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Engagement with re-use and repair services in the context of local provision

Exploring the relationship between re-use and repair behaviours and the provision of services in different areas across Scotland



Zero Waste Scotland works with businesses, individuals, communities and local authorities to help them reduce waste, recycle more and use resources sustainably.

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Engagement with re-use and repair services in the context of local provision. A report by Brook Lyndhurst for Zero Waste Scotland.



BROOKLYNDHURST

Executive summary

Background and aims

The Scottish Government recognises the importance re-use and repair have in prolonging the lifespan of products during use. On its behalf, Zero Waste Scotland (ZWS hereafter) has been working to improve the capacity, professionalism and consistency of the re-use sector through the Revolve re-use quality standard. They have also been working to encourage uptake of re-use services by members of the public with a new 'national re-use hotline' information and signposting service.

While there is a growing understanding of re-use capacity across the UK and of consumer attitudes and behaviours towards re-use, far less is known about the repair sector. Little is also known about how the local provision influences peoples' engagement with re-use and repair services.

These are pertinent issues to explore as ZWS seeks to improve re-use service provision in the future and as these activities are aligned with actions to improve the repair service offering. In parallel, those tasked with developing communications campaigns to boost engagement levels will need to be mindful of the landscape of provision, to avoid delivering confusing or contradictory messaging.

Within this context, Brook Lyndhurst was commissioned by ZWS to undertake a piece of research that addressed two aims:

- **To understand engagement with re-use and repair services in the context of local provision**
- **To identify additional actions required to increase re-use and repair behaviours**

More specifically the research sought to understand how the nature and extent of service provision influences engagement in different geographical and socio-economic contexts. Three distinct study areas were selected to explore this:

- A rural area (Strathallan and Strathearn wards in Perth and Kinross)
- An affluent urban area (Southside/Newington ward in Edinburgh)
- A less affluent urban area (Leith ward in Edinburgh)

Though the research was concerned with the re-use and repair of a range of household product types it focussed on four product categories of particular interest to ZWS, namely: clothing, furniture, large electrical items and other electrical items. Various types of organisations were also within the scope of the research; from the third sector re-use organisations, to local authority services and private sector enterprises.

Once the study areas had been selected, three strands of evidence were gathered in each area:

- A mapping exercise and selected sector interviews to identify and characterise service provision
- A quantitative questionnaire survey to assess attitudes and behaviours towards re-use and repair
- A series of qualitative discussion groups to explore the relationship between service provision and engagement

In the final stage of the research, the three strands of evidence were brought together to determine the influence of provision on re-use and repair behaviours, and to identify actions suggested to boost engagement.

Re-use and repair service provision

The mapping exercise and sector interviews revealed the following about service provision:

Searching for services is time consuming

- There is a lack of readily available information online, particularly for private sector enterprises
- Information about service characteristics such as pricing, quality or products handled is particularly lacking
- Third party signposting is currently restricted to charity/third sector re-use organisations and is patchy
- It is much easier to find services and characterise them from street level but this is resource intensive

A large number of re-use and repair services were discovered, many of which are multi-functional

- 228 services were uncovered within or near to the three study areas
- Repair organisations make up around one quarter of those identified
- Multi-functional services (typically accept donations/buy items as well as selling used items) make up about half
- The majority of services found are private enterprises such as shoe repairers, pawn shops or antique centres

Services are unevenly distributed within and between the study areas:

- Considerably more services were found in the two urban study areas, than in the rural area
- Within urban centres, services tend to be clustered in and around local shopping districts
- Those located off the high street tend to handle bulky items and are less visible to shoppers
- Some products, notably electrical items and furniture, are represented by fewer services in all areas

Demand for second-hand items is buoyant as re-use services become more commercially orientated:

- Sector representatives reported that demand for second-hand items is buoyant, across a broad customer base
- The re-use sector is working to professionalise its offering and to match supply more closely with demand
- While many customers are reported to be local, some are willing to travel considerable distances to purchase specialist items or those perceived to be higher quality than those available locally

Less desirable donations are a burden for re-use services, leading to some being turned away:

- Partnerships between the local authorities and third sector organisations have developed to boost re-use levels
- Yet re-use organisations handling bulky goods are becoming more selective about what donations they will accept
- High street charity shops accept all donations, but lack capacity to maximise re-use of low quality donations

Demand for repair services is reported to be very low:

- A small number of repair representatives were interviewed, they reported that demand for their services is very low
- The high cost of repair compared with replacement is largely blamed for a lack of demand
- There are currently no partnerships between local authorities and repair services in the study areas to boost product repair

Purchasing second-hand

For many household items, the survey results demonstrate that there is a gap between happiness to purchase second-hand and reported experience of doing so. This suggests there may be scope for boosting uptake of this behaviour.

