

# Upcycling



# Section 1: What is Upcycling?

Upcycling is the art of transforming something old, unwanted or "finished" into something new, useful or beautiful without breaking it down into raw materials first. An old T-shirt doesn't get pulped and rewoven, it gets cut, sewn, tied or restyled into a tote bag, a cushion, a headband or anything you can imagine.

Upcycling is where practical skill meets pure creativity. There's no single "right" answer, just your materials, your imagination, and a pair of scissors!

## Is upcycling part of the Circular Economy?

Most of fashion today follows a linear path:

Take → Make → Use → Throw Away

A circular economy breaks that line into a loop. Instead of clothes ending in the bin, they're kept in use for as long as possible, through caring for them properly, repairing them when they break and upcycling them into something new when they're no longer wanted as they are.

Learn more in our [Circular Economy Resource](#).

### Strand

### Learning Outcome

Junior Cycle Home Economics - Strand 3: Textiles and Craft

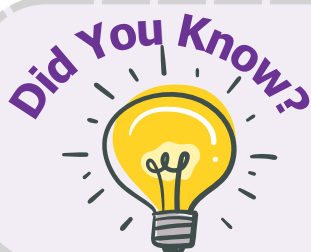
Learn new skills or upskill in sewing and design.

Junior Cycle Visual Art - Strand 3: Design (LO 3.4, LO 3.6, LO 3.14)

Learn how to turn used clothing into raw material for new household or fashion items.

Senior Cycle Home Economics - Elective 2: Textiles, Fashion and Design

Students will also gain knowledge of what fabrics are suitable to producing quality upcycled products.

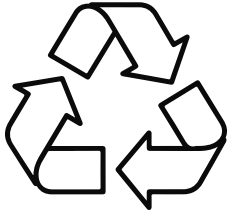


The word "upcycling" only entered wide use in the 1990s, but people have been creatively reusing fabric for centuries, from patchwork quilts to repurposed military uniforms.

