

Make do and mend

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. If it is – take it to a Repair Café, advises **David Hughes**

IN THESE environmentally aware times, many people don't want to throw something away if it stops working, for what could be just a simple fault. And there are some people who love fixing things, and are good at it.

So – why not bring the two together? That's the inspiration behind Repair Cafés, which offer a pop-up venue for volunteer fixers and fixees (if that's a word). There are now an astonishing 2234 such Cafés worldwide, and in every locality the reaction has been identical: "What a brilliant idea."

A Repair Café will typically be held at a local church hall or similar venue about once a month. Advertised on Facebook and other social media, with posters, and notably by word of mouth, the event will last for either a half or a full day.

The Repair Café at Pocklington, in Yorkshire, meets once every second month, "always at the Scout Hut, on a Saturday, 1pm to 4pm," says founder Elizabeth Walker, who set up the event in 2018 as a spin-off from a collaboration

Setting up a Repair Café

The Repair Café International Foundation, based in Holland, supports local groups around the world to start their own Repair Café. All Cafés are wholly run by volunteers.

You can find a host of useful information on their website.

Included in a digital starter pack (voluntary donation of 49 euros suggested) is an extensive Repair Café manual with step-by-step advice for finding volunteers, publicising events, locating premises, finding funding, and more, along with the Repair Café logo, templates for posters and a press release, registration and other forms.

The foundation also has advice about potential insurers. Once set up, a new Repair Café will be listed on the foundation's website.

with friends to promote "things that will have less impact on the environment".

The concept was already familiar to her, as she had visited a Repair Café in Sheffield. And, in any case, "I was brought up very much with that ethos – my dad was always mending things."

At first, Elizabeth advertised on Facebook for volunteers, and had a good response. Then a venue was chosen – the local Scout Hut – "which let us have it free for the first one, just to see how it went."

It was a big success.

"Everyone thoroughly enjoyed doing it, the public thought it was brilliant, and the idea soon caught on"

Elizabeth Walker, founder of The Repair Café at Pocklington, Yorkshire

"Everyone thoroughly enjoyed doing it, the public thought it was brilliant, and the idea soon caught on," remembers Elizabeth. "It was interesting to notice that doing the publicity for the first one, I had to explain the idea to everyone. But it wasn't long before all I had to do was say we have a Repair Café on Saturday, and people knew what it was."

Portability...

Items to be fixed must be portable – so no fridge-freezers or large televisions.

"We get a lot of kettles and lamps. On the last session we had a Karcher power washer; we've done lawn mowers, there was a bicycle once."

Elizabeth's team of volunteers includes four men who do mainly electrical and furniture repairs, including one who is qualified in Portable Appliance Testing.

"And then we have two women who bring their sewing machines and lots of thread, and do the fabric repairs."

A further, more recent volunteer is able to bring another level of skill,



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as she can expertly restore crockery, small furniture and other items. "So we're expanding all the time," says Elizabeth.

Most items can be fixed, so customers are happy, and so are the volunteers.

Look and learn

"It amazes me how much our repairers thoroughly enjoy the sessions," says Elizabeth. "When someone gets a bit stumped, they ask advice from the others. And I love it when they all start to pool their knowledge, and learn things from each other."

For knowledge-sharing in pre-Covid days, customers were encouraged to watch while the repairs were done, so that they might be able to fix the item themselves in the future. But social distancing has put that aspect on hold for the time being, with mask-wearing guidelines also currently being in place.

Covid notwithstanding, the Repair Café is "very much a social event", says Elizabeth. The name does imply refreshments, after all, and "we have a lady who makes tea and coffee, and volunteers bring cake and biscuits, things like that. We've had to be a bit more careful since Covid, of course."

Finance

The finances of running a Repair Café are reasonably straightforward, but not without some hurdles to overcome. Elizabeth discovered that holding regular public events would involve having to take out insurance, the cost of which would not be covered by donations.

"So we knew we needed to apply for funding, and to do that we needed a bank account. And to get a bank account, we needed a constitution.

"We've now done that, and applied to our town council for help with the insurance, which they unanimously agreed to give us, which was brilliant."

Having negotiated the ins and outs of setting up the Repair Café, Elizabeth affiliated it with the Repair Café International Foundation and it is listed on their website. The foundation offers help and advice in setting up Repair Cafés.

Elizabeth hopes that more localities will soon reap the benefits of their own Repair Café.

"I would love to see these popping up all over the place, it's such a good idea. And it truly is so enjoyable. Everybody who takes part just loves it."

Find out more

■ (www.repairCafé.org)

Repair Café Q&A

■ **How much does it cost to mend things in the Repair Café?** Advice and help from experts in the Repair Café is free of charge, although a voluntary donation is appreciated from satisfied customers. Such donations help to cover the organiser's costs.

■ **Do I have to register to visit a Repair Café?** Generally, no. If registration is required, the organisers will say so in their publicity – otherwise you can just drop by the Repair Café without an appointment.

■ **Can I drop by at times other than the advertised opening hours?** No. Repair Cafés are neighbourhood gatherings that only take place on certain days at arranged times. If you drop by at other times, you won't find any repairers on hand.

■ **My TV/mixer is broken. Can you fix it?** Most things stand a good chance of being properly repaired. If you wish to make sure a specialist repairer is on hand the day you want to drop in, get in touch with the organisers of your local Repair Café (see Repair Café Foundation website for details).

■ **What kind of things can I bring to the Repair Café?** Anything that's broken and which you can manage to carry by yourself to the Repair Café is welcome. Items include electrical appliances, clothing, furniture, crockery, houseware, bicycles, toys etc. See previous question for availability of experts.

■ **I can repair things. Could I help in an existing Repair Café?** Please do! You can find your nearest Repair Café through the Repair Café Foundation website.

Information taken from the Repair Café International Foundation website: (www.repairCafé.org).



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Repair Cafés by numbers



2234: Estimated number of Repair Cafés around the world



33,510: Estimated number of volunteers involved



40,212: Estimated number of items repaired each month