
Pioneering a civic gateway space on campus

Exploring the impact of Imagine Leeds for the University of Leeds community



Authorship

This report was developed by a collaborative partnership of the University of Leeds Sustainability Service (Alice Tenney, Dr Rebecca Brunk, Dr Tasha Aylett and Jane Dickinson), the School of Geography (Professor Paul Chatterton), and the community partner Climate Action Leeds (Simon Dixon and Andy Goldring). The project management, interviews, data collection and data analysis for this report were conducted by Alice Tenney.

1 Executive Summary

This report examines the strategic value of Imagine Leeds: the climate action hub (a civic-university collaborative space based on the University of Leeds campus). Serving as a bridge between the University and wider city, Imagine Leeds supports shared goals on climate action, sustainability and social justice. The report assesses the hub's contributions to University priorities through stakeholder interviews, student and researcher feedback, and usage data from a 20-week period (details of which can be found in Appendix A). This initiative builds on over a decade of civic-focused work at the University, and aligns with institutional strategies like the 'One Leeds' White Paper, The Framework for Environmental and Social Responsibility, and the University Climate Plan.

Key findings include:

- **Increased research and collaboration with the city:** Imagine Leeds fosters multi-sector partnerships, offering a trusted, non-traditional space for civic-engaged research. Academics highlighted its role in reshaping researcher-participant dynamics and enabling impactful civic collaboration, particularly around sustainability challenges. The hub hosted 52 different organisations during the research period, with an eightfold increase in University engagement compared to its previous city-centre location. The space supports the University's knowledge exchange KPIs of public and community engagement, research partnerships, working with the public and third sectors, and local growth and regeneration.
- **Opportunities for innovative teaching and learning:** Students and staff reported enhanced learning experiences through activities held at Imagine Leeds, recognising the value of its informal environment for fostering critical thinking, interdisciplinary engagement, and the real-world application of academic concepts. The space supports the University's commitment to student-centred, research-based learning as an important KPI of the Teaching Excellence Framework.
- **Improved civic engagement and responsibility for the University:** Imagine Leeds embodies the University's civic mission by providing a space for students, staff and local organisations to work together on urgent societal issues. Its presence as a unique civic gateway on campus strengthens the University's role as an anchor institution.

Conclusions and recommendations:

Imagine Leeds demonstrates a strong potential as a civic engagement model, effectively contributing to research, teaching and civic partnership development. The report recommends the University of Leeds formalises and extends its relationship with Imagine Leeds and invests in a dedicated civic space on campus. Campus Reimagined offers a strategic opportunity to leverage the space as a long-term 'living lab' for innovation and co-produced climate action and research, in order to advance the University's civic mission by embedding public engagement into the heart of campus life, while strengthening its position as a leader in climate science and sustainability.

2 Context

2.1 Imagine Leeds: the climate action hub

What is Imagine Leeds: the climate action hub?

Imagine Leeds is an initiative within Climate Action Leeds, with a number of key functions:

1. To bring people together from across different sectors to work on the interconnected challenges of climate change, nature depletion and social injustice.
2. To provide a physical space and proactive facilitation support for groups and organisations to develop both local and strategic plans and foster positive relationships and connections.
3. To provide access to up-to-date information about the city and the challenges that we face - an effective 'environment for decision making'. Information includes data about organisations, initiatives and opportunities - both geographic and thematic.
4. To provide a friendly and welcoming public facing space that provides people with access to tried and tested 'ready to go' solutions and approaches that can be adopted in homes and communities, and to information about groups they can work with locally.
5. To provide co-working space, meeting and event space, for a wide range of people and organisations working on climate, nature and social justice.

[Imagine Leeds: the climate action hub](#) is home to the [Climate Action Leeds](#) city-wide movement that aims to create a “zero carbon, nature friendly, socially just Leeds by the 2030s”. In October 2020, Climate Action Leeds received five years grant funding from the National Lottery’s Climate Action Fund, one of six initial £2.5m ‘test and learn’ projects. Climate Action Leeds are currently developing plans for their second phase of work.

Before its current location at 9 Blenheim Terrace, Imagine Leeds was located at City Exchange in Leeds city centre between February 2023 to February 2024, where it saw over 5,000 visits in its 12 months of operation. On 11 November 2024, Imagine Leeds moved into its new location on Blenheim Terrace after agreement from the University of Leeds Facilities Directorate on a rent rate of £7,500 for six months to cover the basic building costs. It was then agreed in February 2025 that Imagine Leeds’ lease could be extended until the Climate Action Leeds Lottery funding runs out in September 2025.