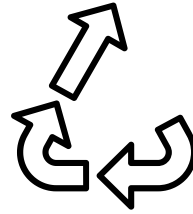


# Upcycling vs Recycling

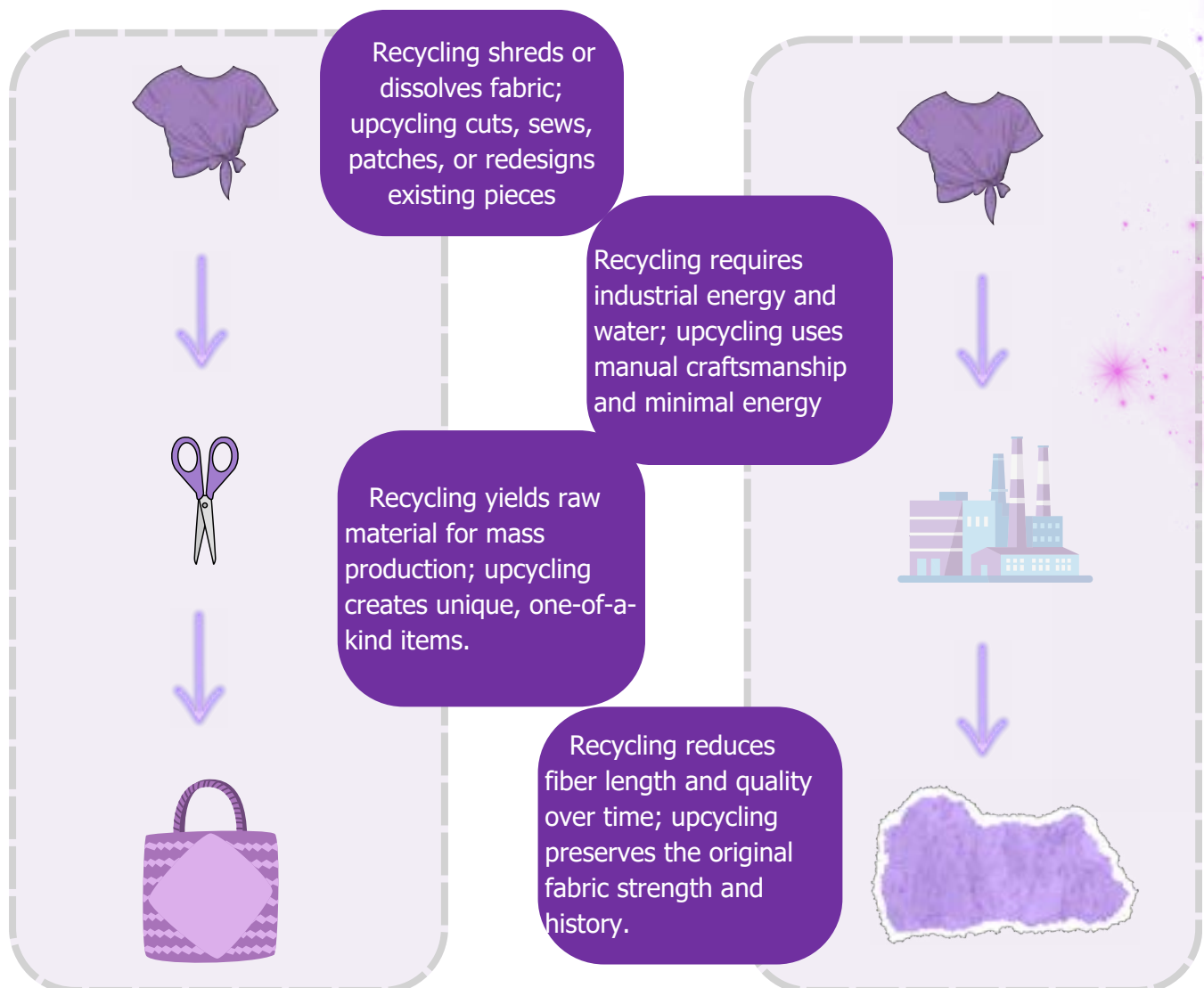
## How is upcycling different from recycling?



The traditional möbius strip recycling symbol emphasizes breakdown of textiles for reuse preventing them ending up in landfill but with a downgrade in value



Whilst there is no universal logo for upcycling you will often see a variation of chasing arrows that point upward or break out of the closed loop representing creative transformation where the value is elevated



# Upcycling vs Recycling



Prevention, reuse and repair are the most effective ways to reduce textile waste.

Upcycling is favoured over recycling as it transforms existing products into something new retaining its value whilst reducing the need for raw materials. It lowers industrial energy use and helps minimise emissions and overall environmental impact..

