

# Community-led Sustainable Cities

## How local place-based leadership is powering sustainability transitions

### Snapshot

- This project set out to explore a powerful question: *What happens when communities – not institutions – take the lead on sustainability?*
- Led by the UTS Social Impact Lab, the Community-led Sustainable Cities project brought together over 170 residents across Glebe, Haymarket, Pyrmont and Ultimo to reimagine what sustainable futures could look like in their neighbourhoods – and to make them real.
- The result? A rich shared vision for change, 3 inspiring community-led initiatives, and a practical toolkit to help others do the same.

### Introduction

Environmental change is often seen as a technical challenge, but communities hold vital knowledge about what sustainability means in everyday life. This project explored how people in inner-city Sydney are imagining and shaping more just, sustainable futures – showing that when local values, stories and relationships are centred, trust and collaboration can unlock leadership and drive meaningful lasting change.



## What did we do?

Over the course of a year, community members came together through creative workshops, storytelling and co-design activities to reflect on their experiences, share ideas, and take action.

They spoke of strong connections to place and nature, a desire for more just and inclusive systems, and the need for practical support to make change happen. These insights were captured in a powerful Story of Change – a visual roadmap of what matters, what gets in the way, and what's possible when communities are supported to lead.

Backed by seed funding, mentoring and partnerships, community members brought 3 projects to life:



### 1. Sustainable Food and Social Inclusion

A neglected garden in a social housing complex was transformed into a vibrant space for growing food, building community, and sharing skills - with support from Community Greening and UTS student volunteers.



### 2. What's old is new

A bilingual clothing swap and textile repair workshop connected generations and cultures, while tackling fashion waste. Led by older migrant residents, the events created inclusive opportunities for skill-sharing and connection.



### 3. Collective Conversations for Climate Resilience

A community-led forum brought together local and Aboriginal-led sustainability groups, sparking follow-up projects including solar installations and the beginnings of a local climate action network.

All three initiatives continue to grow beyond the life of the project – proof that when leadership is local and support is strong, the impact lasts.



A SUSTAINABLE STORY OF CHANGE FOR OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

# Why does community leadership matter in sustainability transitions?

Sustainability transitions are most effective when grounded in local knowledge, relationships and priorities. While policy and technology play critical roles, top-down approaches alone often fall short – overlooking the social, cultural and place-based dimensions of change (Creamer, 2015; Simon et al., 2019). Community-led initiatives, by contrast, build on local strengths, foster social cohesion, and translate abstract global challenges into meaningful local action (Khalatbari, 2024; Henfrey et al., 2023). They provide a powerful means for people to act on what they value, while cultivating the trust and participation needed for long-term transformation

To support this kind of change, inclusive, participatory methods are essential. Approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry and futures thinking help communities surface collective aspirations, explore barriers, and design solutions that are locally relevant and socially grounded (Bushe, 2011; Sharpe et al., 2016). Importantly, when community members are positioned as co-creators – not just stakeholders – they bring unique insight, motivation and leadership to the table. In this way, community leadership becomes not only a catalyst for sustainability, but a condition for its success.

## What did we learn?

This project surfaced a wealth of insight into what it takes to move from good intentions to real, community-led impact. While each initiative was different, some clear patterns emerged:

- **Start with strengths:** Communities already have what they need to lead – our job is to help unlock it.
- **Embed lived experience:** The people most affected by environmental and social challenges must be at the centre of designing solutions.
- **Support local leadership:** With the right scaffolding – mentoring, coordination, flexible funding – community members step up and sustain action.
- **Be creative:** Methods like storytelling and visual facilitation make sustainability accessible, inclusive, and energising.
- **Measure what matters:** Relationships, confidence, and connection are just as important as outputs.

These insights – and more – are captured in our **practical new toolkit**, developed to help others adopt, adapt, and scale this work in their own communities.

## What needs to change?

If we want more impactful, community-led sustainability, we need to shift how we work. This project points to 5 big changes that institutions, funders and policymakers should consider:

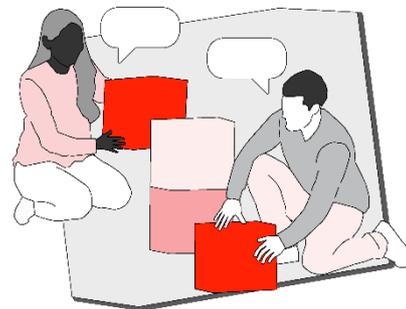
1. **Position community members as co-creators, not just stakeholders.** Our work is more impactful when it is shaped by the communities we seek to serve.
2. **Invest in place-based and partnership infrastructure,** like community connectors and trusted intermediaries.
3. **Offer flexible, low-barrier funding** and wrap around support that responds to community-defined priorities.
4. **Design for equity and inclusion** by removing barriers to participation and embedding culturally responsive practice.
5. **Use creative tools** to unlock participation and possibility.

## What's next?

The momentum hasn't stopped. Each of the community projects is continuing – with new partnerships, expanded events, and growing networks.

The relationships formed through this project are seeding future work, and the insights gathered are already being used to inform university practice and city-wide planning.

We're calling on partners, policymakers and practitioners to keep building on this energy. Let's centre care, collaboration, and community leadership in how we do sustainability.



### More information

Read the full report: [Community-led Sustainable Cities: How local place-based leadership is powering sustainability transitions](#)

View our toolkit: [Making change together: a community toolkit for local sustainability](#)

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## References

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