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# How to grow your city's reuse and repair economy

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Linear economic systems that rely on the production and consumption of new goods and that discard broken or unwanted items drive up cities' consumption-based emissions and waste volumes. They also waste valuable materials and can exacerbate inequality and living costs by forcing unwanted spending. Cities can support sustainable consumption, reduce waste and allow residents and businesses to save money by cultivating the local reuse and repair sector as part of a zero-waste and/or circular economy strategy. This means enabling residents and businesses to fix the goods they want to keep and facilitating the collection of unwanted items for reuse by others. Building a reuse and repair economy can create local jobs that cannot be relocated and help to build community. This article looks at how cities can help to make repair and reuse an easy, affordable and attractive alternative to buying new.

**The consumer goods with the greatest need and potential for repair** are durable (long-life) goods such as smartphones, laptops and other personal electrical items, household appliances, furniture and furnishings, as well as clothes and textiles. This focuses on these items.

The disposal of food and organics, materials from the construction and demolition of buildings and single-use plastics are also major contributors to city's waste streams and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Follow the links for advice on the reduction, recovery and reuse of these resources.

Because repair and reuse keep damaged and unwanted goods out of the waste stream altogether, **the growth of this industry is a more impactful zero-waste strategy than the recycling of parts and materials** from

**It can also benefit other global cities.** Large volumes of unwanted goods disposed of in many higher-income countries, especially textiles and e-waste, are exported to Global South cities. Much of it has no market value and is often burned or dumped in landfill or the environment, with significant negative impacts.<sup>1</sup>

## Work with local partners to understand and encourage reuse and repair

The repair and reuse sector is informal and/or still in infancy in most places, but it is likely that your city is already home to businesses and non-profits that are active in this space. These might include tailors or clothing repair services, upholstery and furniture repair shops, electronics shops, waste management companies, social enterprises, zero-waste community organisations, and volunteers and technicians with repair experience for different types of consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> They may not define what they do as ‘reuse’ or ‘repair’; in Kenya, for example, businesses and informal workers providing these services are often embedded in other businesses, while many describe themselves as makers or simply as offering services that their customers demand.<sup>3</sup>

**Build partnerships with the existing local reuse and repair industry** to cultivate this sector and foster a local culture of reuse and repair, informed by their knowledge of the current landscape. As well as collaborating on the design and delivery of approaches outlined later in this article, cities can support local partners by:

- **Promoting repair as attractive and aspirational through informed educational and communications campaigns.** Local attitudes and societal norms will influence the kind of messaging that can help to drive the uptake of repair services among diverse groups. Research in Southeast Asia, the United Kingdom and Kenya has found contrasting consumer attitudes to second-hand and repaired goods depending on gender, age group, education and income level.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> Understand local attitudes and norms to inform campaigns that seek to expand repair culture.
- **Developing a directory of local businesses and non-profits to raise awareness of their services.** Restart, a social enterprise in London, mapped the city’s repair shops and services in an online Repair Directory with funding from five local borough councils and agencies. The City of Austin’s website offers a Reuse Directory that identifies places to donate, resell, rent and repair items. Cities can also promote websites and applications that can help people to repair their own goods. For example, the website IFIXIT hosts guides that demonstrate how to take apart a phone, laptop or other gadgets.
- **Developing repair and reuse training programmes.** Partner with education and vocational training institutions to help people develop or expand their repair skills. Where concerns over reliability and

quality are driving down consumer acceptance of second-hand and repaired goods. English  
developing certification schemes to improve confidence in the quality of repair they offer.<sup>7</sup>

- **Provide financial incentives to repair and second-hand goods outlets.** For example, the provision of repair and reuse services could be included in evaluations for any economic incentives offered to businesses. Alternatively, cities can create loan and grant programmes aimed at enabling repair and reuse.<sup>8</sup>

**Consider conducting an assessment of your city's current reuse and repair sector** to examine how reuse and repair fits into your city's waste management strategies, the size and scope of the sector, those already working in it, how to support the sector's local growth, and potential barriers to growth or adoption of repair.