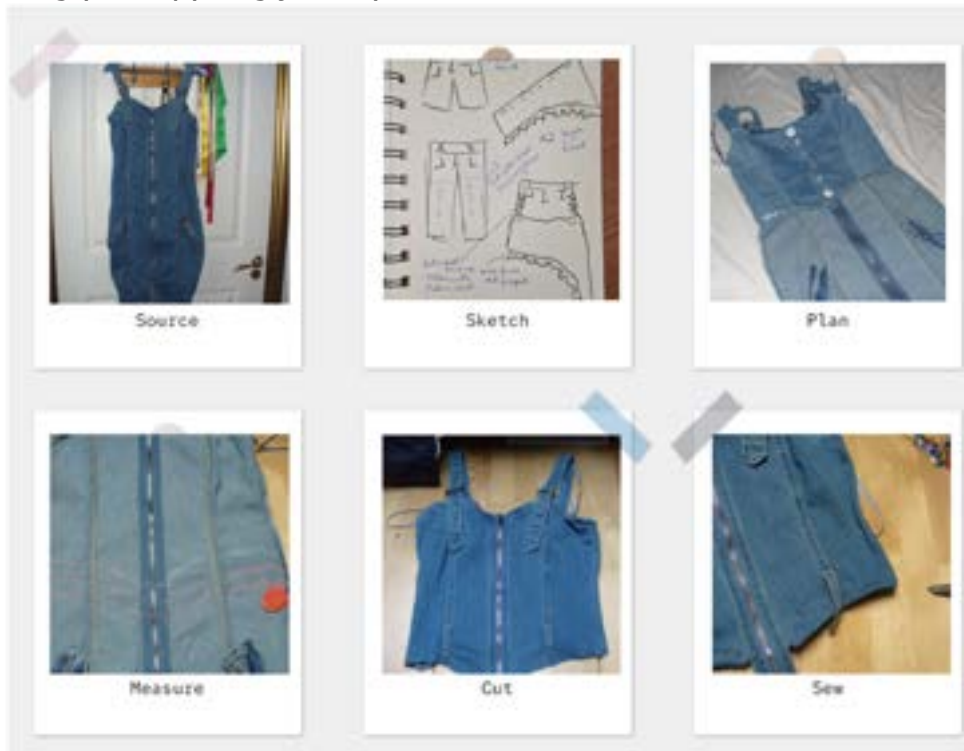
## Downcycling

Most textiles are made from mixed fibres and treated with dyes and chemical finishes, leading to contamination that complicates recycling. That cotton/polester mix t-shirt you no longer wear may be impossible to recycle. Fabrics are often shredded into new fibres through industrial recycling resulting in lower quality outputs. This is often called **downcycling**. In most recycling facilities, sorting is still done manually: a slow, inconsistent, and labour-intensive process



# Upcycling basics

Our Lets Fix Fashion ambassador, Sarah Burns, Colaiste Muire shared these simple steps when starting your upcycling journey



## 1. Source

Carry out a wardrobe audit and gather items you no longer wear. If you wish to make something bigger take a look in charity shops or ask friends or family who might donate some unused fabric you could experiment with.

## 2. Sketch

Use our Ideation activity here to make a sketch. Ensure to detail every angle and side so you will know where to cut and sew.

## 3. Plan

Lay out the garment. Using your sketch, pick out pieces you will need to cut.

## 4. Measure

Using a measuring tape, take a note of waist, bust, hips etc. Once you've measured your desired length/width start sketching your design. Using washable ink or chalk sketch out all the pieces you will need.

