



The repair evolution

how it can become part of your approach to re-use

A guide to integrating repair into a household waste recycling centre network

Introduction

In our re-use guide, [Putting re-use at the heart of your household waste recycling centre†](#), we looked at how re-use could be introduced and developed at a household waste recycling centre, to increase the diversion of usable items away from a waste or recycling stream and create wide reaching benefits at the same time.

In this guide, we look at the next step in taking this journey up the waste hierarchy through the introduction of repair activities alongside the re-use activities already in place.

Repair is an intervention either to fix a fundamental part of an item's purpose or function, or an aesthetic change that breathes new life into diminished or outdated characteristics. It sits with re-use at the top of the waste hierarchy, because together they prevent items becoming waste and keep them in their original form to be used again.

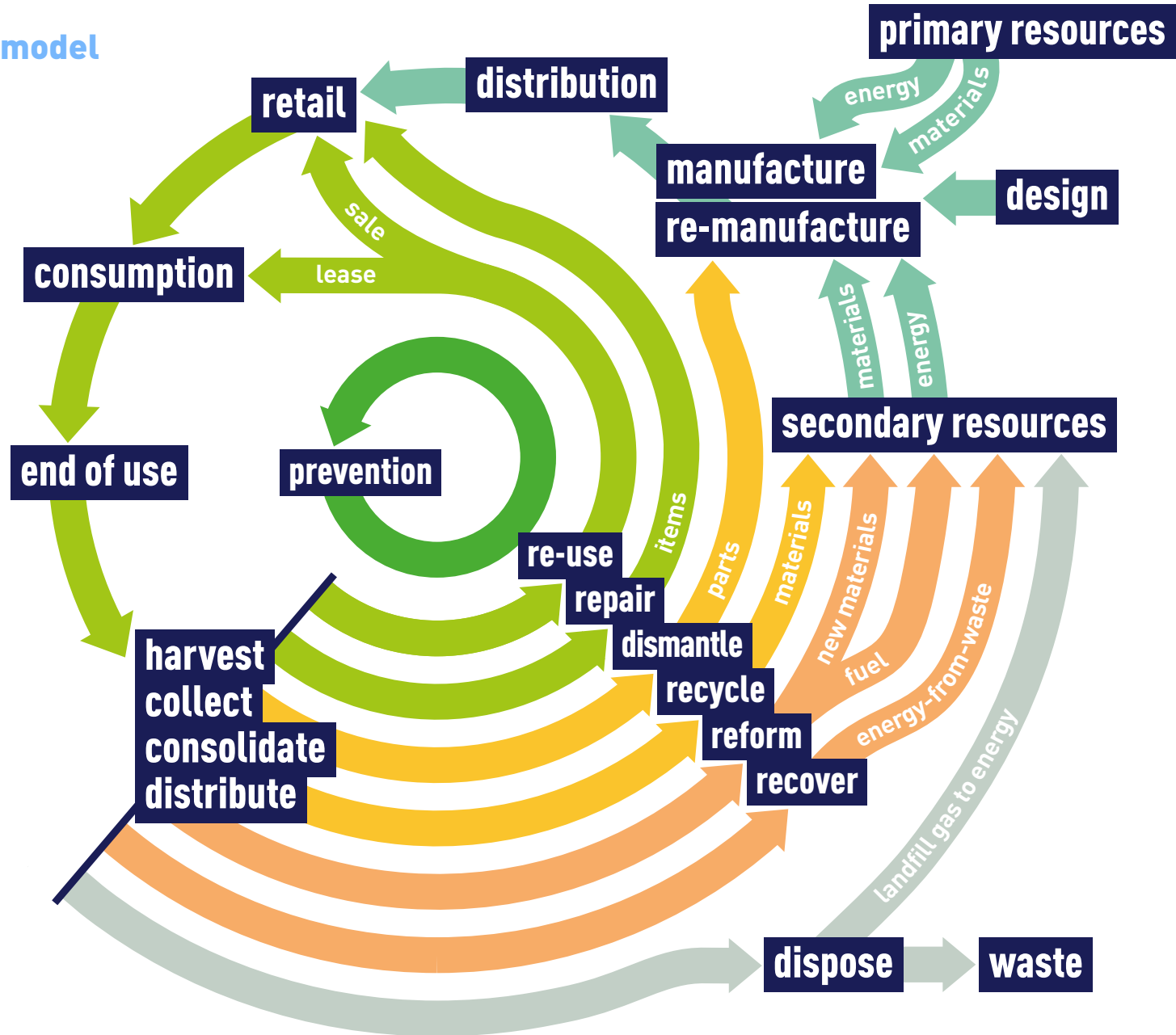
This is a fundamental element of a circular economy and a clear role that household waste recycling centres can play as they evolve to meet the changing demands of their users, national policy and local environmental, social and economic needs. The resources sector must also take an active role in developing repair solutions and infrastructure, as we act as the last line of defence before an item is recycled or disposed of.

