

A city reuse centre like you

Something special is happening in the city as Suez and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority team up to take reuse and repair to the next level at the unique Renew Hub in Trafford. **DANIEL BOSLEY** paid a visit

You would not expect anything unusual was going on as you head down an average road, on an average industrial estate, to the average transfer station in Trafford Park, Greater Manchester. Heading past idling trucks and non-descript warehouses inhabited by MOT centres, plant hire firms and couriers, you would be forgiven for thinking you had left the history of the world's first industrial city a couple of tram journeys behind you.

But only a few hundred feet away lies the Manchester Ship Canal, the largest of its type anywhere when it opened in 1894, while Trafford Park became the world's first planned industrial estate shortly after. Just like the old mills and grand cotton exchanges in the city centre, this is an area that helped to shape Britain's first industrial revolution.

"What Manchester does today, the rest of the world does tomorrow," then prime minister Benjamin Disraeli once said of the city. As today's leaders talk of a second, green, industrial revolution to counter the side-effects of the first, a visit to the Greater Manchester Renew Hub will leave you hoping that Disraeli is still right.

The Hub, run by Suez Recycling & Recovery UK and Recycle for Greater Manchester (R4GM) – part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) – was previously used for the composting of organic waste. The typical aromas of any treatment facility remind you that this still goes on just next door. But, inside, something much fresher awaits.

Through the doors, you might think you had entered a theme park attraction, finding yourself in a narrow tunnel, heading towards a glowing yellow entrance with the words 'Welcome to the Hub'. You then walk through an actual skip, cocooned in rough steel, with a canopy of bric-a-brac – you have become waste. But it's only momentary, and any lingering sense that this is an average waste management facility disappears as you exit into the Renew Hub for the full treatment.

"You don't have the concept of what it is until you walk in there and see it," says David Taylor, executive director of waste and resources for the GMCA, showing off the project's progress, 18 months after it began.



Design for life: items arranged like design shops and (below) repair demonstrations



"It always leaves you feeling slightly awestruck."

The cavernous space of more than 5,000sq m that greets you is split into three sections. The first is the still-evolving events area, marking the latest phase in a project that has made 75,000 individual items available for reuse in the past 12 months.

The idea for the Hub was born in 2018, when the GMCA put its new waste management con-

tract out for procurement. But there was a key difference: whereas social value components would previously have amounted to just 2% of the overall marks awarded to a bid, this time it was 15%. This forced anyone seeking the contract to get creative.

Taking advantage of the vacated building in Trafford, Suez spotted a unique opportunity for a unique project, explains Daniel Carolan, Suez's contract director. Indeed, the word 'unique' is one heard repeatedly during the tour of this one-of-a-kind facility.

"It's not often in my career I have had the opportunity to walk into a completely blank canvas and do something from scratch," says Carolan. "There's nothing like this out there."

Stretching across the far wall, a mural by Manchester street artist Kelzo features iconic figures from the nine councils involved in the GMCA's waste contract: Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, and Tameside. But the wall is dominated by an image of Trafford's own Frank Sidebottom.

We climb up to a shipping container converted into a football stand, sitting on top of carefully curated scenes showcasing the best that reuse has to offer, where even the wooden

u've never seen before

floors were once an army barracks' sports hall. From up here, visitors can watch films on the big screen opposite or gaze out at the hive of activity below.

On the opposite side of the huge hall lie rows of items collected from across the GMCA's household waste and recycling centres (HWRCs), where staff are on the lookout for any items that can still be saved from that dreaded drop down the waste hierarchy. The authority says it has increased the amount of waste diverted from landfill from 90% to 98%, between 2017 and 2021, and expects to improve on that figure this year.

Of the GMCA's 20 HWRCs, those in Eccles, Altrincham and Oldham are also home to the three Renew Shops, where pre-loved items will end up after paying their own visits to the Renew Hub. At the Hub, donated items will be cleaned and checked, with electrical goods tested or stripped for parts and some bits of furniture chosen for refurbishment or upcycling projects by the team on-site.

As we tour the Hub, we see designer Sarah Parmenter, often featured on the BBC's *Money for Nothing* programme, busily working on her latest creation. The popularity of such shows, in which people are encouraged to turn their trash into cash, is symptomatic of the way in which opinions are changing, according to Carolan.

"Ten years ago, I think the public mood wouldn't have been as receptive as it is now," he says. "We still had that stigma of 'oh, it's second hand, it's cheap and nasty', whereas now that



Community education: teaching bike maintenance

stuff is cool. You put the TV on in the afternoon and one of these programmes will be on."