## 5. Cut

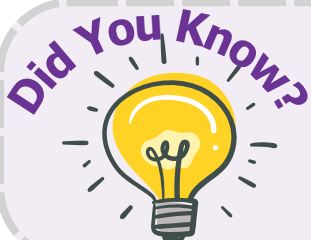
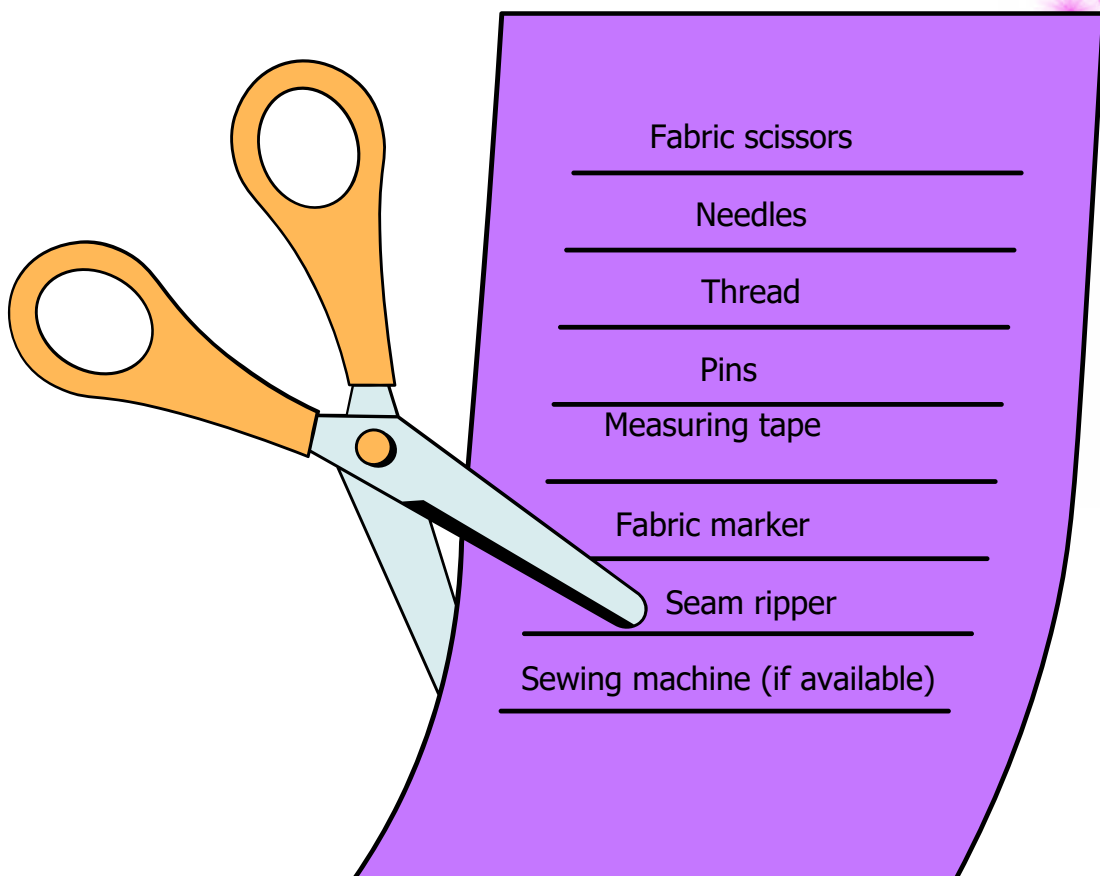
When cutting each piece, leave at least 1-2cm space excess for sewing. This leaves space for mistakes, hemlines and makes it easier to sew the pieces together.

## 6. Sew

Always tack in vibrant colours. Ensure each side matches. Use pins to hold pieces together for help. Either by hand or machin, stitch across the line in a similar colour as the fabric. Always backstitch at the beginning and end. Iron as you go.

# Sewing essentials

- Start simple! A small project like repairing a hole, adding a patch or button.
- A line stitch is the easiest.
- Carefully threading the needle through and back in a straight line about 3m away from each stitch.
- Ensure the needle is suitable for the fabric, ie a lighter needle for thin fabrics, denim will need your thickest needle.
- Ensure your thread is strong and will withstand everyday wear and tear.
- Back stitch is very important.
- Looping the needle through the same stitch multiple times to ensure it does not unthread.
- Remember, Upcycling is about giving something another life, not making it look factory-made. Visible stitching, patches and uneven textures can become part of the design!



If every person in Ireland kept just one existing garment in use for an extra year instead of buying new, the collective impact in water, carbon and waste saved would be enormous.



# Techniques

## Patch

Elevate and make a statement with visible mending technique patch making

Give damaged or plain clothes a new look with patches. Use leftover fabric, old clothes or denim scraps. Patches can cover holes and stains, or simply add colour and personality. Try contrasting fabrics, different shapes or visible stitching

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## Embelish

Experiment with composition using buttons, beads and zips

Transform a basic garment by adding decorative details. Try embroidery, buttons, beads, fabric scraps, ribbons, appliqué, studs or fabric paint. Think about how you can use materials you already have rather than buying something new.

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## Learn to lace

Gives clothes a creative second life instead of a bin bag

Use old lace, trims or lace from unwanted garments to add detail. Sew lace onto collars, sleeves, pockets or hems, or use it to create panels and inserts. You can also layer lace over another fabric to create a completely new look

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## Dyeing

Natural Fibres like cotton, linen, denim are much easier to dye than synthetics. Maybe you have something faded that could do with a refresh. Always check the label of the dye product and garment so temperature and composition guidelines match. Top tip: Its always easier to dye something darker.