The vast majority of purchases were found to take place in high street charity shops, with online shopping also being reported for some types of items. Socio-demographic factors – including gender and life stage – were found to influence the types of purchasing services used and the kinds of second-hand items purchased.

The survey results and qualitative groups show that a series of core motivations and barriers to purchasing second-hand items apply to all product types, although barriers tend to be more of an obstacle for electrical items and soft furniture. Key motivations relate to cost-saving and opportunism, whereas barriers are associated with the perceived quality, reliability and safety of second-hand items. The qualitative groups revealed that these key drivers underpin two very different kinds of purchasing behaviours:

- **'Nice to have' opportunistic purchases**
- **'Borne out of necessity' deliberate purchases**

Opportunistic purchases were found to be associated with browsing for unusual items or bargains in charity shops or online, whereas deliberate purchases described by participants were strongly driven by an inability to afford new products.

Donating or selling household items

Disposal patterns reported in the survey and qualitative groups varied by product type. The following broad patterns were observed:

- Clothes are disposed of more than other items, most commonly being donated to charity, but a notable proportion are thrown into the household bin
- Furniture items are disposed of less frequently and tend to be donated to re-use organisations or disposed of via council services
- The majority of large electrical items are handled by the council where breakage is the trigger for disposal
- High value electrical items may be sold online or donated to charity, but discussion group participants revealed that small, low value electrical appliances are commonly thrown in the household bin

As is the case with purchasing of second-hand items, socio-demographic factors (life stage, gender and affluence affect disposal decisions). For example, women tend to dispose of more clothes and are more likely to donate them to charity than men.

A number of core motivations and barriers influence decisions to donate or sell items rather than to discard them, and which disposal channel is ultimately used. These can be grouped into types of drivers which all act to influence disposal outcomes:

- Product characteristics which inform judgements about the suitability of an item to be re-used
- Situational factors that determine what items can be disposed of, re-used or repaired in the local area
- Individual attitudes associated with convenience, financial need or a desire to support charity

In one example cited by a discussion group participant, they believed their piece of furniture was suitable to be re-used and had decided that they would rather donate it to a re-use organisation for this reason. They were dismayed to find that no re-use organisations in the area would accept their donation, however, because it was not deemed to be fashionable enough to re-sell. This example highlights the interplay between these factors and the instrumental role local service provision plays in re-use behaviours.

Repairing broken items

Many household items, with the exception of electrical appliances, tend to be disposed of before they break. Around half of respondents who experienced clothing, furniture or electrical items breaking chose to discard their item rather than having it repaired. Rates of repair of other items, such as bicycles and shoes, are considerably higher.

Many repairs are undertaken at home and these behaviours are sometimes facilitated by the use of amateur 'how to' videos available on the internet.

Lower socio-economic groups are less likely to repair items if they break (and are more likely to throw them in the household bin). Other socio-demographic factors, including gender, also influence who repairs different types of household items.

Interviews with a small number of sector representatives suggest that repair behaviours are strongly influenced by cost. This was strongly supported by the survey results, as cost-related motivations and barriers to repair were consistently cited by respondents.

There was a general pessimism about the cost-effectiveness of professional repair among discussion group participants. This view was particularly apparent for electrical items, large and small. Insurance and warranties were cited as a motivation for repair among survey respondents and discussion group participants confirmed that these would encourage them to consider repair of electrical items, even though they generally believed it would not be worth it.

Linkages between purchasing, disposal and repair behaviours

Further analysis of behavioural patterns associated with clothing re-use and repair uncovered linkages between these behaviours. This showed that people who donate or sell unwanted clothing items (tend to be women and socio-economic group ABC1s) are more likely to have bought clothing items second-hand. Moreover those who tend to donate and sell clothing items are *more likely* to repair clothes when they do break.

These results are limited by small sample sizes. However, they suggest that further research should be undertaken to understand the linkages between re-use and repair behaviours for other product types.

Influence of local provision and suggested actions to boost uptake

The research demonstrates that local service provision influences repair and re-use behaviours on numerous levels:

- Provision of information about services and its accessibility influences the ease of finding disposal and repair options
- The number of services determines the amount of choice but not all products or local areas are catered for well
- The location of services influences how visible they are to local people; those on the high street are easier to spot
- The proximity of services to areas of housing affect how accessible they are, particularly for bulky items
- Service characteristics (such as pricing, products handled, collection/delivery services) strongly influence re-use and repair outcomes

By understanding the nature of the relationship between service provision and engagement, it is clear that there is scope for ZWS to boost uptake by improving provision and expanding signposting activities. Yet this research has also demonstrated that commonly held perceptions about re-use and repair present key barriers and opportunities for engagement with re-use and repair services, irrespective of local provision. This emphasises the importance of working to change attitudes and behavioural norms in parallel with activities to improve service provision.