For example, New York City's Department of Sanitation published a [NYC Reuse Sector Report](#) in 2019 which built on polling, surveys and assessments that began in 1995. [Austin's report on the city's recycling and re-use related economy](#) – including repair – found that the sector contributes more than US\$1.1 billion in total economic activity. Austin expects its circular economy sector, which is in infancy, to grow to many multiples of that figure in the years to come.<sup>9</sup>

### **Consider recruiting 'ambassadors' to champion reuse and repair in their communities**

This approach has proven beneficial in Cleveland, for example. [Circular Cleveland](#), which is led by the City of Cleveland and neighbourhood civil society partners, appointed ten Circular Cleveland Ambassadors representing different neighbourhoods, communities and associations. They informed [Circular Cleveland: A roadmap towards an inclusive circular city](#), serve as liaisons between the Circular Cleveland leadership team and their respective communities, and support reuse and repair in their communities including through regular Fix-it CLE repair workshops.

### **Develop and scale initiatives that enable people to repair the goods they want to keep**

The following initiatives are proving successful in many cities globally:

- **Establish or support recurring repair events in the community.** These events provide repair services and/or teach people to perform their own repairs at no or low cost. Repair events should be hosted in accessible locations, such as cafés, public libraries, community centres and business storefronts, and held monthly, quarterly or other regular schedule. They are often staffed, at least

initially, by a network of skilled volunteers, including staff from local businesses  English non-profits that can benefit from the publicity. The City of Austin, for example, hosts Fix-It Clinics at various times in different locations around the city to maximise accessibility. Cities can also support events run by non-profits, as Portland does (see box). Over 2,000 Repair Cafés have been set up in cities around the world, largely run by volunteers, using a manual and other resources from the Repair Café Foundation – established by the founder of the first Repair Café in Amsterdam. The United Kingdom-based Restart Project shares a similar Restart Party Kit with advice on hosting free community repair events.

*“The aim [of London Repair Week] is to give Londoners practical skills and encourage greater use of existing repair services. This is done in the name of sustainability but what we really wanted was to scale up repair in London, and shine a spotlight on brilliant people in the community who are promoting repair.”*

Rebecca Child, London Repair Week

- **Host major repair events.** For example, ReLondon hosts an annual London Repair Week, which started in 2020, to deliver repair workshops and share advice. ReLondon is a partnership between the Mayor of London and local borough councils aimed at accelerating the city’s transition to a low-carbon, circular economy. donateNYC, a programme of the New York City Department of Sanitation, is a co-host of ReFashion Week NYC, which hosts clothing repair workshops, thrift markets and more.
- **Establish city-run repair and reuse facilities.** For example, Capannori, Italy runs a municipal reuse centre as part of the city’s zero-waste strategy, providing free classes on repair or ‘upcycling’ techniques, from sewing to woodworking.<sup>10</sup> The centre also repairs unwanted clothes, electronic devices, toys and more, which are then donated to local people in need or sold at low prices.<sup>11</sup> Work with local businesses to ensure these complement, rather than compete with, the services they offer.
- **Implement a repair voucher scheme to support repair businesses and improve access to their services.** For some items and paid-for repair outlets, repair can be equally or more expensive than buying new. In such cases, vouchers can provide an incentive and are usually targeted at lower-income and marginalised groups. Translate vouchers into locally spoken languages and offer both electronic and paper vouchers to reach a wide audience.



Starting in 2020, Vienna offered a voucher covering half the repair cost of electronics, bikes, shoes, clothing and other goods, up to a maximum of €100. The vouchers were redeemable at Reparaturnetzwerk Wien (Vienna Repair Network) businesses and offered in a series of campaigns, each with a capped budget.<sup>12</sup> Over 22,000 items were repaired in the first year alone; 90% of the items brought in were successfully repaired and around two-thirds were electrical.<sup>13</sup> The programme's success led Austria to adopt a nation-wide Reparatur Bonus (repair bonus) scheme in 2022.<sup>14</sup>

## City of Portland's growing repair industry

Portland, Oregon's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability hosts an annual Fix-It Fair, offering classes and resources from government and non-profit organisations to help residents learn simple, low- or no-cost ways to save money by repairing their goods. The fairs developed from a door-to-door effort to distribute home weatherisation funds to low-income households in the 1980s and gradually became an annual fixture, with the repair of bikes and household appliances emerging later. The Bureau also provides logistical and promotional support to Repair PDX repair cafés, established in 2013 by a Portlander using the Repair Café Foundation's resources, including through the Resourceful PDX event calendar and the Master Recycler programme.

More recently, Portland's Report and Two-year Workplan for Sustainable Consumption and Production aims to increase participation in reuse and repair and share services as one of 14 strategy areas (see page 30). The workplan is informed by Portland's consumption-based emissions inventory, which you can explore in our interactive data story.