Please note that throughout this report when “Imagine Leeds” is mentioned, it is specifically referring to the iteration of Imagine Leeds at its current location in 9 Blenheim Terrace.

2.2 Context of this report

Imagine Leeds moving to a campus-based location was pitched as a collaboration between the academic community led by Paul Chatterton, Professor of Urban Futures; professional services led by Thom Cooper, Head of the University of Leeds Sustainability Service; and the Imagine Leeds team led by Simon Dixon and Andy Goldring of Climate Action Leeds and [Leeds Love It Share It CIC](#). This three-way partnership of academic, professional services, and civic partner colleagues allows Imagine Leeds a unique position; committed to co-producing a distinctive and mutually beneficial civic space on campus that can meet city, community and University aims and values.

Pre-dating Imagine Leeds, the desire for a civic space on campus has longer threads through previous and current funded projects such as [Leeds City Lab](#), the [Remaking Places Interdisciplinary Network](#), the Faculty of Environment Centre for Sustainable Development, and the [University Climate Plan](#). Prof Chatterton referred to Imagine Leeds on campus as “an exciting evolution of over 10 years of thinking”.

This project is rooted in this history, as well as a present need for climate and sustainability focused spaces on campus, highlighting the crucial role of civic partnerships within this work. Therefore, in order to understand the value that Imagine Leeds presents to University priorities, we wanted to understand what the original motivations and goals for the space to achieve were. To do this, we interviewed two key University of Leeds stakeholders, Thom Cooper and Prof Paul Chatterton. From these conversations, we have identified two main aims of the Imagine Leeds hub on campus:

1. **Innovation in teaching, learning and research** - Innovate through “disrupting” the normalised ways of teaching, learning and research that traditional models of spaces on campus foster.
2. **Civic engagement and responsibility** - “Build and strengthen” the relationship between the University, its students and third sector organisations, allowing the University to better align its programmes with the city’s objectives, to ensure the civic work of the University “delivers for [and with] the city”.

It is worth noting for this report, that experimentation was the key motivation behind the partnership between the University of Leeds and Imagine Leeds. It was seen by both the academic community and the Sustainability Service as a way to build upon previous work looking into the value of civic co-production for sustainable development, to “try something and see how it works” while helping out an organisation in need. For the Sustainability Service particularly, it was important to support Imagine Leeds in finding a space, due to the role of Climate Action Leeds and its member organisations in the delivery of the ‘Supporting a Net Zero City’ Principle of the University’s Climate Plan.

The following results section will evaluate Imagine Leeds as a [‘living lab’](#) (a real-world, collaborative project that uses the University campus and community as a testbed for innovative solutions) and explore whether Imagine Leeds has delivered upon these original aims.

3 Findings

3.1 Increased academic excellence and multi-sector collaboration

Academic excellence and multi-sector collaboration are ideas that run throughout key University of Leeds strategies such as the [‘One Leeds’ White Paper](#), Climate Plan and Framework for Environmental and Social Responsibility. Our examination of the Imagine Leeds hub found that it had strengthened the collaborative relationship between staff and numerous external partners in the city.

In discussion with seven researchers from across the University of Leeds, the benefit of Imagine Leeds as a space for impactful research with civic partners was evident. The separation of Imagine Leeds, both in its location and its management by a third sector organisation, created a neutral, non-commercialised ground for researchers to meet participants and co-researchers, compared to traditional University spaces. As a researcher from the School of Geography explained, “While Imagine Leeds is on campus [...], the fact that it is a bit further away and isn’t part of the University makes it feel safer for research participants who might not want to engage with the university system – for whatever reason”. The Imagine Leeds hub proved to be pivotal for building trust with research participants and reshaping the power dynamics that play out through the research process. “Research can be very extractivist”, another researcher from the School of Earth and Environment pointed out, “but it’s not just about how it can make it easy for us to access data. It is about really rethinking the relationship that the University has with anything else that is outside of the University”. They went on to suggest how trust built through such civic-university collaborative spaces could allow for participant-researcher dynamics to shift, to allow for more inclusive, mutually beneficial and impactful research.

