Harrow Sustain IT

This case study was produced as part of the Harrow Reuse Directory project run by Harrow Council and Groundwork London.

The directory is a part of Harrow Council's commitment to creating a circular economy in Harrow, by creating a free online platform to promote Harrow-based businesses which provide repair, reuse and recycling services. Prior to its launch, Harrow Council awarded three £9,374 grants to local projects and businesses whose aims aligned with that of the directory. Voluntary Action Harrow were the recipients of one such grant for their project: Harrow Sustain IT.

Find out more about the directory, sign your business up, or use it to find a sustainable local business to support: harrowdirectory.com

Voluntary Action Harrow is a workers cooperative based in Harrow, North-West London. Its members work with local community groups and individuals to help them to make a difference in their community. In January 2022 they launched 'Harrow Sustain IT', a project which aims to tackle waste and digital inequalities in the local community. Through a series of 'repair workshops', members of the local community learn to fix and clean up donated laptops, which are then be distributed to local charities and voluntary organizations for donation.

The idea for Harrow Sustain IT came about during the COVID19 lockdown, after the groups discovered that several of the organizations and individuals they were working with didn't have adequate access to IT equipment during the lockdown period.

"Access to IT equipment is crucial to young people's education, especially during the COVID19 lockdown. We work with several groups offering supplementary education to youth in Harrow, and we were seeing that many attendees were really struggling - particularly those from low income backgrounds. We were seeing who families sharing just one laptop, making it extremely difficult for young people to continue their education online"

The link between digital exclusion and poverty is clear, and this gap becomes even more poignant when we consider the fact that there are currently an estimated 31 million unwanted laptops sitting idle in homes across the UK[1].

"So many laptops go to landfill each year because it's so much easier for people to buy a new one rather than spend time and money fixing the one they have. Meanwhile low-income communities can't afford to do this. It's such a waste."

1 Recycle Your Electricals: https://www.recycleyourelectricals.org.uk/sell-second-hand-electronics/

In addition to addressing social inequality, recycling and redistributing unused laptops helps people to do their bit to tackle the climate crisis.

The UK is the world's second highest producer of e-waste per capita, producing 24kg per person per year[2]. The effect this has on the environment is monumental. Laptops contain toxic materials which can seep from the landfill into our waterway and oceans. Meanwhile this 'cradle to grave' life cycle of products causes further environmental destruction as more metals are mined and plastic produced to satisfy customer demand.

By fixing and donating unused laptops, Sustain IT is working to tackle the issue head on.

"With Harrow Sustain IT we're taking a two-pronged approach to the problem, we're working to reduce e-waste and our collective carbon footprint by reducing the amount of laptops being discarded, while also helping people from disadvantaged communities by providing them with a refurbished laptop."

By empowering people to fix their own electronics through their repair events, the Harrow Sustain IT team hope that the positive outcomes of their work could have a ripple effect into other parts of the community.

"One of our volunteers works in a charity shop where they're forced to throw away a lot of the donated electrical items due to safety concerns. If he can gain a solid foundation in PAT testing and electrical repair from the Sustain IT sessions then he may be able to save more of the electrical goods donated to the shop."

Alongside helping tackle environmental and social issues, Sustain IT is also a skill-sharing forum, and is bringing people together from across Harrow's community to teach and learn from each other, build friendships, and strengthen their community ties.

"We were pleasantly surprised by the amount of diversity at our first repairing event. We had people of different genders, ethnicities and age - from their early 20's to their 70's - in attendance. A young gentleman with a learning disability was able to come and join in with the help of someone on his table who was quite experienced in repairing and kindly talked him through each step. It's great to see so many different members of our community come together in an open, non-judgemental space"

Harrow Sustain IT is just one of the organizations featured in the Harrow Reuse Directory. Find out more about the directory, sign your business up, or use it to find a sustainable local business to support: harrowdirectory.com

2 Edie: https://www.edie.net/library/In-charts--How-big-is-the-UK-s-waste-mountain---and-what-are-we-recycling-/7046