022 to 31 January 2023
- During-trial online comments open from 1 to 28 February 2023
- During-trial face to face business drop-in sessions on 6 and 7 February 2023

We also collected data before and during the trial to measure whether there has been a positive impact. We measured a suite of indicators including expenditure in businesses, vehicle speeds and numbers of pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles as follows:

- Ongoing economic and foot traffic data sourced from Spendmapp by Geografia; Roy Morgan
- Pre-trial traffic, pedestrian and cycle activity data, collected over two weeks from 30 July 2022
- During-trial traffic, pedestrian and cycle activity data collected over two weeks in November 2022

What are the results of the trial?

To date, the trial has been successful overall when measured against a range of indicators, including community sentiment, economic outcomes, vehicle speeds and pedestrian and cyclist numbers. For full results, see the summary of engagement results on our Darby Street SaSS Have Your Say web page.

High level takeaways from the community consultation are as follows:

- 69% of the 275 respondents support retaining the trial infrastructure in its current form.
- 68% of respondents agreed that compensating for on-street parking losses by converting commuter parking in Queen Street car park into free 2 hour parking was a positive change.
- The pedestrian crossing was very popular with 86% of respondents agreeing it is a positive change.
- The large wooden dining deck was also popular with 74% of respondents agreed that is a positive change.

High level takeaways from the traffic counts are as follows:

- On average we saw a 13% increase in cyclists using Darby Street during the trial.
- During the trial average vehicle speeds on Darby Street south of Bull Street did not decrease.
- During the trial average vehicle speeds on Darby Street north of Council Street were reduced from 42km/h to 30km/h.

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High level takeaways from the economic data:

- Findings from the economic data are as follows (data sources: Spendmapp by Geografia; Roy Morgan):
 - Since the commencement of the SaSS trial in Darby Street, businesses in the precinct as a whole have experienced their highest trading revenue levels on record.
 - Sales revenue in Darby Street in the December (Oct-Dec) 2022 quarter was up 17.0 per cent compared to the September (Jul-Sept) 2022 quarter.
 - Current sales revenues have easily surpassed pre-COVID levels.
 - Even accounting for the normal Christmas trading spike, Darby Street traders have fared well: sales levels were up 9.2 per cent compared to the same period in 2021 (Oct – Dec 2022 vs Oct – Dec 2021).
 - The increase in trading from the September to December 2022 quarters was also above other Newcastle business precincts: October to December 2022 sales revenue in Darby Street increased 5.2 per cent more than the average sales revenue bumps elsewhere in the Newcastle local government area.
 - Foot traffic in Darby Street has also increased since the commencement of the SaSS trial: visitation numbers in October to December increased by 18 per cent compared to July to September. Compared to the same period in (COVID-affected) 2021, visitation numbers were up by over 67 per cent.
 - A big driver of the increased sales expenditure in the street was visitors to the area: about 47% of total sales were to customers from outside the Newcastle local government area, a rate which has risen significantly over the past 12 months.
 - The big industry winner from the trial has been the Dining and Entertainment sector, with December 2022 being its highest trading month on record (\$4.26m for the street).
 - Other big Darby Street trading increases were captured by the specialised food retailing, specialised and luxury goods and clothing retailing sectors.

What issues were raised by the community?

- We heard community concerns about cyclist safety at the northern entry to the trial 30km/h zone. A concept plan for upgraded infrastructure at the northern entry will be tabled at Newcastle City Traffic Committee in February 2023.
- We heard that the trial delivered varied results, with some businesses benefitting more than others. We will work to better understand the granular impacts of changes to the public domain.
- We heard that the noise from speed cushions was obtrusive to some of the residents.
- We heard that parking availability continues to be a concern.

What are the next steps?

The trial ends on 28 February 2023. We are now in the final phase of the trial, in which we assess and share the trial outcomes and respond to what we have learned.

The outcomes of the Darby SaSS trial, including the results of community consultation and data analysis, will be presented at a Councillor Workshop ahead of Council making a decision about the future of the infrastructure installed for the trial in **late March 2023**.