A large number of suggested actions were identified by Brook Lyndhurst to boost uptake of re-use and repair services, on the basis of the research findings. Further work by ZWS is required to understand which of these actions should be taken forward, once the impacts of each of them have been assessed against one another and in relation to current activities to boost engagement and improve service provision. The suggested actions are summarised in three tables below according to the behaviour they refer to:

Type	Boosting purchase of second-hand items
PROVISION	Encouraging the re-use sector to continue professionalising its offering and the appearance of outlets, without reducing cost-saving opportunities, is likely to continue improving the desirability of the shopping experience and demand for second-hand items.
PROVISION	High Street charity shops currently offer very standard product profiles, which have been found to deter men and younger groups from shopping in them. In particular charity shops offer clothing ranges which are heavily skewed towards adult women. Helping the sector to develop stock profiles and customer specific stores, which match the needs of different consumer segments more closely, may broaden their customer base.
PROVISION	Though there is a notable trade in high value electrical items online, there may be appetite for locally orientated services such as the WEEE recycling centre at Perth College (which was uncovered during the mapping exercise), where the demand for reconditioned mobiles and laptops is very high. Replicating this model would broaden the number of purchasing options, especially for those without access to the internet.
PROVISION	Working to professionalise the appearance of re-use services selling bulky items, such as furniture and white goods, may improve the shopping experience of these services, as has been the case with high street charity shops. For example, 're-use rooms' or attractive window displays in store could be used to help inspire shoppers.

Type	Boosting purchase of second-hand items
COMMS	The number and variety of second-hand shops on the high street could provide a real alternative to conventional outlets selling household products. The research suggests that communication activities which promote these services should build upon positive perceptions of charity shops as sites of 'normal' and enjoyable shopping experiences, to benefit other acquisition channels.
COMMS	Key barriers – perceived cleanliness; reliability and safety of second-hand items – will be difficult to overcome for certain product types (especially large electrical items and soft furniture). Improving the appearance of services and offering standardised information about the expected lifetime of used items as part of a guarantee may help for those who struggle to afford new, but is unlikely to succeed with other consumers.
COMMS	There is an opportunity to close the value-action gap for hard furniture items, as the research found an absence of strong barriers to purchase. Awareness of re-use services for furniture is lower than for other items, however, which suggests that increasing signposting to these may boost uptake.
COMMS	Purchasing second-hand items tends to be locally oriented, although people will travel further afield for particular types of items. Locally-orientated signposting will therefore be most useful, particularly for furniture and electrical items where access to private transport or collection services is important.
COMMS	Younger age groups (especially those in their 20s) more frequently report that they are happy to purchase second-hand items than other age groups, though their experience of purchasing these items is no higher. Focussing communications on this age group may help to catalyse their good intentions.

Type	Boosting donation, sale or passing on
PROVISION	The mapping exercise found that third-sector organisations and charities are benefiting from partnerships and networking opportunities facilitated by local authorities. Opening these partnerships out to private sector organisations may help to maximise re-use opportunities.
PROVISION	There is a need to consider the landscape of re-use options and how different service types impact on one another, to prevent sub-optimal disposal outcomes for re-use or conflicting messages for the public. These include the influence of retailer take back schemes on re-use of electrical appliances. The mismatch between supply and demand leading to some bulky items being 'knocked back' by re-use organisations might also be considered.
PROVISION	Working with bulky re-use services to boost their willingness to manage lower grade or less desirable items would improve re-use rates, as fashion not function can be a barrier to re-use for less desirable items of furniture. One way of achieving this might be for re-use organisations to offer less desirable products for free, but this may not be in keeping with their brand identity, so alternative solutions may need to be developed in collaboration with the sector.
COMMS	The mapping exercise demonstrated that it was harder to find information about private sector re-use services online, partly because they are less well represented by third party signposting activities. Broader promotion of different types of services would considerably improve choice for the public.
COMMS	There is a need to align public understanding of what should be donated where to maximise re-use (and recycling) potential. For example, there is a need to clear up confusion about what to do with low grade textiles to keep them out of the bin and to make sure that services are not overburdened with low quality donations. Further research should be conducted with the re-use sector before communication