Repair is once again becoming a more recognised behaviour by the public, thanks to increasing awareness of the need to take action to prevent the worst effects of climate change and reduce overconsumption, high profile television shows (such as the Repair Shop) and the COVID pandemic encouraging people to stay at home and try to fix things themselves. In addition, the cost-of-living crisis, rising inflation and economic uncertainty means the need and demand to keep existing items in use for longer is rising and will continue to rise.

Alongside this upturn in interest is the greater recognition by policy makers, local authorities and other enterprises of the benefits that repair can generate beyond keeping materials in use longer – including the creation of skilled jobs and new businesses, the demand for the training and expertise needed for them to succeed, the development of new supply chains to support a growing industry and a financial return on items that currently result in a cost to a local authority to collect and dispose of. These developments do not happen overnight, but can be accelerated with the right instruments in place – including national policy, commercial support mechanisms and clear standards, which are all familiar approaches to any growing industry.

Accurate data collection and careful decision-making is needed to ensure that items received are accurately assessed as being repairable, so that they generate a financial and social return, and the effort invested in restoring them does not in itself go to waste. When done well, the opportunities for local economies, communities and local authorities are potentially significant.

The circular economy model



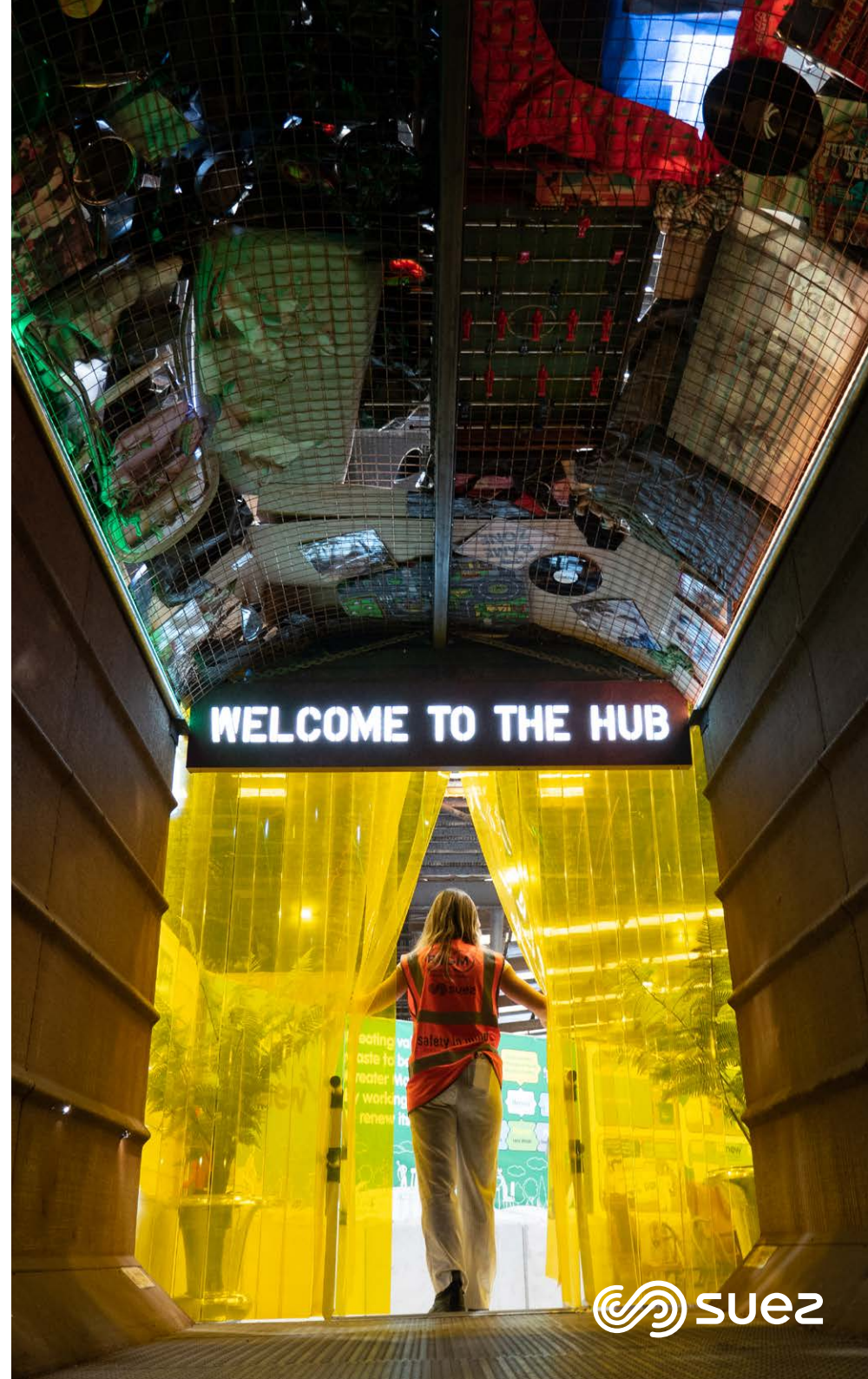
Achieving more through repair

Repair is something that SUEZ has been actively involved in since 2017, when in partnership with Surrey County Council, we began testing certain electricals – such as televisions and hoovers – many of which enter a household waste recycling centre with only simple things wrong with them, perhaps needing little more than a new fuse. In 2018, we expanded our activities in Surrey through a partnership with HMP Ford, where prisoners are trained in how to repair and maintain bikes brought into the household waste recycling centres. The refurbished bikes are returned to be resold in the four re-use shops across the Surrey re-use network. As part of this relationship, we also refurbished a workshop at the prison to create a dedicated space and working environment for this activity, so those involved can feel part of the SUEZ team.

Over time, our process has evolved and developed, and continues to do so. Our extensive network of re-use shops in Devon began their own bicycle repair operation in 2023, through a team of trained staff with a real passion and interest in giving bikes another lease of life.

With the knowledge and experience we've developed over time, and the relationships we have with the people we work with, we were ideally equipped for the creation of the next stage in the evolution of repair through the household waste recycling centre network, this time in Greater Manchester.

The Manchester Renew Hub is a 6,000 m² warehouse, repair and repurpose centre, created in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in Trafford Park. In 2022, the hub employed 32 people, diverted more than 100,000 items for re-use through the network of three resale shops and a dedicated internet sales point for higher value items, and provided £320,000 to the local community through the financial return generated by its activities.



Introducing, evolving or integrating repair into your operations

Repair can seem a daunting prospect from a standing start, but there is no need to go from nothing to a warehouse full of repairers and upcyclers in one giant leap. There are ways to introduce repair at a small scale locally, which will create a solid foundation that can be developed as local demand increases and collective knowledge, experience and networks grow.

