

HIGHLIGHTS

This study looked at the value of a network on the reuse and repair sector in Northern Ireland through stakeholder mapping, interviews and surveys.

All reuse and repair organisations indicated a network would be valuable with 47% responding extremely valuable and 30% very valuable.

55% of Councils indicated a network would be extremely valuable and 27% very valuable.

Many stakeholders indicated a network would be valuable to promote the importance of the sector and shift perceptions around reuse and repair.

Funding opportunities, knowledge sharing/ networking and business opportunities ranked as the most important supports for a network to offer from both the reuse and repair organisation & Council perspective.

Cross-border collaboration and the potential to leverage lessons already learned from Irish and EU networks could help to accelerate setting up a reuse and repair network in Northern Ireland.



Findings from a DAERA-funded research project

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Feasibility of Setting up a Reuse and Repair Network in Northern Ireland

Description

The aim of this Community Resources Network Ireland (CRNI) research project, which was funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), was to qualify and quantify, where possible, the impacts a network would potentially have on the reuse and repair sector in Northern Ireland.

The research involved 1) the completion of a mapping exercise of key repair and reuse stakeholders in Northern Ireland; 2) the identification of issues in Northern Ireland facing key stakeholders; 3) the identification of the main constraints and opportunities facing national networks in developing the sector; 4) a summary of the potential value of a network in addressing the issues identified and supporting key stakeholders; and 5) a summary of all findings including potential cost and structure of establishing a network in Northern Ireland.

Research Methods

Both secondary and primary research methods were utilized. CRNI first conducted secondary (desk) research to analyse and map the reuse and repair landscape in Northern Ireland. A detailed spreadsheet was developed of about 79 organisations.

Approximately 51 reuse and repair organisations were identified to be approached for primary research (interviews/surveys), reflecting a sample of different organisation types (social enterprise, registered charity, nonprofit, volunteer-led, platform, commercial), activity types (repair, reuse, redistribution, exchange, upcycling, service, physical retail, online retail and educational information, courses and workshops) and material/good types (textiles, furniture, food, WEEE/E, media, household goods, building/home improvement materials, bicycles, bric a brac, craft supplies/stationery, paint).

A total of 30 reuse and repair organisations and all 11 Councils participated in the interviews/surveys, which were primarily conducted by Zero Waste North West on CRNI's behalf. Eight national networks across Europe were interviewed by CRNI.

HIGHLIGHTS

79 reuse and repair organisations were identified, 30 participated in the research project and represented different types of organisations, reuse and repair activities and geographic areas.

Registered charities and nonprofits were the most prevalent organisation types followed by social enterprises.

Reuse, followed by repair, was the most common activity of participating organisations.

The top barrier to joining a network is cost, with 33% indicating they would not be able to pay a membership fee.

Cross-border collaboration may be possible when it comes to maximizing the repair and reuse of certain items, such as bicycles, whether it takes place between organisations and/or Councils.



Reuse and Repair Organisations

Of the 30 of participating organisations, 43% identified themselves as registered charities, 43% as nonprofits, 40% as social enterprises, 37% as volunteer-led, 17% as commercial, 17% as other and 13% as a platform (Figure 1).

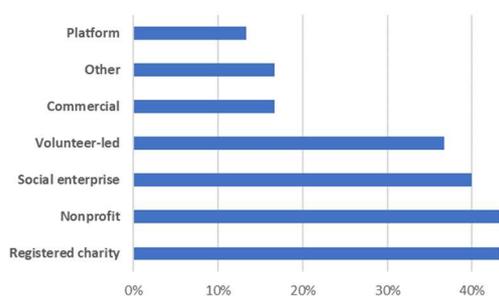


Figure 1: Reuse and Repair Organisation Type

In most cases, organisations identified themselves as at least more than one type. This supports the challenge identified by both organisations and national networks that there is a lack of clear definitions in the sector.

The organisations are involved in a variety of repair and reuse activities, with reuse as the most common (Figure 2).

