Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce Case Study

"People living in Greater Sydney can survive and thrive in a warmer climate and during extreme heat events" - Shared vision of the Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce

Overview

Extreme heat is one of the most significant and fastest-growing risks to Greater Sydney's health, liveability, and economic productivity. Heat already kills more Australians than any other natural hazard (AIHW 2024; Coates et al. 2022), yet it remains one of the least developed areas of climate risk governance in Australia. With temperatures rising and heatwaves becoming longer, more frequent, and more severe (BoM 2024), impacts are cascading across health systems, critical infrastructure, energy networks, business operations, and community wellbeing.

The Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce was established to address this emerging risk by bringing together government agencies, infrastructure and service providers, industry, and community organisations. Convened by WSROC and Resilient Sydney, the Taskforce's purpose was to co-design a coordinated, multi-agency, city-wide approach to heat, culminating in Greater Sydney's first Heat Smart City Plan (HSCP) 2025–2030.

The Taskforce model offers a practical example of cross-sector governance for complex climate risks, demonstrating how collaborative, non-legislated partnerships can accelerate shared understanding, clarify historically fragmented responsibilities, and generate momentum for coordinated action.

Introduction

Extreme heat is a growing and increasingly complex challenge for cities worldwide. As global temperatures rise, heatwaves are intensifying, with major impacts on human health, natural ecosystems, urban systems, infrastructure reliability, and economic productivity (IPCC 2022; Zhao et al. 2021; UN 2024).

In Australia, heat is a silent but deadly hazard, responsible for more deaths than fire, flood, and storms combined. It affects urban areas most severely due to the urban heat island effect and rapid population growth particularly in outer metropolitan regions (CFS 2024; AIHW 2024).

Across sectors, there is growing recognition that traditional, siloed, hazard-by-hazard approaches are no longer sufficient for managing the cascading impacts when these hazards occur. International and Australian research emphasises the need for more collaborative, adaptive, and whole-of-system governance models, particularly where responsibilities are fragmented or unclear (Chaffin et al. 2014; Wamsler 2017; Mees et al. 2015).

This case study has been prepared for government agencies and practitioners exploring how to coordinate action on emerging and cross-cutting climate risks. It documents how the Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce - operating without a legislated mandate and relying on voluntary participation -

successfully mobilised more than 40 organisations to develop a shared regional plan and accelerate action for heat resilience.

The Taskforce provides an applied example of a new governance approach for complex climate challenges: collaborative, decentralised, multi-sector, and focused on shared responsibility rather than command-and-control responses.

Governance Context

Despite growing and widespread risks, heat governance in NSW has historically been fragmented and underdeveloped compared to hazards such as bushfires and floods. Responsibilities for mitigation, planning, health, emergency response and infrastructure resilience sit across multiple agencies, with no clear lead body or authorising framework.

This fragmentation creates several challenges. Responsibility is dispersed, with sectors defining and measuring heat differently, leading to inconsistent approaches and misaligned priorities. Policy settings are often uncoordinated across levels of government, creating barriers to implementation and increasing the risk of maladaptation. Heat also historically lacks visibility and political prioritisation compared with more acute hazards. Prior to the Taskforce, no overarching mechanism existed to align agencies, and existing arrangements focused largely on response rather than prevention and preparedness. These issues are compounded by persistent resourcing and capacity constraints across government and community sectors.

Together, these conditions highlighted the need for coordinated, cross-sector governance capable of addressing heat as a systemic, long-term risk.

Why a Taskforce

The Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce was established to fill this clear governance gap, where many organisations were acting independently but no single agency had the mandate to coordinate system-wide action. It provided a governance mechanism that did not previously exist: a neutral, cross-sector platform capable of coordinating action on a complex and emerging climate risk.

A Taskforce model was effective because heat requires collaborative, cross-sector governance rather than a single-agency or command-and-control response. It created a shared forum to clarify roles, identify gaps and resolve inconsistencies across planning, health, infrastructure, emergency management, and community sectors.

With no legislative mandate or dedicated funding, participation relied on voluntary commitment, fostering shared ownership and strong collaboration. This enabled the Taskforce to coordinate and deliver key initiatives, including the Heat Smart City Plan, Heat Risk Assessment Methodology, Cool Suburbs tool, and Heatwave Management Guidance - which all required multi-agency input and endorsement.

The Taskforce provided strategic momentum, allowing members to leverage a collective voice to secure policy traction, funding and executive support. Just as importantly, it built the relationships, trust and shared understanding needed for long-term implementation. In convening the myriad stakeholders across government and non-government sectors, the Taskforce enabled connections

that brought previously siloed and fragmented projects into better alignment - more clearly defining project outcomes and improving their delivery

Process Overview

The following process supported action on heat by (i) co-designing the HSCP, (ii) building cross-sector relationships and (iii) motivating participants to drive action from their own organisations.