Here are our top tips to either help you get started or develop your current approach.

On site

Many items enter a household waste recycling centre simply because they are no longer wanted, not because they are no longer usable. This is especially true of electrical items – such as televisions or hoovers – which are often replaced for a newer model before the current model no longer works or because it no longer performs at its best due to a lack of maintenance. Bikes, especially children’s bikes, are also frequently outgrown and replaced, often having seen little use. These are good examples of items that can be tested, cleaned and put out for sale with minimal intervention, and a good place to start when it comes to repair.

Things to consider

- ① **Only repair the repairable** – it may sound obvious, but it is essential to creating a sustainable approach to repair. To produce an effective business case, you will need to explain the benefits it will create, including a financial return generated by the products being received, sold or invested in and returned to sell on site or through any other retail channels you have. Too much investment in time or resources in any item could mean the item costs more to repair than can be reasonably recovered from its sale, its recycling or its disposal. It’s important to set clear boundaries on which items, brands and state of disrepair it’s worthwhile site staff diverting to go through this process. Communicating this clearly and keeping the site team updated on any changes will be essential to ensuring that the most worthwhile items are repaired and that the team remains engaged in the process.
- ② **Portable appliance testing (PAT)** is important to ensure an electrical appliance is safe to sell to a member of the public. Training is essential but relatively straight forward and there are many training providers, including colleges and local specialists who can provide this for you. It could also give members of your team the opportunity to upskill and learn something new or provide an opportunity to create additional roles on site, generating important local employment.
- ③ **Space** – having sufficient space where you can safely test and make basic repairs to items is essential. This doesn’t have to be at the same site that the items are captured. Centralising these activities on one or a small number of locations (either on or off site) will allow you to concentrate the skills, equipment and space needed to run the operation successfully – not forgetting to ensure the location has the appropriate tools and workspace for the testers to work in and is lockable to protect the equipment when not in use.

In partnership

Key to your approach to repair is to understand where you can add value and where more value can be added by working in partnership with others.

Repair is a growing sector. Some have seized the opportunity to become more adept at more complex repair activities – such as electrical repairs, reupholstery or upcycling furniture – whilst others have developed value chains and networks that can provide a more efficient and effective approach to complement your plans. When considering developing your re-use activities further, this could be the time to map where you would most benefit from working with others and give thought to building relationships with organisations who could effectively support your ambitions. Alongside this, there are often wider benefits too, with most of our current repair activities taking place through a network of third sector, local or social enterprises who create significant social value by creating opportunities for others, the local community and the economy at the same time.