A civic engagement space such as Imagine Leeds can also help foster and incubate collaborative approaches to sustainability challenges. Over the 20-week period that this research was conducted, Imagine Leeds has been the location of a retrofit living labs project led by an academic from the School of Civil Engineering, and has been instrumental for various sustainability focused research networks such as the Remaking Places Network and Leeds Climate Migration Research Network. Amanda Jackson, Social Impact Manager and co-Lead of the CENTRE network said, “a shared civic space like Imagine Leeds creates the physical and cultural conditions for cross-disciplinary collaboration to thrive. By bringing together academics, students, practitioners, and community partners from diverse fields in a neutral, public-facing environment, it encourages spontaneous interaction, idea exchange, and the co-creation of solutions to complex societal challenges”.

The Imagine Leeds space provides value as a facilitator between the university community and wider city region, beyond research activity as well. The data demonstrates that the University of Leeds community has engaged significantly with the space, holding 35 meetings and events over the 20-week period that this research was conducted (775% more than in its previous location at City Exchange if extrapolated over the same time period). The space encouraged teams and services across the University such as the Climate Plan, to more thoroughly engage

with the wider community on sustainability work. Furthermore, over this period, Imagine Leeds had also brought together a diverse array of people representing 27 out of the 29 postcodes in Leeds, as well as engaging visitors from as far away as Cardiff, London and Ghana. The venue has hosted approximately 1,640 visits, 230 meetings and events, and 52 different organisations (detailed in Appendix B).

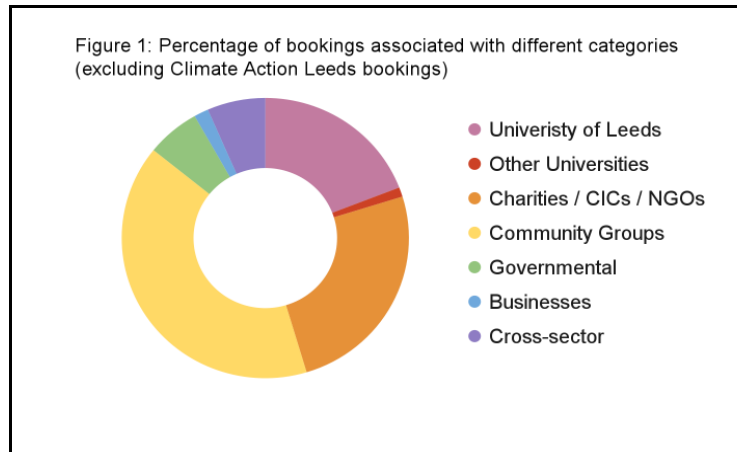


Figure 1 maps the percentage of meetings and events related to specific categories, highlighting the space as a cross-sectoral meeting point for a variety of organisations across the city.

Thom Cooper argued for the role of Imagine Leeds in helping shape a more informed and locally rooted sustainability strategy, saying: “In the long term, I see the benefits of this as a trial, because what we're talking

about wanting to get through the strategy is, continually building and improving on our ability to engage with the local community on sustainability issues”. Having Imagine Leeds located on campus directly contributes to this goal – supporting and upholding the University's duty as an anchor institution in plotting a path to a fairer and more sustainable future.

3.2 Opportunities for innovative teaching and learning

In the original proposal set out by Prof Chatterton, Imagine Leeds aimed to provide a unique function for teaching and learning by existing outside of traditional university spaces, enhancing education in new and more embodied ways. Our research demonstrates that it has delivered on this, with further opportunities to develop experiential learning that positions students' educational experiences within an understanding of the real-world implications happening in Leeds.

We interviewed six students who had lessons in Imagine Leeds. They found the space provided a welcome alternative to traditional lectures and seminars. “Often seminars are meant to be collaborative, but they still feel quite constrained”, one MSc Sustainable Cities student remarked, explaining how their experience of learning in Imagine Leeds opposed this norm by letting them engage in interdisciplinary thinking and allowed more freedom to learn. Their professor also observed an obvious shift in their behaviour while in Imagine Leeds, sharing that the students appeared more engaged, asked more questions, and thought more critically than they had ever done in the traditional classroom environment. Another lecturer from the School of Earth and Environment discussed the benefits of allowing students to explore concepts first hand, rather from the distance of a classroom. They recalled positive feedback from students who reported increased understanding of Doughnut Economics after going to a talk at Imagine Leeds, which made them “realise the importance of having a different, maybe less academic

approach and way of connecting people to certain content". One MSc Sustainable Cities student noted the power of this style of teaching and attributed it to the consultancy-like task and real-world experience they had in Imagine Leeds as part of their module on sustainable housing. Reflecting on this dynamic way of learning, they said, "interactive learning gives you more opportunity to express yourself and it gives the opportunity for the professor to learn more about their students."