Greater Manchester celebrated Repair Week in March along with the rest of the country, which, despite ranking 21st in terms of total population, has historically been fifth in global greenhouse gas emissions. Even as the UK inches towards long-promised reforms in the waste and resources sector, many are beginning to recognise that recycling alone will not be enough.

Suez opened its first reuse shop in 2012 in Devon, where almost all the county's HWRCs now have them. It envisions the permanent replacement of that W for 'waste' with an R for 'reuse' at all centres, where it estimates 35,500 reusable items are missed every day.

The Renew Hub represents the UK's first attempt to deliver these services on an industrial scale. But Suez estimates that, with supporting Government policies, the repair and reuse sector could manage more than 15 >>

Street art: Manchester's street artists have got involved in the space and (below right) one of the Reuse Shops at a local HWRC





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million items during the next five years, which would be worth £63m a year to local authorities and more than 930,000 tonnes of CO₂e to the planet.

The need to introduce a retail mindset to ramp-up reuse is seen in the methodical way in which stock is categorised and catalogued in the Hub, says Carolan. Designated spaces for the three Renew Shops to ‘pull out’ what they need rather than having unwanted items ‘pushed’ on to them allows for a professional presentation, he explains, rather than creating a giant city-scale jumble sale.

Three vans regularly pull into the Hub to drop off donated items before selecting new stock. They are joined by collections from charity partners, which includes Mustard Tree, the British Heart Foundation and Emmaus, which are able to take whatever items they like.

Across the hall is the online sales section, where customers can come and collect items bought from the hub’s eBay shop. It is there that the highest-value ‘vintage’, the best in ‘bespoke’ and the upper-tier of ‘upcycled’ is displayed for a wider audience. A semi-circular boucle modular sofa tops the listings at the time of visiting, closely followed by a carbon-fibre Boardman Team bike, with a reupholstered pink-velvet chaise lounge relaxing further down the listings.

Carolan accepts that the availability of the site in Trafford was the clear differentiator in this project, but it’s the GMCA’s growing commitment to social value – which Taylor says would probably be up to 20% of a bid’s assessment today – that appears to have added strategic importance for prospective contractors.

“The wider industry has got a flavour of this place and they are trying to come and have a look,” says Carolan, adding that other councils are equally intrigued.

As well as hosting curious companies from across the waste and recycling sector, the events space is being used for free community education projects, teaching bike maintenance and basic electrical skills, as well as for master-classes run by experts like Paul Cunliffe of Wigan-based upholstery specialist the Patch Perfect Academy.



View of the Hub: ‘it can leave you feeling slightly awestruck’



Working alongside these in-house experts in the Hub’s repair pods, ex-offenders – part of the Recycling Lives social sustainability programme – also receive training, as do those still on day-release from nearby Styal Prison.

“For every pound the GMCA spends on this contract, it generates £3.12 in social value in the Greater Manchester region,” says Carolan. He explains that 60% of the project’s procurement spend on all goods and supplies must be within the GMCA area.

The Hub currently employs 32 people, and previous research has estimated that 10,000 tonnes of waste can create 296 jobs in repair and reuse compared with just 36 for recycling alone. From just over a million tonnes of waste handled on behalf of the GMCA in the past year, around 800 tonnes have been renewed, explains Carolan.

As part of the project, Suez has committed to donate a minimum of £320,000 a year to local communities, with £100,000 going to the Greater Manchester Mayor’s Charity focusing on homelessness and £220,000 donated to the R4GM Community Fund. The fund’s third year of applications opened on 3 April, offering up to £10,000 per project.

Previous grants have been awarded to composting clubs, children’s clothing banks, food waste prevention, recycling awareness programmes for people with learning disabilities and a project that turned crisp packets into thermal blankets for those sleeping rough. One former recipient of funds, Manchester Bike Kitchen, was so successful that it now has a permanent residence at the Hub, having repaired more than 1,500 bikes in the last year.

The Hub’s feel-good factor is certainly something that radiates far beyond its humble surroundings, as Taylor explains.

“We could have taken you to one of the main waste processing sites, and you’d come away from there with a different feeling because you would be looking at a sports hall-sized building full of waste. Yet you come here and it’s a completely different feeling you leave with because you’re totally inspired by it.”

With work ongoing to acquire an alcohol licence and food hygiene certificates for larger events, the Renew Hub looks set to serve even more educational and recreational purposes. There is even talk of it going matrimonial.

“We’ve had our first request for a wedding reception in the events space,” says Carolan, with the site now proving so popular that an events manager is being recruited.

An industrial estate in Trafford certainly wouldn’t be where most people would choose to take their vows, but it might be the perfect place to get them renewed. 🌱