“ I know SUEZ do help people develop. Of course, I want to move up, like everyone else, and these guys do help me develop. I’ve not been here that long and I’ve been promoted, so I must be doing something right and I appreciate that they recognise that.”

— Albert, Supervisor in Surrey

Things to consider

- ① **Identify potential items** – it’s useful to establish which items are arriving at site on a regular basis that would benefit from some level of skilled repair. Feedback from your retail channels and site staff will help you to understand the potential demand and value of these items and will provide an evidence base to inform your conversation with potential partners.
- ② **Start a conversation** – having mapped out potential organisations, reach out and simply start the conversation. Even if they aren’t able to get involved themselves, they will be connected to others in the local area or beyond and could advise or connect you with others who may be better suited to what you’re trying to achieve.
- ③ **Consider all the benefits** – when it comes to developing a repair-based solution, it can be easy to simply focus on the direct operation and look inward, making sure the right products are identified and how these will be moved, repaired and eventually find a new home. When working with an external organisation whose primary purpose is a social one rather than an environmental one, the opportunity to create amplified social benefits at the same time are significant and not to be overlooked.

For example, our relationship with HMP Ford and the ongoing bicycle repair operation with our Surrey re-use network also works alongside the extensive programme of prisoners who have joined the operations teams through the Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) programme, giving them work experience before full release and giving SUEZ access to a growing number of talented people who have been employed on a permanent basis following their release.

At scale

As you develop a solid foundation in repair, through on-site activities, retail channels and local partnerships, you may be in a position to scale up your operation and increase the volume of items being diverted for re-use.

One of SUEZ's most exciting projects to date is our award winning Renew Hub. Created in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the hub is a 6,000 ft² upcycled ex-composting facility, providing an innovative space as a central point for the products being diverted to Greater Manchester's re-use shops, upcycling and repair stations run by our partner organisations, a click and collect service, and a multi-functional education and function space.

Our partnerships with organisations including Recycling Lives, the Manchester Bike Kitchen and Patch Perfect Academy are creating opportunities for people from across Manchester. People are able to learn new skills and develop their career opportunities while repairing and upcycling items from essential products – such as washing machines, fridges and bikes – to beautiful one-off furniture pieces inspired by the growing demand for bespoke furniture without the environmental cost.

Since the hub began operating, it's employed more than 30 people, seen 18 through a placement or traineeship and distributed more than £500,000 to local organisations, making a difference to people and the planet, based on the revenue stream generated – and we're only just getting started.

Things to consider

- ① **Vision** – it goes without saying that planning is essential to a project of this kind, but before that comes the vision. What do you and your partners want this operation to be and to achieve? Is it to repair more items to be used again? Or could it be a space for people to learn and grow? Thinking about both the current and future ambition of your repair and re-use operations will help you to create a space that is fit for purpose for the longer term. It's worth bearing in mind that this vision will need to flex and mature during your journey, to adapt to new information, ideas and mistakes that are made along the way.
- ② **Location, location, location** – if you're upscaling your re-use activities, it is likely to need to take place away from your operational household waste recycling centres and at a central site or location, or series of locations, to accommodate everything you need. Having a location that's accessible and can be reached reasonably from each of your household waste recycling centres and/or shops and partners is important to minimise transport costs and time. You may want to consider having different activities in different places, to suit your partners, sites, or the demands for items in different areas of your borough – for example, bike repairs may occur on one site and furniture upcycling another. However, it is important to remember that someone needs to retain control of the entire operation to ensure that there is coordination and oversight to what happens day to day.
- ③ **Partners** – if you are already working with or considering reaching out to others to work in partnership on this venture, include them as early as possible in the process. They are likely to have needs and ideas beyond yours, which can help to ensure the space is fit for purpose both now and in the future, while maximising its social and environmental impact at the same time.



With SUEZ’s support, we’ve been able to refurbish over 1,100 bikes for resale and donated 400 bikes, scooters and push-alongs to schools and community groups, keeping preloved bikes on the road and out of the bin. We’ve had six people train with us – two now work for us, three went on to further education and the other went on to another job.” — Andy, Manchester Bike Kitchen



Summary

Repair doesn't have to be a large operation at the start. It could be as simple as one individual on a single site testing and ensuring target items are fit for resale, or it might be a creative network of restorers, upcyclers and repairers breathing new life into once loved items or returning a suite of target essential items into a usable state.

As we build on these foundations and develop our collective ambition towards repair, the opportunity to divert more items up the waste hierarchy grows too. Providing access to a wider range of items for local communities to purchase at a lower cost than new benefits their pockets and the environment, and in turn will help to stimulate consumer demand and create an additional revenue stream for a local authority.

These are all deliverable outcomes, as our examples demonstrate, and can be replicated locally wherever you are in the UK.

See also

SUEZ guides designed to support the development of re-use within the resources and waste sector.

↪ <https://suezuk.co/reuseguides>