This style of teaching supports the institutional strategy outlined in the 'One Leeds' White Paper's commitment to "a student-centred university", as well as providing an innovative approach to the University's strengths around research-based learning. Through providing a civic-university space focused on climate action and sustainability, students are able to engage with developments in place-based research, scholarship and practice in real time.

3.3 Improved civic engagement and responsibility

Finally, our data demonstrates the potential of Imagine Leeds to support the University's revitalised civic mission - by fostering student and staff engagement with the city and strengthening its local reputation as an inclusive and socially responsible institution. As Prof Chatterton noted, "red brick universities were founded to meet local needs".

Through offering a space that connects academic life with the wider city, staff and students alike described the value of Imagine Leeds in fostering civic and social responsibility. A researcher from the School of Geography highlighted the benefits of Imagine Leeds for developing more interconnected personal and professional networks and how that positively influences their work, both personally and professionally. "For me, what this has meant is that there is now a sort of interesting and helpful merging of two prominent aspects of my life – work and community involvement. It is tricky to balance doing research with communities, and Imagine has somewhat blurred the lines, allowing an interesting flow between research I would like to do, research I am doing, and commitments I have to the community. So, I would say the civic duty of the university is in a way supported here".

The six final-year students we spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with their own lack of engagement with the wider community during their time in Leeds. One BA Geography student explained, "An important part is showing students how beneficial it can be to interact with the community. [...] We have so many societies just within the Uni of Leeds, it feels like you don't really need to look outside of the University because you can get everything you feel like you need inside". This was felt particularly by international students in the research group, and one MSc Sustainable Cities student explained the value of civic engagement spaces like Imagine Leeds in helping students grow roots in their university city: "If an international student is planning to build her future here, she has to be aware of this place. So, I think it will be really helpful for her to get a more solid foundation of what this place has to offer". Their visit to Imagine Leeds showed them that the benefits of civic engagement was a greater sense of connectedness to the wider city - something some students might not realise they are missing.

Reflecting on the University's role in the city, Thom Cooper said, "Our relationship with the local community is a challenging one and a difficult one, and a lot of our most local community do not see the benefits of the University. And we need to try and turn that around, and have a much clearer responsibility and role in the local community. We're a very internationally focused institution which makes a lot of sense. That's not going to change, right? But we shouldn't be doing that at the expense of our local relationships". This mirrors what students told us, that while they valued their academic experiences, they felt a disconnect from the wider city. However, they also saw a clear opportunity for the University to address this gap. They agreed that a formalised, and crucially, well-advertised civic engagement space like Imagine Leeds could help future students build deeper connections with the city.

Importantly, they and their lecturer also noted that this type of space could enhance student recruitment. It offers a distinct, tangible demonstration of the University's civic mission - something prospective students and their families increasingly look for. One staff member suggested that showcasing the space on open days would send a powerful message about the University's commitment to social and environmental responsibility, and help attract students who are eager to learn and contribute beyond the campus walls.

4 Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, this report has demonstrated that a collaboratively managed civic gateway such as Imagine Leeds is a practical and necessary space that supports the University in meeting its civic responsibility, continuing to innovate in the ways we teach, learn and conduct research, and in ensuring the University makes its contribution to building a sustainable future for its community, the city, and wider world.

Further, it evidences that Imagine Leeds has achieved its goals for the space within the context of its relationship with the University of Leeds. We consider the trial of bringing Imagine Leeds onto campus to be a success.

To further extend the beneficial impact this space has had, we recommend the following next steps:

Short term

- Extend provision for Imagine Leeds on campus to support the University to develop a framework for longer term civic engagement, and support Climate Action Leeds as it moves into its next phase of work.
- Harness the value of Imagine Leeds as a living lab to continue learning from it as a collaborative civic-university space on campus and build upon its impact in research, teaching, and city-wide engagement.