## Buttons

Replacing buttons on a garment creates an entire new look, in particular with coats, shirts and cardigans. Top Tip: Keep the same size as existing buttons to avoid altering buttonholes. Measure accross the diameter to get the correct size. Thrifted buttons are easily available online or accros charity shops and are often better quality. Choose between branded for a classy look, contrasts for modern look, similar colour for a more traditional vibe or metallics for fun and statement pieces!

Together, these actions are some of the most powerful and accessible tools for upcycling. You don't need to be an expert, you just need to get started!

# Choose your fabric



When choosing fabrics always start with what you have and ask yourself the following:

## 1. **Is it stretchy?**

Some fabrics stretch naturally, while others are made stretchy by adding fibres such as elastane (also called spandex or Lycra) Common stretchy fabrics include fleece, knits, ribbed, elastane blends, jersey, think old t-shirts, leggings, sportswear, jumpers and fitted clothing already in your wardrobe. Stretchy fabrics can be a little trickier to sew because they can move or curl. Woven cotton and denim are usually easier fabrics to start with.

## 2. **Is it strong and durable?**

Some fabrics are particularly useful for upcycling because they can withstand lots of wear and tear. Think denims, corduroy, canvas, wool, heavy cottons, leather and polyesters. Denim, cotton and canvas are particularly good choices for students because they are relatively easy to cut, sew and work with.

## 3. **Does it fray?**

Fraying happens when the threads at the cut edge of a fabric start to unravel. Linen, silks, satins and some polyesters can fray. In this case sew along the edge, use a zigzag stitch, fold the edge over and stitch it down or add a trim or perhaps you could embrace the fray as part of the design!

## 4. **How easily could it be cut, sewn, dyed, embroidered or glued?**

Cotton or felt is probably the best all-round fabric for a beginner. It is relatively easy to cut and sew, can be dyed and embroidered, and works well with fabric glue.

Make a repair part of the design! A hole can become a patch, a stain can be covered with embroidery, and a plain top can be transformed with lace or embellishment.



## Section 2: Catwalk Inspiration

From lace and bow detailed outfits, to full outfits made from high vis gear and repurposed denim, students each year not only upcycled, but they \*redefined\* what fashion can be!



### HIGH VIS

Hi vis can be great to work with due to its bright colour and reflective detailing which can give an upcycled item a completely new look while retaining some of the original garment's character. The reflective strips for example become a distinctive feature in a new item.

#### Presentation Tralee, 2025



This vibrant ensemble was upcycled from donated hi-vis clothing. Hi-vis trouser legs were transformed into a skirt, with reflective strips added to the hem. The original sleeves were replaced with sleeves from a hi-vis coat, while the waist was cinched for shape. Matching leg warmers were made from the original sleeves with elastic added for comfort, and the look was completed with a hi-vis hat and yellow sunglasses.



#### Bailieborough community School, 2026

This student sourced t-shirt yarn from a school swap-shop to crochet the jumper in a mesh-like stitch using different colours, as well as a matching bag. She used fabric to upcycle old jeans by adding a pleated flare below the knee and a matching ribbon belt to complete the look.

# Patch and Denim



Denim is one of the most versatile materials to upcycle. Strong, durable and easy to work with, an old pair of jeans can be transformed into something completely new rather than ending up in the bin. From bags and accessories to transformed outfits there are endless possibilities for giving denim a second life



## **Ursuline secondary school, 2025**

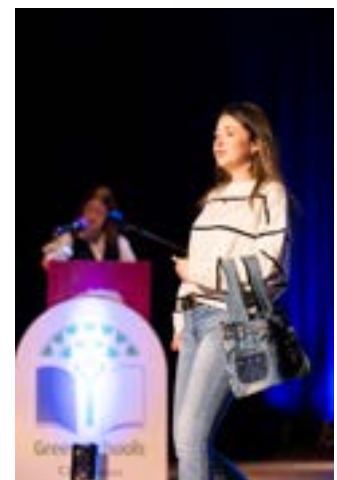
Students showcasing a two piece outfit, skirt and top, made from upcycled jeans and tops, designed and sown together in a collaborative effort. You might recognise this old Green-Schools tote bag from our Green-School awards. Its been dyed Green and embroidered bringing a 3D dimension the Green Schools logo!