## Develop the local market for repaired and second-hand goods

Collect the goods and materials that are no longer wanted and support their reuse by others. As unwanted goods may need repair, the approaches outlined above often complement reuse.

- **Look for opportunities to leverage the city's buying power through municipal procurement.** For example, when COVID-19 hit, instead of buying new devices, Amsterdam arranged the collection of 3,500 unwanted laptops from residents, hired a firm to refurbish them and distributed them to priority groups who lacked access to computers. The move was prompted by the vision set out in the Amsterdam Circular Strategy 2020-2025, and saved the city money compared with the cost of purchasing new machines.<sup>15</sup>
- **Incentivise residents to donate their unwanted items.** Make donation easy by connecting repair and reuse initiatives with waste disposal, salvage and recycling centres. This will divert reusable or repairable goods from the waste stream, while enabling people to purchase low-cost, second-hand



goods. Tallinn City Council, for instance, has opened reuse spaces at recycling stations to collect and sell reusable items.<sup>16</sup> West London Waste established a ‘Fixing Factory’ that repairs laptops, tablets and desktop computers – unwanted devices donated at local recycling centres are repaired and given to local people who need them. **Go further by implementing volume-based fees or ‘pay-as-you-throw’ schemes** to discourage the disposal of repairable or reusable goods in landfill.

- **Incentivise businesses and non-profits to divert reusable goods and materials from landfill.** The City of Austin’s Resource Recovery and Economic Development departments together operate the [Austin Materials Marketplace](#) business-to-business by-product exchange. They also run a bimonthly networking event for the circular economy business community, and the annual [Circular Austin Showcase](#) and [RE]verse Pitch competitions, to encourage innovation and reward the reuse of unwanted goods and surplus materials.<sup>17</sup>

## Establish lending libraries to reduce the need to buy tools and other goods

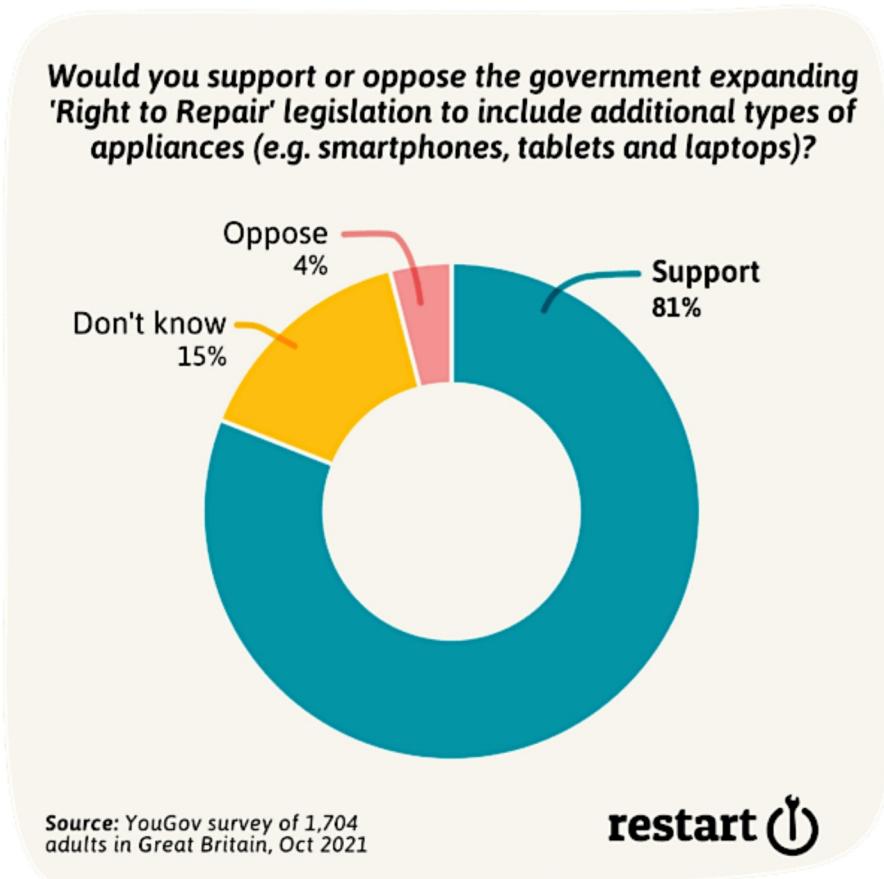
The growth of the local ‘sharing economy’ for consumer goods can complement that for repair and reuse, promoting [sustainable consumption](#) by further reducing the unwanted or unnecessary purchase of new goods. ‘Lending libraries’ enable people to borrow a wide range of goods that they only need infrequently, including tools for repair. Locate them in lower-income neighbourhoods to maximise accessibility for those who can benefit most, and ensure the selection of tools and goods responds to local needs and interests. Examples include [Vancouver’s Tool Library](#), which is run largely by volunteers as a non-profit organisation. Public libraries can expand collections beyond books and other media to include other goods and equipment. Many already have – [Berkeley’s tool lending library](#) has been operating within the public library for decades, for instance, while in Ontario, Canada 59% of public libraries reported having non-traditional items in circulation when they were surveyed in 2017.<sup>18</sup> In the United Kingdom, [SHARE:Frome](#) was set up by Frome Town Council in partnership with a local non-profit, while local councils act as commissioning partners for the [Library of Things](#) in London, funding the set-up fees. Many libraries are managed using [MyTurn](#), which [maps them here](#).