Long term

- As part of Campus Reimagined, establish a permanent civic gateway on campus. Similar to the Students' Union – which is an integral part of University life, but managed independently from the University itself – a dedicated civic gateway can help the University meet its core missions and values around responding to global and societal challenges, enhancing research innovation, student experience, employability, skills and recruitment. This space can draw on the lessons from, and harness the networks of, Imagine Leeds and Climate Action Leeds, especially in terms of engaging civic actors.

In this period of institutional development and 'reimagining', where key developing strategies directly reference a commitment to "develop a more strategic and impactful approach to our civic and regional engagement" ('One Leeds' White Paper), it is time that we formalise a civic engagement space on campus. Not only to aid the University in achieving its civic, climate and sustainability goals, but also to ensure that the next generation that are passing through its doors take with them an ethic of sustainability and have the skills and experience to tackle the ever-increasing challenges that our city, and our world, faces.

5 Appendices

Appendix A: Research Methodology

Data collection	- Utilised Imagine Leeds' online booking sheet to gather the following data: - Number of visits, meetings and events (Including University specific meetings and events), and groups to use the space across the research period from 11 November 2024 to 31 March 2025 and at the previous location in City Exchange. - The types of groups using the space, categorised into the following: University of Leeds, Other Universities, Charities, CICs and NGOs, Local Community Groups, Governmental, Businesses and Cross-Sector. - Conducted the following semi-structured interviews and focus groups: - Stakeholder interviews with senior academic and professional service managers (Prof Paul Chatterton, Thom Cooper (and Amanda Jackson via online form) - Focus group with 7 researchers from a range of schools (including Geography, Earth and Environment, Media and Communications and others) - Focus group with 6 students (2 final year BA Geography undergraduates and 4 studying MSc Sustainable Cities)
Data analysis	- Using the booking sheet data we calculated the following: - Percentage change of visits, meetings and events (including University specific meetings and events), and groups at Imagine Leeds in 9 Blenheim Terrace compared to the City Exchange location. - The percentage of meetings and events related to specific group categories. - Number of Leeds postcodes represented in visits to the space - Using the interview, focus group and questionnaire data, we used thematic analysis to answer the following: - Does the Imagine Leeds hub deliver to the initial expectations of the University upon agreement of the first six-month lease of the space? - What is the value that the Imagine Leeds hub adds to key University priorities and areas of work, such as: research, teaching and learning, student experience and recruitment, innovation, climate and sustainability goals, and civic engagement? - What is the potential future value of an ongoing relationship between Climate Action Leeds and the University of Leeds through the Imagine Leeds space?

Appendix B: A table showing the groups that have used Imagine Leeds during the research period, displaying their associated sector and category.

Sector	Category	Groups
Higher Education	University of Leeds	LUU Green Action Society University of Leeds Sustainability Service Climate Plan Net Zero City Working Group Civil Engineering - Dr Sally Shahzad (Retrofit Living Lab research) Leeds Climate Migration Research Network Remaking Places Network Climate Hubs Policy Project Climate Plan Just Transition Taskforce, student voice MSc Sustainable Cities class L3 Geography Module Rachael Carrie Student Sustainability Day Out
	Other	Leeds Arts University Leeds Trinity University
Third Sector	Charities, Community Interest Companies and Non-Governmental Organisations	Together For Peace Hyde Park Source Leeds Permaculture Association Leeds DEC Energy Heroes Climate Fresk Leeds Community Homes Climate Action Leeds Leeds Love It Share It CIC Roadblock CIC Leeds Green Activity Providers Feed Leeds Incredible Edible Immortal Bloom CIC
	Community Groups	Green Drinks Leeds Leeds Students Against Apartheid Coalition Leeds Cycling Campaign Leeds Doughnut Coalition Extinction Rebellion Leeds (XR) Friends of the Earth Leeds (FoE) Greenpeace Leeds Leeds Community Energy Leeds Palestine Solidarity Campaign Leeds Blue Marble Leeds Environmental Groups Our Future Leeds Yorkshire Drummers for Palestine (YDFP) AXDR Axe Drax Leeds Food Network
Public Sector	Governmental	Leeds City Council (LCC)
Private Sector	Businesses	Kirkstall Farm Research For Action People Powered Homes
Cross-Sector	Cross-Sector	Leeds Climate Commission Leeds Anchors Network Collaborative meeting on Climate & Nature Strategic Paper (UOL, LCC, CAL, Commission) School of PCI project with Climate Action Leeds & Leeds City Council