

Right to Repair: Australian Government, Productivity Commission inquiry

Submission by Transition Darebin – Darebin Repair Café

Transition Darebin is a community group based in the municipality of Darebin, Victoria which aims to inspire a transition to more sustainable ways of living, in the face of resource depletion and a dramatically changing global climate. We offer opportunities to be informed about climate/environmental issues, learn and share practical knowledge and build stronger connections between local people, in order to create a healthy, sustainable and inclusive community. Transition Darebin has been running for over ten years and has incubated many projects, working groups and events.

Darebin Repair Café is a sub-group of Transition Darebin and is one of a growing network of Repair Cafes in Australia and around the world.

A Repair Café provides a free meeting place at which someone with a household item in need of repair can meet with a person with the required practical skills to either repair the item on-site or provide information so the owner can repair it in their own time. The repairers volunteer their time and expertise, thus enabling a free service.

In addition to all the flow-on environmental benefits of keeping waste from landfill, Repair Café aims to foster a culture of extending the life of products and provide people with the skills and confidence to do this. Our hope is that this will extend to breaking down the broader community throwaway culture.

The Darebin Repair Café comments on the Right to Repair Inquiry relate mostly to the questions raised in the Inquiry Issues Paper under Information Requests # 1, 4, 6, 8. We share the concerns raised in other sections of the Issues Paper, particularly issues affecting the reparability of goods, availability of parts, restrictive practices, access to repairers, cost of repair versus replacement, planned obsolescence. E-waste is an area of serious concern. However, we focus our comments on the questions of most direct relevance to repair café operation.

The Inquiry definition of a 'right to repair' as the ability of consumers to have their products repaired at a competitive price by the repairer of their choice provides a succinct statement of the need if we as a society are to reduce our environmental footprint, specifically to reduce the amount of material which is thrown out, with all the economic and environmental costs involved in managing the waste and in production of replacement goods.

Darebin Repair Café (DRC) is linked with Repair Café International, and the agreed measure of material repaired is by weight of the item, which is in turn a measure of weight kept out of the waste stream and most likely sent to landfill. Repair Café International calculates that in 2019 successful repairs prevented 420,000 kg from going to landfill and saved approx 10 million kg of CO2 emissions. They record 2000 repair cafes globally, of which 46 are in Australia. Ref: <https://www.repaircafe.org/en/>.

DRC has run 17 repair cafes over the past 3 years. During that time over 700 items have been repaired, representing a total weight of over 1.5 tonnes. This ranges from very light jewellery or clothing items to heavier household items, including a large TV and furniture items. Not all items brought to the Repair Café can be repaired on-site – generally this would be due to lack of a required part or equipment or expertise, sometimes due to product design. In most cases approximately 70% of items brought are repaired.

Generally repairs are not particularly complex for a person with the appropriate knowledge and tools, but such a repairer would be difficult if not impossible to find in the broader

community. If there were a suitable repairer, it is likely that the task is one they would consider too minor to bother with or it would cost more than a new, replacement item.

Planned obsolescence is a major barrier to repair – items may need only a minor component fixed or replaced, but the item has been designed in such a way as it cannot be disassembled. Many people express great frustration at this – they don't like to send items to waste and would repair them if they could.

In our experience, electrical items outnumber others in demand – and sadly also in inability to repair. This stems to some extent from item design (planned obsolescence) but also from lack of availability of skilled repairers in this field.

The Repair Café offers a test and tag service - all electrical items brought for repair are tested, and people also can bring items just for test and tag. But electrical is the field in which we have greatest difficulty finding volunteer repairers with the requisite skills. There is a great unmet demand for test and tag as well as for general electrical repairs.

It has been observed anecdotally that household items such as pedestal fans, small heaters, toasters are commonplace among waste put out by residents for the Council hard waste collection – another indicator that electrical waste is a serious component of the 'non-repairable' or 'cheaper to replace than repair' waste stream.

Actions which would reduce barriers to repairing goods may include:

Support community groups such as Repair Café or other waste rescue and repurpose organisations for basic costs such as test and tag training and equipment and general toolkit to enable a range of basic repairs.

Support Municipal Councils, businesses or programs such as 'mobile muster' which collect and either repair or re-purpose discarded goods or their component parts.

Support small businesses which provide repair services for general items – clothing, jewellery, household items, furniture, toys.

Require Manufacturers (OEMs) to take 'cradle to grave' responsibility for their products through a range of strategies which may include:

- to build 'repairability' into product design
- to provide product support when their actions such as software updates would otherwise render the product unusable
- to contribute to the cost of disposal of their products, as an incentive to design for longer product life.

Ensure that Skills Training provides sufficient people in the community with the skills required to carry out repairs.

Ensure that practices provide for repair options to be accessible and economical.

While Repair Café is limited to relatively small household items, these add up to significant quantities of waste. Encouraging and enabling a repair culture at community level also feeds up to demand on manufacturers and decision-makers to adopt practices and introduce incentives and regulations which support extending the life of products.

We welcome this Inquiry and look forward to recommendations and real action towards a culture of repair rather than throw out and replace.