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JUDGES' REPORT

COMMUNITY INNOVATION

REPAIR CAFE BLENHEIM

INTERVIEWED

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DATE

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JUDGES

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021 a small group of parishioners from Blenheim's Nativity Church were exploring climate change and environmental issues as part of their mission. Hearing of Nelson's Repair Café, they decided to bring the initiative to Blenheim as a pragmatic way to pursue their ethos of caring for the environment and creation.

Repair Cafés are free meeting places where people gather to repair things together. There are tools and materials plus expert volunteers with skills in a wide range of fields. They do not formally teach people skills, but foster an on-the-job learning ethos.



Repair Cafés are a response to our throw-away society which has led to people forgetting or never learning how to repair things such as darning socks or fixing a lamp. Many things are built in such a way that they can't be repaired.

The Repair Café believes this lack of skill and throwaway culture is a threat to a sustainable future. They were interested in the notion of a circular economy where items and materials can be repurposed and used again, reducing the volume of raw materials and energy needed to make new products.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Repair Cafés started in the Netherlands based on an idea from Greenpeace that quickly spread through Northern Europe and internationally.

Repair Café Blenheim is affiliated to both the international organisation and the 30-strong network of Repair Café Aotearoa. Both organisations provide networking opportunities and a newsletter that is a rich source of information and ideas. They supported the 2022 Right-to-Repair petition to Parliament requiring that items are designed to last longer and be easier to repair.

Repair Café Blenheim is a fledgling organisation which has started small to become familiar with the process and to see if there was enough interest in Blenheim. The small core of talented and committed volunteers comprise eight repairers who have a range of skills from sewing clothing to fixing furniture.

Visitors bring broken items from home where they are assessed by the repairers and if something can be fixed, they work on it together. It's an ongoing, collaborative learning process. If someone doesn't know how to use tools and equipment this is an opportunity to learn. If they don't have the necessary tools, they may be able to use the tools and expertise at the Repair Café.

The Repair Café is open on the fourth Saturday of the month at Crossroads in Blenheim. The session is advertised on Facebook and states which volunteers' expertise will be available. Signs are put up around town before the Saturday and removed at the end of the session. Items are only repaired on site, on the day, so visitors are offered a 'cuppa and a chat' while they're waiting. During Covid they set up a marquee so they could continue to offer the service to everyone, with or without masks.

The Repair Café has well defined house rules that set out the parameters of the service and make sure visitors' expectations are clear and realistic. People bringing in items sign up to agree to the rules.

This is not an antique restoration service, as popularized on TV, nor do they repair items that should be professionally repaired as they have no wish to affect others' livelihoods.

The boundaries are clear – it's not a drop-in centre, but a place to fix and learn.

This is a lean organisation that runs on volunteer help. Basic administration such as photocopying and laminating is provided by the Nativity Church office. Social media is managed by the volunteer coordinator and other volunteers.

The Crossroads premises are provided free of charge, but Repair Café donates an annual koha which is sourced through a Blue Door grant. The 2022 grant of \$1600 also covered setting up costs including international Repair Café membership, tea and coffee and signage.



There are different workstations in the Repair Café – electronics, furniture, sewing, mobile phones and electrical appliances. There's a big variety in the range of items repaired and as they get more repairers with different expertise, the number of stations will increase.

It could be kitchen tongs that need a rivet or a printer that needs adjusting. Vacuum cleaners, torches, books, wooden furniture, kitchen appliances, jeans, scarf and a soaker hose are among the myriad of items brought in for assessment and repair.

Overall, they can't guarantee something will be fixed, but they do what they can. They are collecting manuals and instruction books off the internet and referenced by Repair Café International to be on hand for commonly used items.

A comprehensive "Repair Monitor Form" keeps track of what has come in and what's been repaired. Each volunteer repairer brings in their own tools and equipment. The Café has very few resources – they may get some spare parts from recycling centres for commonly repaired items, but there is limited storage space.

As the Repair Café has become more established, connections have been made with other organisations and projects, such as the Men's Shed and the Blue Door, resulting in more people stepping forward and offering their skills.

Communication about the initiative occurs through a variety of media, such as Marlborough Cool Cat Chat, Facebook and the local free newspapers.

The Repair Café has a vision for the future which includes plans to expand the space, more repairers and a wider range of repair options. Core to this is publicizing the service and raising awareness of the urgency of environmental action in the repair space – recycle, reuse, restore, and the benefits of repairing items rather than buying new.

At present, they open once a month ensuring that there is consistency but there is potential to meet more often.



THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- The range of community skills and the opportunity for people to volunteer and share those skills.
- The expectation that people bringing in items are not just dropping them off for someone else to deal with. By encouraging them to work with the repairer, they are learning how the item operates and what's needed to fix it, which tools to use, and how to use them.
- The well thought out House Rules that clearly set out the parameters of the service.
- The resourcefulness and innovation of volunteers - the No. 8 wire mentality is at work! Discussions with volunteers demonstrate they have ideas for the future such as repair café aprons with pockets and a logo, made from existing materials.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Finding enough repairers. They would like to have a registered electrician from a safety perspective, who could verify electrical repairs.
- There are often limits to what can be repaired, or altered (such as sewing alterations which can be professionally done).
- Currently they only have a few workstations as they get familiar with the processes and they would like to extend their range of offerings.
- Because Crossroads is a drop-in centre during the week, some of those people have tried to use the Café in the same way as there are few places to go at the weekend. This has made the volunteers very clear about setting boundaries and the expectations of being at the Repair Café.
- Keeping repair jobs small and achievable.
- Encouraging younger people to come in with something to repair. Fostering a mending mentality and opportunity to develop skills.

SUMMARY

Repair Café Blenheim is a timely, community-based response to the environmental consequences of endless consumption and the throw-away mentality.

Their efforts save landfill space and reduces demand for new commodities. It will be particularly attractive as the cost of living rises and gives people choices to repair, reuse and recycle rather than replace with new.

Energetic, engaged and skilled volunteers provide the opportunity for people to bring in precious items as well as everyday objects and give them a new lease of life. Ideas are bubbling as people work together, problem-solve, learn basic skills, and learn to maintain, repair and use tools. The benefits are captured by a volunteer who says they came in to “repair your soul”.

SUGGESTIONS

- There is huge potential to foster an upcycling mentality. Consider working with the Marlborough Girls College environmental sustainability team to develop a programme that could be presented to schools and other groups.
- Continue to promote the Café through the media and through organizations such as U3A, Age Concern, Grey Power and other church networks.
- Discuss an event that joins forces with the community garden including a pop-up Repair Café.
- With things that can't be repaired, people could be encouraged to look at items differently and turn them into something else – a garden sculpture, containers for plants or other uses. This would make a good topic for a public workshop.