Type	Boosting donation, sale or passing on
	campaigns are developed, however, to make sure communications messages are aligned with the sector's capacity to handle lower grade items.
COMMS	The experience in the mapping exercise suggests there is a gap in information provided online about re-use services. A 'one stop-shop' providing authoritative information about the location and nature of services would improve access to information, but this would be resource intensive to maintain. There was appetite for a 'one stop shop' service, in the form of ZWS's re-use hotline, among research participants. Participants emphasised the importance of such a service to be locally-orientated and free of charge. They were particularly keen on a service which could help them identify disposal solutions for specific products (particularly in identifying free collection of bulky items). Nevertheless communications should not seek to boost donations until sector capacity to handle less desirable items is remedied.
COMMS	Convenience is key to disposal, especially among men and lower social grades. Emphasising characteristics of re-use services which improve ease of access will appeal to those without strong altruistic motivations for donating their belongings. These might include the availability of free collection services, the speed of collection, the breadth of items accepted.
COMMS	Those in their 30's and 40's report higher rates of disposal than other age groups, though their disposal decisions do not differ greatly from other age groups. Though younger age groups (early 20's) do not dispose of as many items, they are significantly more likely to throw clothing items in the household bin. This shows there is a generational difference in how people dispose of lower grade textiles, which could be addressed through targeted communications.
COMMS	Many still refer to Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) as the 'tip' or 'the dump', so changing language associated with the HWRC towards re-use may help to change perceptions of the baseline disposal option/council role in re-use.
COMMS	There is a need to discourage hoarding of items for long periods prior to disposal, to increase their desirability for re-use. People could be encouraged donate or sell items rather than storing them away, emphasising their diminishing use/monetary value over time.

Type	Boosting repair of broken items
PROVISION	The mapping exercise demonstrated that there is a need for more extensive research into the state of the repair sector in Scotland, its role in the landscape of re-use and recycling organisations for different product types and what sector-level support may be required. In better understanding the capacity of the sector, it may be discovered that it is more effective to work with retailers and manufacturers to increase take back and repair services offered, rather than through independent repair services.
COMMS	The mapping exercise revealed that information about repair services (and private re-use organisations) is harder to find online, partly because they are less well represented by third party organisations who signpost re-use services. A reported lack of awareness about where to fix broken items amongst research participants also suggests that marketing repair services through a repair sector network would be beneficial to consumers.
COMMS	Strong cost barriers are associated with repair. It will be important to communicate the cost-effectiveness of repair (where it exists) for functional items. Offering guarantees or warranties with professional repair services would help to improve perceived cost-effectiveness of repair.
COMMS	The biggest gains may be had by focussing communications on middle age groups (30/40s), who tend

Type	Boosting repair of broken items
	to report that they experience items breaking more than other age groups. The qualitative research explained that this is partly influenced by life stage (household items purchased by participants in their 20s becoming worn out).
COMMS	The research found that many items are discarded before they break or wear out as people fall out of love with their possessions. Using emotional messaging that provokes notions of caring and attachment may help prevent these broken relationships and encourage repair if breakage does occur.
COMMS	There is a need to address lack of awareness about what to do with broken or unwanted electronic items, other than selling them online or via high street shops.
COMMS	Manufacturer warranties and purchased warranty cover are a motivation for repair of electrical items but they are only relevant to minority of people at present – working with manufacturers and retailers to boost uptake of warranties for new (and used) electrical goods may increase repair rates when breakage occurs.
PROVISION	There is a gap in service provision for certain items across rural and urban study areas. It will not be possible to promote uptake of repair services in the absence of provision, so alternative solutions may be required. For example, signposting people to re-use channels where they can donate broken items. If this is taken forward, however, it will be necessary to develop capacity in the re-use sector to handle broken items.
PROVISION	In home repairs make up the majority of repair behaviours for items, except shoes. There is a need to consider the role of self-skilling and in home repair to prolong the lifetime of items and any basic information or advice required to facilitate this, such as diagnostic tools, 'how to fix...' guides or signposting to spare parts services. For example, an online video about how to replace a filter on a dishwasher or sew a button onto a shirt would facilitate basic repairs in the home for those who lack the knowledge necessary to do so.
PROVISION	Consider providing collection banks next to conventional recycling facilities to keep people from putting smaller electrical items in the household bin, until WEEE regulations are extended.
PROVISION	One possible way of improving the affordability of repair would be to encourage more join up between the re-use and repair sectors to allow for acceptance of broken items and trade in affordable, second-hand parts. The business case for such action could be tested through a pilot exercise with selected re-use organisations and professional repair services. It would be particularly helpful to conduct such a pilot for large and small electrical items, which are not considered cost-effective to repair by many research participants because of the cost of obtaining spare parts.

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Full report publication will follow. Visit www.zerowastescotland.org.uk for more information.



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