## Advocate for regional, national and international supportive legislation

As repair and reuse grow in popularity, cities can lobby for legislation and other supportive policies to expand access to repairable goods and repair services. These laws and policies are absent or nascent in most places, but have the potential to be transformational:

- **Right to Repair legislation:** Right to Repair is a global movement seeking regulatory change to ensure that everyone has the right to fix the products they have purchased. This legislation can require products to be easier and cheaper to repair, make replacement parts affordable and repair

information accessible, expand consumers' rights after purchase and further reduce the cost of repair by removing value-added tax (VAT).<sup>19</sup> Right to Repair legislation is often popular with consumers – polling in the United Kingdom, for example, found that 81% of respondents support the expansion of Right to Repair legislation to include additional appliances such as smartphones, tablets and laptops.<sup>20, 21</sup> Cities can advocate for Right to Repair legislation on behalf of residents as well as small repair businesses, which have much to gain.





## Right to Repair progress to date

**In Europe**, the European Union established the first such laws in March 2021, setting standards for computers, televisions, dishwashers and washing machines, and is aiming to extend the laws to cover phones, tablets and laptops.<sup>22</sup>

**In the United States**, 27 states have introduced Right to Repair legislation as of 2022.<sup>23</sup> The first Right to Repair law came from Colorado, allowing wheelchair owners access to parts, software and manuals needed to repair their own chairs.<sup>24</sup> In June 2022, the New York state legislature passed the Fair Repair Act – the country's first Right to Repair bill covering electronics, requiring the manufacturers of digital electronic products to make available tools, parts and instructions for repair to both consumers and independent shops.<sup>25</sup>

Right to Repair has yet to gain traction in other regions of the world.

- **Other sustainable product design regulations.** For example, the Ecodesign regulation proposed by the European Commission in 2022 builds on existing design standards for energy-using products to set new requirements on durability, upgradability, repairability and the provision of information for consumers.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Right to Repair, this legislation may not require repair to be easy, cheap and accessible – it might be restricted to certified professionals, for example.
- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies:** EPR policies establish producer responsibility across the lifespan of a product, including end-of-life disposal. EPR policies have been in place in European Union countries for some products for several decades and are increasingly being adopted elsewhere. To date, they have mostly targeted packaging, but have the potential to be introduced for reusable and repairable items in cities' waste streams. Medellín supported the creation of Colombia's EPR policy for recyclable packaging, in which producers of packaging and plastics must collect and process at least 10% of the products placed on the market.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, in 2021, the province of Ontario, introduced legislation to make packaging producers fully responsible for the cost of collection and recycling from 2023 after more than a decade of advocacy by municipalities and other stakeholders.<sup>28</sup> Toronto is now working on local policy to meet the new requirements.<sup>29, 30</sup>
- **Labels and indices.** Labels and indices that assess the repairability of items enable consumers to make more informed choices, and could enable cities to incentivise and reward producers that adopt them. **Durability labels** provide consumers with a score on the repairability and likely lifespan of an item. The score takes into account the availability and price of spare parts, the availability of repair documentation and the average lifespan of a product. New Zealand not-for-profit Consumer is petitioning to require manufacturers to put a durability label on their products. In 2019, France



English

became the first country in the world to implement a **repairability index** for electrical devices, effective January 2021.<sup>31</sup> The new law requires manufacturers selling products in France to provide consumers with clear information on the repairability of electrical and electronic equipment. It applies to products including smartphones, laptops, televisions, washing machines and lawnmowers.<sup>32</sup> Fines for non-compliance are expected to begin from 2023.<sup>33</sup>

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