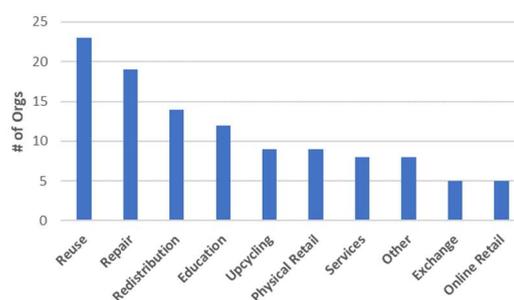


Figure 2: Activity Type

The geographic representation of the organisations was as follows: 12 in Antrim; nine in Derry~Londonderry; two in Down; two in Fermanagh; one in Armagh; one in Tyrone and three with nationwide scope.

The organisations are involved with a variety of material types with textiles, furniture and household goods being the most common (Figure 3).

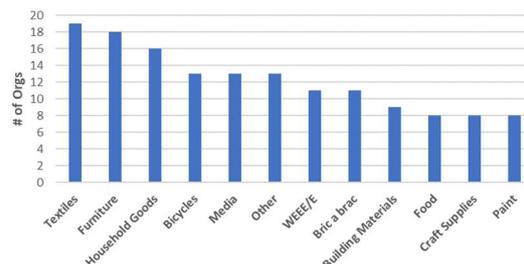


Figure 3: Type of Materials

The top three barriers organisations face in growing their reuse and repair activities are 1. funding, 2. staff/volunteers, and 3. physical space. Competition, primarily due the availability of cheap, new products, is another barrier. The organisations overwhelmingly indicated that most helpful support that would enable them to grow their reuse and/or repair activities is funding, and many specified funding for staff, space, vehicles and equipment.



This finding correlated with their top response as to what supports would be most important for a reuse and repair network to offer. Funding opportunities ranked as the most important, followed by knowledge sharing/networking and equally by promotion, policy representation and business opportunities.

All reuse and repair organisations indicated a network would be valuable with 47% responding it would be extremely valuable and 30% responding it would be very valuable.

40% said it was extremely realistic and 27% very realistic for them to join a network. The primary barrier to organisations joining would be cost with 33% indicating although they value a network, they are unable to afford a membership if one were required. 23% said that an annual membership fee of £100 per year and 20% said £20 per year would be what they would pay if a membership fee was required to join a network.



Councils

All 11 Councils participated in the research. 27% of Councils responded that reuse and repair is extremely important and 55% very important to their waste prevention strategies.

Councils currently support reuse and repair organisations in a variety of ways (Figure 4), mostly through financial support of premises and least through support of core operating costs.

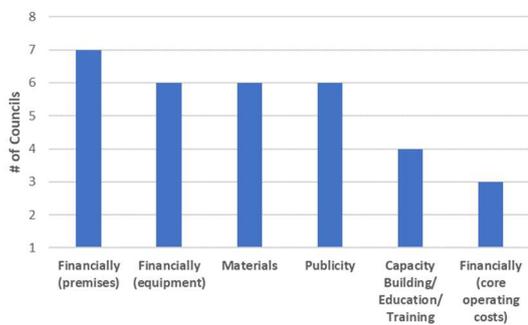


Figure 4: Council Support Type for Organisations

The top three barriers Councils face in growing their reuse and repair activities are 1. funding, 2. lack of reuse targets, and 3. lack of time. Lack of public awareness around reuse is another barrier. What would be the most helpful to Councils to enable them to grow their reuse and/or repair activities are 1. funding, 2. public awareness and 3. good models/ best practices.

Councils indicated that the most important supports for a network to offer are 1. funding opportunities, 2. knowledge sharing/networking, and 3. business opportunities.

Materials and products that end up in Councils' waste streams that can be avoided or reduced through a reuse and repair project include repairable items, bottles and hard plastics, toys, carpets, paint, bicycles, household goods, WEEE/E and textiles/clothing.

55% of Councils indicated a reuse and repair network would be extremely valuable and 27% very valuable. Councils could provide support to a network primarily through meeting/event space, a membership fee and by hiring network members in their region for reuse and repair expertise/ skills (Figure 5).

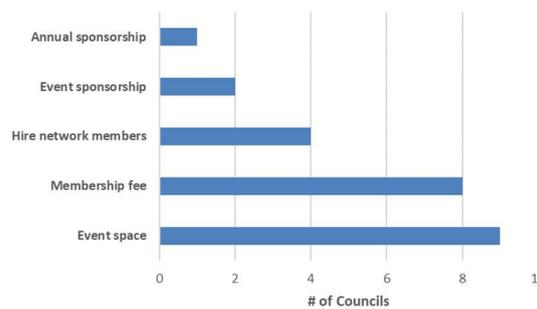


Figure 5: Council Support Type for Network

HIGHLIGHTS

More than half of the Councils indicated that the lack of legislative targets and budgets for reuse and repair is problematic for sector development.