Stage	Primary Engagement Activities
Cycle 1 Focus on: • Vision • Outcomes by 2030 • Intermediate outcomes	• **Taskforce #1 (f2f) (Aug 2023)** – to discuss what success looks like and agree on the engagement approach • **Wide Workshop #1 (f2f) (Oct 2023)** – to reflect on why action is needed, refine a draft theory-of-change (vision and outcomes), and unearth existing work • **Deep Dive Session (virtual) (Oct 2023)** – to identify quick wins for Summer 2023 • **Deep Dive Session (virtual) (Oct 2023)** – to understand foundational barriers keeping these organisations from acting
Cycle 2 Focus on: • Recommendations for the next 5 years	• **Taskforce #2 (f2f) (Dec 2023)** – to test Cycle 1 outputs, agree on shared heat messaging and identify urgent data requirements • **Out of Session Homework** – to gather initial actions organisations propose they might take to support required outcomes • **Wide Workshop #2 (f2f) (Feb 2024)** – to remind ourselves of the vulnerable communities we're working for, celebrate organisational action, identify action gaps and propose actions to fill these • **Deep Dive Session (virtual) (Feb 2024)** – to continue workshopping solutions to foundational barriers to action • **Deep Dive Session (virtual) (Feb 2024)** – to agree which of the missing actions are most important
Cycle 3 Focus on: • Refine recommendations • Governance • Positioning in the public-facing document • Evaluation	• **Taskforce #3 (f2f) (Mar 2024)** – to finalise theory-of-change, determine best approach to securing organisation commitments to action, and workshop solutions to remaining action gaps • **Wide Workshop #3 (f2f) (Apr 2024)** – to refine draft actions and gather broad input into governance and evaluation approaches • **Taskforce #4 (f2f) (May 2024)** – to agree on HSCP positioning, gather final feedback on HSCP doc, and discuss governance • **Out of Session Briefings** (by the Secretariat) of Senior Executive of multiple government departments – to support members to secure internal sign-off of their HSCP actions • **Taskforce #5 (f2f) (Jul 2024)** – to review final HSCP doc changes in response to feedback, propose success measures and reflect on the journey we've been on
Implementation Focus on: • Promoting HSCP • Celebrating progress	• **Heat Smart Symposium #1 (f2f) (Dec 2024)** – Ministerial launch of the HSCP; encouraging system actors to connect and play their part • **Political engagement – briefings** (by the Secretariat) of relevant Ministers and MPs across portfolios: planning, health, emergency management, climate change and regulation to increase political buy in • **Taskforce #6 (f2f) (Mar 2025)** – to report progress on actions and workshop ways members can assist each other's actions

• Addressing implementation barriers	• **Taskforce #7 (f2f) (Aug 2025)** – to report progress on actions, agree priority actions for secretariat to help troubleshoot and identify additional Taskforce members to invite to join • **Heat Smart Symposium #2 (f2f) (Nov 2025)** – to update broader system actors on implementation progress, share emerging heat insights and workshop actions to overcome common barriers • **2026 – onwards:** ongoing activities to progress the implementation of the City Plan, including Taskforce meetings, issues-based workshops, meetings and seminars.

Key Roles

Stakeholder	Membership	Day-to-day responsibilities
Chair	**CEO, Blacktown City Council** Following the launch on the Heat Smart City Plan, a co-chair arrangement has been established between local and state government to cement co-ownership. Since 2025, the Taskforce is co-chaired by the CEO of Blacktown City Council and the Executive Director, Disaster Risk Reduction. NSW Reconstruction Authority	• Chairing meetings • Acting as media spokesperson • Spearheading ministerial briefings • Pushing Taskforce members to commit to ambitious actions
Secretariat	**Peak local government bodies**, including: • WSROC • Resilient Sydney	• Initiating, securing funding for and overseeing the project • Recruiting Taskforce members to reflect the diversity of heat risk considerations and potential interventions • Giving strategic engagement design and content direction and feedback • Engaging participants between workshops to maintain their involvement and momentum and to secure inputs • Connecting participants to one another • Conducting highly tailored Ministerial and Executive briefings to help agencies secure buy-in to their assigned actions • Leading development of the co-drafted Heat Smart City Plan document • Providing feedback and/or written letters of support for heat-related policies, research proposals and programs by participating organisations • Coordinate media and communications, including generating media and publication