## **Ocean Rising Trousers-Alison Norman, An Taisce**

Designed by our talented Alison Norman, Climate Action team and modelled by Claire, Lets Fix Fashion co-ordinator, these jeans were created from a pair of swapped black jeans, scrap fabrics and old T-shirts. Blue fabric scraps were layered to create ocean waves, while faded T-shirts were transformed into marine animal appliqués and cotton net bags became fishing nets. The finished trousers are a creative statement highlighting the impact of human and fishing waste on marine life.

This denim bag was upcycled from old dungarees, decorated with embroidered flowers, a bear patch and stitched stars. The handles were machine-sewn, while running and blanket stitches were used to finish the bag.



# Patch and Denim



## **Presentation Tralee, 2025**

This student's upcycled outfit combines sleeves from one top with the torso of another to create a colour-block effect, finished with embroidered and crocheted flowers. Donated jeans were transformed into flares using floral fabric from an old top, with leftover material repurposed into a matching bandana. This model added painted floral designs using acrylic paint mixed with fabric softener.

## **2026 Upcycled denim designs**

Below is a snippet of creative upcycled outfits worn on the catwalk out of denim. The last image showcases a pair of thrifted skinny jeans transformed into an asymmetrical skirt, with lace scraps added. Another pair of jeans became flared leg warmers, decorated with hand-sewn denim strips. A second-hand belt completed the look, while leftover scraps from the outfit were turned into flowers and attached to an old hairband to create a matching flower crown.





# Lace



Lace is a great material for creative reuse, adding texture and detail to old clothing and accessories. It can be used as a decorative trim, incorporated into panels or sleeves or combined with other fabrics to create a completely new look!



This skirt is designed from a pair of shorts with fake laces on the hips made from a cut up t-shirt. Then a pair of thrifty skinny jeans were cut apart into irregular shapes all sewn together to create an asymmetrical skirt with lace from an old project sewn into the hem. Leg warmers were made from another pair of thrifty jeans, cut at the knee. Then the seam was opened to allow a scrap piece of denim to widen the leg creating flares. Once again, the t-shirt was cut up in strips and hand sewn on as fake laces to tie the two pieces together. The belt was handed down as part of an old clothes bag a friend had given her. Lastly, her flower crown was created by using scrap pieces from all the items previously used on the outfit, to be sewn into a range of flowers and put onto an old hairband with a shoelace at the back to tie it on to her head



## **Sligo Grammar School, 2025**

Students crafted a beautiful satin skirt featuring a floral and lace design. The skirt was shortened, with the leftover fabric repurposed to create additional flowers that were added as embellishments. It is paired with a black tank top decorated with a floral detail. The skirt cost €7 and the tank top €4. The look is completed with upcycled shoes, purchased from a hospice charity shop and transformed with pearl and lace embellishments.

# Embellishments



## **St Joseph of Cluny, 2026**

St Joseph of Cluny student walked down the runway wearing this fabulous dress made of old shopping bags, denim, receipts and coins. They used a recycled old top and shoes. They asked around for spare materials to make this outfit which is inspired by the Vivienne Westwood 70s punk era.



## **Colaiste Muire, 2025**

Our two ambassadors, Sarah and Elizabeth modeling their upcycled creations. Sarah is wearing an old thrifted blouse upcycled to a slim fit dress with puffed sleeves and pearled cuffs. She is also wearing a mermaid inspired belt made out of an old necklace. Her crown is also mermaid inspired, made with zip ties and old jewellery painted silver. Her tights and shoes were bought at a charity shop and her necklaces were made from an old jewellery making set from when she was young. She got her blue handbag from a swap shop.