Almost half of the Councils enable social enterprises to divert items from the waste stream by collecting from containers designated for reuse/repair. Three Councils have Household Waste Recycling Centres and four councils do not have a reuse/repair option.

Four Councils and ten organisations indicated that reuse and repair could be integrated into the circular economy side of Council business and has great potential in the education and social dividend it could produce.

Both organisations and Councils suggested an online/website aspect to the network would be important to share knowledge, resources and scale up initiatives.

Perspectives from research participants

"I think it (a network) is one of the most needed things in Northern Ireland at the minute, especially for growing reuse!"

"There's too much good stuff ending up in landfill and too many people who could benefit from these goods or get satisfaction and wellbeing from repairing them."

"It would be an important ambition to identify ways to capture data on a regional basis (e.g., identifying data capture methodology)."

"I think there's definitely a need for it and it is likely to stimulate the sector."

"I think such a network would be extremely useful in growing the sector. Can share good practice, join up thinking between Council regions, raise public awareness re. importance of reuse & repair to social economy, climate change, environment."

"It's about changing perception so that we stop the tide of endlessly buying new stuff. So, we need to get a presence on high streets... It's a really difficult task. We need governments with vision, big communication campaigns and promotion campaigns."

"Keen to join if this starts up!"



HIGHLIGHTS

National networks play an important role in the contribution and development of reuse and circular economy policy.

Preparation for reuse or reuse targets were suggested in order to increase reuse in Northern Ireland.

Examples of countries/ regions with targets in the EU are Spain, Flanders in Belgium and the Balearic Islands.

Core funding will be required to establish and sustain a national network.



National Networks

Eight EU-based national networks were interviewed to understand how they measure value to their members and the sector in which they operate. Of the networks, five were either Ireland or UK-based, five were reuse-focused and two were social enterprise-focused networks.

Metrics that networks track include member growth, event attendance, and participation in working groups. Six of the participating networks conduct member surveys to assess what members perceive as the benefits of membership, better understand members' needs and identify how they can improve their service offering to members.

The reuse-focused networks track the impact their members have on the sector, such as tonnes of goods reused, tonnes of carbon savings, number of jobs, training positions, volunteer opportunities provided by their members and the resulting estimated social value created, as well as the turnover of their members' combined activities and how many customers were reached, number of reuse centres & shops (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: CRNI 2019 Member Impact

Constraints facing national networks on their ability to measure value include a lack of clear definitions for reuse, repair, social enterprise and a reliance on members to prioritize reporting.

Some networks provided examples that demonstrated their value. For example, one network created business opportunities for members by securing and managing a green and social public procurement project and cited that members have also successfully secured funding from opportunities provided by the network. Another network was a central contributor to a new policy that improved the definition of and business climate for its social enterprise members.

One network developed a successful reuse consortium where members came together to lead national procurement involving the purchase second hand furniture. Five of their members are currently active and the consortium has now traded £1 million.

Anecdotally networks hear from their members that it is better to be in a network rather than working alone as it raises their visibility in the sector, they can have collective impact and the knowledge sharing between members is very valuable. Some networks create case studies to illustrate member impact.

Opportunities for national networks include informing potential national & local policies to prioritize environment, social enterprise, advance EU Waste Framework Directive and Circular Economy Package, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes.

In terms of revenue models, national networks indicated that membership fees do not represent a sufficient source of income and that core funding, primarily from Government, is required to run the network. Several networks view membership fees as more of a commitment fee. For example, membership fees for one established network represents only 4% of revenue and for another established network less than 10% of revenue. Other ways some networks generate financial support is by tendering for work, charging for events and applying for project grants.

Next Steps

This research project has demonstrated that there is a keen interest in increasing the reuse and repair sector in Northern Ireland and a network would catalyse this potential. Services a network could provide to members would be funding opportunities, knowledge sharing/networking, promotion, policy representation and business opportunities. It is proposed members would join the network for free or pay a voluntary membership fee. The network would conduct an annual member survey to demonstrate its impact to members and work with members to begin self-reporting metrics to show their collective impact on the sector. The research also found a network would require core funding.