Stakeholder	Membership	Day-to-day responsibilities
		opportunities and referring incoming media enquiries to members
Taskforce & Expert Reference Panel	**23 organisations**, including: • Federal DCCEEW • State agencies (e.g. NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, NSW Health, NSW Reconstruction Authority) • Local government (e.g. Blacktown City Council, Liverpool City Council) • Other organisations (e.g. Australian Red Cross, Business Western Sydney, Endeavour Energy, Property Council of Australia, Swiss Re) • Universities (e.g. USYD, UNSW, WSU)	• Participating in Taskforce workshops to make decisions about key Taskforce initiatives • Participating in Wider Stakeholder workshops to contribute to the development of a shared vision to drive this work, a theory-of-change and action plan for heat • Acting as internal champions in their organisations, sharing the work of the Taskforce and driving Executive commitment to organisation actions • Meeting with other Taskforce organisations, as needed, to develop HSCP actions and enable broader action on heat
Co-Design Group	**23 additional organisations**, including: • NEMA • State agencies (e.g. Homes NSW, NSW Treasury) • Local government (e.g. Camden Council, City of Sydney) • Other organisations (e.g. Local Health Districts, NCOSS)	• Participating in Wider Stakeholder workshops to contribute to the development of a theory-of-change and action plan for heat • Acting as internal champions in their organisations, sharing the work on the HSCP and driving action on heat within their own organisations
Engagement Team	**Contracted consultants**, including: • Bd Infrastructure • Gauge Consulting • Clear Horizon	• Designing the engagement process and each individual workshop • Reporting engagement outputs • Supporting development of the HSCP document • Advising on the development of the theory-of-change at the heart of the HSCP • Preparing evaluation report based on participant feedback

Critical Success Factors

The success of the process in producing a co-signed Heat Plan and generating broader system action on heat can be primarily attributed to the following three factors:

The expertise and relationships to attract participants	WSROC and RSO completed significant work in the heat resilience space in the seven years before this process began. Their understanding of the ecosystem and their relationships with key actors meant they could approach a wide range of prospective members. In particular, the WSROC team's technical understanding of heat gave them credibility as convenors and enabled them to articulate – in highly tailored presentations – the value the Taskforce could offer for each organisation's own policy/political context and priority challenges. The Secretariat's prior work – especially WSROC's development of the Heat Smart Resilience Framework – also meant they were able to prepare draft starting-points for workshop discussions (e.g. theory-of-change elements, problem statements, and potential actions). In addition, support from senior executives, including the CEOs from Blacktown City Council (Taskforce co-chair) and City of Sydney (chair of Resilient Sydney steering committee), were critical to achieving senior level engagement.
Recruiting the right Taskforce members and representatives	The Secretariat applied both "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches to Taskforce member recruitment. For instance, the Taskforce included both NSW Government agencies with statewide policy purviews and non-profit organisations with on-the-ground experience with impacted communities. The representatives from each organisation must also be carefully chosen to ensure they have sufficient internal decision-making power to drive their organisation's commitments to actions.
The workshop design and out-of-session hustle to keep participants engaged	The Secretariat made the initial case to members of the value of participating in the process but the first meeting of the Taskforce supported members to build on this by articulating their own reasons for participating. Participants reflected on vulnerable communities impacted by heat and shared their own hopes for the people of Greater Sydney and the benefits their involvement would have for their organisation and for them personally. By beginning the process with a co-designed vision and 'theory of change', we helped participants align on an aspirational end state and acknowledge required system changes before these were then used to hold them accountable for playing their unique role in that system. For the first time, stakeholders had a forum for engaging with the complexity of the city's response to heat risk and a structured approach to defining roles and responsibilities. Their shared vision - and the life safety at its heart - would compel Taskforce members to overcome the barriers they later faced through the process. All workshop designs included parallel but distinct goals – to (i) produce required outputs for the HSCP and (ii) deliver a great experience for participants. Cycle 1, for instance, included a deep dive to identify 'quick wins' for Summer 2023,

	enabling participants to find immediate value from the process. Other sessions focused on building relationships, celebrating progress or on producing immediately useful artefacts like agreed heat risk messaging or priority data requirements. Most of the work, though, occurred 'out of session', with the secretariat conducting 176 formal briefings/meetings in 2024 alone. The team leveraged their understanding of the policy context and ecosystem actors to help organisations move forward, including by: • Assisting different sectors align their language/semantics • Reframing issues to align with the policy and strategy priorities of each organisation • Debriefing on challenging Taskforce conversations and providing reassurances for how these would be managed in the process • Helping participants brief their Executive, political leaders or other teams
The process design and complementary roles for maximising participant actions	The process was designed to prevent organisations from pushing back on actions early on. The theory-of-change identified required system change before suggesting who was responsible for these. Organisations were given the chance to propose their own actions (as homework) and then Cycle 2 participants were given a safe space to propose and prioritise missing actions for organisations who then took these away to consider. The project team established a safe, non-committal space for these discussions and maximised member buy-in to action by helping them articulate clear, specific calls to action that were within their control. It was important organisations understood we were working together to maximise commitments – that their draft responses were not going to be used against them in external advocacy efforts. The Secretariat met with Taskforce members out-of-session to help them further develop their actions and to help brief their Executive and/or Ministers to build internal support for those actions. The process also built in space for each organisation's own barriers to action so these did not become an unsolvable excuse for inaction. As early as Cycle 1, we used the deep dive to unearth the barriers participants faced *within* their own organisation and used Taskforce meetings to share tools for overcome these (e.g. presentation packs, briefing note outlines, Secretariat letters to the boss or attendance at Exec briefings). Likewise, the diversity of member organisations meant some organisations could commit to actions earlier while others had long approval and budgetary processes to navigate. Assigned "actions" were renamed "recommendations" and given a status; scoping, committed (seeking funding), committed (delivery planning) or implementing. This enabled larger, more bureaucratic organisations to sign-off on their assigned responsibilities and then leverage the published HSCP to secure required funding.