# Embellishments



## St. David's Holy Faith, 2024

A group of TY students brought together a creative mix of reused materials to create this unique ensemble. The outfit combines two dresses and a jacket from a school swap night, lace cuffs made from old dresses, and a skirt created from an IKEA curtain and materials from the Let's Fix Fashion Magic Box. A sash was made from a dress hem, while a repurposed lampshade was transformed into a statement hat. Charity shop jewellery completes this creative and sustainable look.



### Did You Know?



An upcycled pair of jeans saves 10,000 litres of water and 32.5kg CO2 going to landfill (Oxfam)

An upcycled t shirt saves 2,700 litres of water



Unloved Ts: Give that T-shirt some love and learn to lace

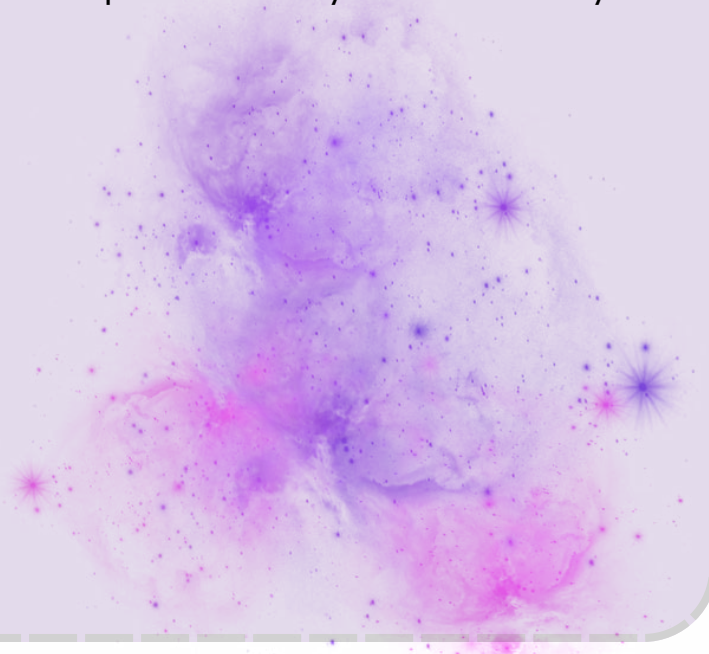
Turn an old t-shirt into a tote bag [here](#)



# Organise an upcycling workshop in your school

An Upcycling event is an ideal action day for your Green-Schools programme. It enables everyone in your school to transform clothing under guidance. Sewing machine demonstrations and supplies and fabrics that you may not have of your own are often made freely available. Sometimes centred around a theme or particular garment for example denim, lace, embellishments. Check out these workshops to see if they are available in your area:

- [Relove Fashion](#), Rediscovery Centre
- [Change Clothes](#)
- [The Upcycle Movement](#)
- [Roscommons womens network](#)
- [Sew Sustainable](#)
- [Sew Fun](#)
- [Make Create Innovate](#)
- [Voice Ireland: Fabric of Change](#)
- [Fash Forward](#)



# The Runway is calling!

## Let's Fix Fashion Catwalk Event!

Let's take all your amazing upcycling ideas and bring them to life in our Catwalk Event at the end of the year.

### Activity: Design Your Upcycled Catwalk Outfit

Create an outfit that you would love to showcase in the Catwalk event under the Upcycling category. This can also include an accessory like a hat or bag. Make sure its something you will wear again so you are not creating additional waste.

### My Upcycled Design

Old garment item .....

Problem .....

My Idea .....

Materials I need .....

Skills I need .....

What will I change .....

What will I do with leftover fabric?

