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Brighton & Hove's city reuse project

Office clearance project transforms approach to waste and work

Brighton & Hove city council has developed an innovative way to minimise waste as part of an ambitious office modernisation programme. Its rigorous reuse system for furniture and equipment avoids the financial and environmental costs of disposal, brings about changes in working and purchasing habits, and benefits local organisations and community groups.

Brighton & Hove has long been one of the UK's most environmentally aware and active cities. The local authority set up a pioneering, cross-party sustainability commission in 2003 and was the first city globally to achieve One Planet Living status. Today it is the lead authority in the UNESCO designated biosphere programme 'The Living Coast', due in part to its strong focus on sustainability. Brighton & Hove is also the first UK city to have a Green MP and is home to the first building in the UK constructed solely from waste materials. When the council developed modernisation plans for its 25 office buildings, environmental objectives were high on the agenda, alongside saving money and modernising work spaces. The council was very conscious that renovating and vacating its offices and preparing for their paperless future would reveal an enormous volume of unwanted furniture and office resources. Choosing to see this as an opportunity to explore new ways of being less wasteful and more resourceful, it turned to local reuse practitioner and campaigner Cat Fletcher for inspiration and help.

“There was an ambition to change how unwanted goods are viewed so they are kept in circulation and to change behaviour to reduce paper use and office space so costs and carbon emissions are cut.”

Cat Fletcher, reuse manager, Brighton & Hove city council

Rethinking waste

Through her contribution to the city sustainability partnership, Cat had opened the council's eyes to reuse as a means of displacing the need to buy new, saving waste disposal costs, reducing carbon emissions and being able to give free supplies to individuals and public sector, commercial and voluntary organisations. The decision was made to pilot a simple, non-bureaucratic reuse process model combining Cat's proven pragmatic and creative approach with city-wide, cross-sector collaboration. A number of demonstrator clear-out projects were undertaken

cities in action

November 2017

where: Brighton & Hove, UK
what: Participation
when: January 2016 - March 2017

concentrating on keeping unwanted goods in circulation through redistribution. These showed that the model could massively reduce the flow of usable items and materials entering the waste stream, in contrast to the old system of removal and disposal via landfill and incineration. As a result, Cat was appointed the city's first reuse manager and tasked with the biggest project of all, the closure of Kings House, home to 100,000 square feet of office space and 1,000 staff.

We have to rethink our relationship with stuff because it matters: we only have one planet and we can't recycle it.

Cat Fletcher - reuse manager, Brighton & Hove city council

Creating value

Cat started working alongside staff six months before the move, helping them see unwanted items in a new light and categorise less as waste. Sorting areas were set up equipped with mobile collecting cages, boxes and labels to make it easy for items to be separated. Distribution was managed via real life and online networks, including the local Freegle reuse community, and reached residents, community groups, charities, start-ups, circular economy projects, artists, hospitals, universities, builders and schools. Transport costs were negligible as recipients collected the items they wanted and volunteers were called in via social media when extra hands were needed.

Many local entrepreneurs and designers came up with imaginative ways of repurposing items. One café made a ceiling from ring binders, university students built robots from furniture and electronic gadgets, and a property company converted filing cabinets into mobile flower beds. A sustainable fashion designer worked with Cat to turn thousands of plastic in-trays into laser-cut sunglasses - and create a new brand.

Everything from paper clips to building materials and sports equipment to the contents of a commercial kitchen was redistributed, with just half a van load left at the end of the project. In total, more than 150 tonnes of material was reused, equating to €165,000 of economic value re-entering the community and carbon savings of 225 tonnes. The reuse manager role represented an overall saving of €41,000 compared to paying a waste disposal company to clear the building.



Shifting behaviour

These figures are not the only measure of success. The council believes the project has changed the way it thinks about its offices, assets and approach to work and that this culture shift will pay ongoing dividends by preventing unnecessary purchasing and disposal costs. It also cites the goodwill generated among the people and organisations of the city as a positive outcome that will have a lasting effect on support for future environmental initiatives.

According to Cat Fletcher, three factors are key to the project's achievements. Working with staff at the start of the sorting process to influence their mindset, being flexible during the sorting process to accommodate different teams' schedules and styles of working and keeping a record of all goods, transactions and recipients so impact can be evidenced.

There were, though, some challenges along the way. One of the most significant was overcoming resistance to the reuse of IT equipment not holding data, such as keyboards, mice, chargers and monitors. Previously, the IT department had followed the EU WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) Directive, which specifies how to dispose of and recycle this equipment, but says nothing about reuse. Reuse was, therefore, not seen as part of the department's responsibility.

The council is now committed to making reuse a vital component in any future building modernisation programme. In the meantime, Cat is advising other UK cities who wish to replicate the model, giving presentations to the recycling and waste management sector and maintaining the momentum she has created around waste prevention by exploring the development of a city reuse depot to trigger innovative cross-sector projects.