Main Learnings

The project team uncovered the following main learnings from the process, which we recommend other teams heed if looking to replicate this process:

The resource intensity of maintaining momentum	It is not enough to contract consultants to design and facilitate core engagement activities - the secretariat also committed significant staff time to engaging Taskforce members, their Executives and Ministers throughout the process. As referenced above, WSROC and RSO conducted 176 formal briefings/meetings in 2024 alone.
More transparent forward planning	Multi-sectoral collaboration on such a complex issue inevitably brings messiness and uncertainty to a process like this. This required an iterative and adaptive approach from the project team, with the intel from one stage informing the best approach to the next. This iterative approach meant that the engagement process was presented at a high-level to participants and timelines were not concrete beyond the timings of the next stage. This raised trust issues and slowed the process down when participants were uncertain how the HSCP would come together and exactly what would be required of them, when. This can be addressed in future processes by more clearly explaining the reasoning behind the iterative, adaptive approach and signposting when the detailed design of each stage will be shared.
Better connecting to community	Community engagement in the process was very limited. Prominent community organisations like the Australian Red Cross, Sweltering Cities and the Western Sydney Community Forum shared what they were hearing from community members and helped represent the needs of organisations working directly with impacted communities. However, much more could be done. Community voices could have played a valuable role in defining and fleshing out the Taskforce's vision by share more comprehensive aspirations for surviving and thriving in heatwaves and extreme heat. If a similar process required trade-off decisions – between possible actions or between action on heat vs other priorities like housing affordability – then a deliberative process could enable community to advise on these. As part of HSCP implementation, Sweltering Cities and the Secretariat hosted an information session for community organisations and will be establishing a community sector working group to drive local actions.
The importance of long-term government-led coordination	Whilst WSROC and RSO effectively and temporarily filled a governance gap in the heat risk system, multi-sectoral disaster plans like the HSCP require a clear and mandated, government-led collaboration process with sufficient convening power, resources and policy influence for long-term change. The resources for ongoing governance should be commensurate with the risks and costs of unmitigated heat risk.

Outcomes & Impact

The Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce has proven to be a highly successful governance model for coordinating heat resilience across a complex metropolitan system, and has been cited as globally leading by key resilience specialists.

Key outcomes include:

- **Successful, scalable model**: Widely regarded as an effective approach to complex, cross-sector heat governance, with strong stakeholder buy-in (~400 participants, 40 organisations)
- **Step-change in coordination:** Established Greater Sydney's first coordinated governance approach to heat, improving shared understanding and alignment across sectors
- **Tangible outputs:** Delivered the Heat Smart City Plan (40 consensus-based recommendations with nominated facilitators) that are not being implemented
- **System influence:** Elevated heat as a policy priority, contributing to initiatives such as the Heatwave Subplan review, formation of an interagency heat network, and planning reform discussions
- **Enduring value:** Built strong cross-sector relationships (89% stakeholders reported improved connections) and a lasting community of practice to support implementation. The HSCP is also now acting as an 'investment prospectus' that government agencies, NGOs and research institutions can draw from to provide a clear rationale, evidence base and impact pathway in their requests for heat-related funding
- **Replicable approach:** Demonstrated that co-designed, cross-sector governance can deliver shared ownership, practical outcomes and system alignment - recommended for replication across regions, hazards and policy contexts

Whilst long-term governance and resourcing remain essential next steps, the Taskforce model is widely regarded as a best-practice approach and is suitable for replication in other regions and for other climate-related hazards.

Next Steps

The Greater Sydney Heat Taskforce continues to meet and has grown its membership since the launch of the Heat Smart City Plan. The NSW Reconstruction Authority now formally co-chairs the group, bringing critical state-level leadership to the Taskforce. As of September 2026, 34 of the Plan's 40 actions are being progressed. The Secretariat continues to search for a long-term auspicing organisation and governance funding.

The project team invite any other teams to reach out if you are looking to replicate some or all of this process for shared action on natural hazards or other complex challenges. We are available at info@wsroc.com.au or rso@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au and would be happy to answer more detailed questions or share more specific materials.

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