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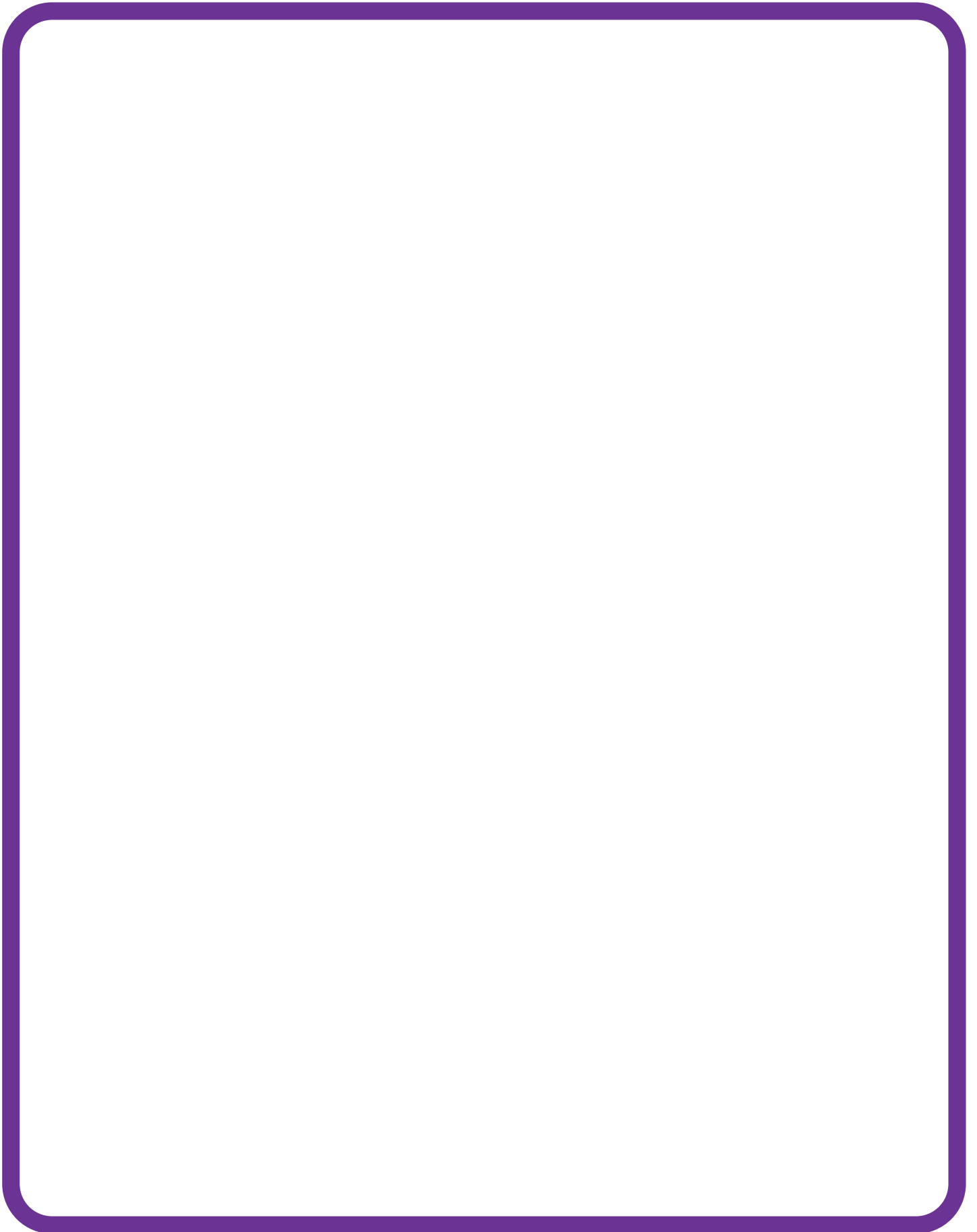


Take a few moments to think about everything you've explored:

- What has been your favourite inspiration?
- Do you know the difference between recycling and upcycling?
- Has your view of clothing reuse changed?
- How might you use fashion differently in the future?

The Runway is calling!  
Let's Fix Fashion Catwalk Event!

## SKETCH

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