



Crafting Sustainable Communities

A research report by Alana McPake

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**Creative
Lives**



Context

Community craft groups were mindful of how and what materials they used, long before ‘sustainability’, ‘eco-friendly’, or ‘green’ made their way into our vocabulary. Yet their sustainable practices have often been overlooked. Our new report champions amateur activity as a force for environmental good. This report highlights the creative work of these groups, explores some of the barriers to doing more, and celebrates the role of community craft in working towards a more sustainable society.



Alana McPake

I am in the final year of my PhD in History at the University of Glasgow. Since 2021, I have researched women's dressmaking in post-war Britain, exploring how and why that skill has declined over generations. As a small part of this, I have made some of the patterns found in women's magazines and in domestic science programmes.

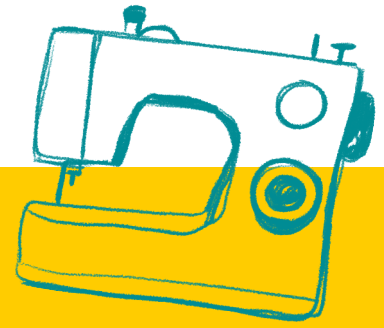


I came to this research through personal interest – I began sewing in 2019, a hobby that continued to grow during the lockdowns. I started it because I was interested in slow or sustainable fashion, thinking about the ethics of our clothes. But the advice I received was often a blunt “Just make and mend your own clothes”, a statement that didn't always sit right with me – because not everyone can.

My mum taught me to knit, my aunt taught me to sew, my gran taught me to cross-stitch, and I taught myself to crochet. Inevitably, embroidery will be added to this list. I saw a connection between ‘make-do and mend’ and ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ as slogans, and as bookends to periods of significant (but understudied) change.

I learnt, and continued to develop, these skills for pleasure and on principle because I actively think about sustainability and build it into my practice. But a lot of what is sustainable about my practice is built-in and passive, because I inherited it. A friend of my mum's passed on a sewing machine she'd had as a girl but no longer used; my sewing table also came to me second-hand, a gift from my aunt through someone she knew. Many knitting needles and crochet hooks came from my mum's mum – someone I never met but, through these possessions, feel I have a connection to.

A lot of our practice is sustainable, when we stop to notice it. I felt strongly that this report should reflect just that: to call attention to what we might overlook and therefore undervalue. Visiting these craft groups reminded me of what sparked my research and practice in the first place, and I'm grateful to everyone at Creative Lives and the community crafters I visited for this experience.



Introduction

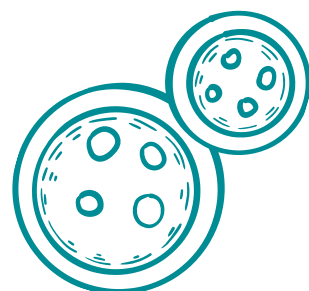
Why look at textile crafts and sustainability?

The problem we face

How we consume clothing and textiles is important in today's landscape because these industries damage our planet and its people. The fashion sector is the second biggest consumer of water, after food, and is responsible for between two and eight percent of all global carbon emissions – more than all international flights and maritime shipping put together [1].

Fast fashion makes it all too easy to buy new and buy often. Ten years ago, people bought around 60% more clothing than they had in 2000 – and held onto these items for half as long [2]. Britain's part in this turnover leaves a lot of room for improvement. We buy more clothes than anywhere else in Europe and can be particularly wasteful around festivities, like buying a new Halloween costume or Christmas jumper every year (even though two in five of us only wore last season's choice once before throwing it away) [3].

These issues are daunting but are not going unnoticed. For example, the booming second-hand market is driven, at least partially, by a desire to reduce consumption and avoid buying new. Research by Statista showed millions of Britons use the resale platforms Depop and Vinted, and this style of shopping can be a cost-effective and sustainable way to access fashion. Price seems more important than ethics – half of sampled users spoke about saving money compared to two in ten who mentioned sustainability – but the net benefit remains positive [4].



Non-profit organisations like Fashion Revolution campaign for a ‘clean, safe, fair, transparent and accountable fashion industry’, appealing to businesses and governments alike [5]. Targeted legislation might be lacking, but a general commitment to tackling environmental issues is growing. Scotland’s Circular Economy Act, for example, while not specifically addressing textile waste, demonstrates a commitment to waste prevention. In passing this bill, MSPs agreed to support initiatives for reuse, recycling, or recovery, with the disposal of materials seen as a last resort. Similarly, although many criticised the lack of discussion around textiles and fashion at COP26, Glasgow’s hosting of the UN climate change conference undoubtedly increased public awareness of climate issues [6].

Many now champion making and mending clothes and textiles as circular economy practices, whether we learn these skills ourselves or enlist the services of other people or organisations. And this is far from the first time that craft and ethics have overlapped – the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement, associated with people like William Morris, championed artisan work over machine-made products. More recently, the Make-do and Mend campaign, spearheaded by the Board of Trade during World War II, framed making and mending clothing as a patriotic duty. There are echoes of both these historical movements in our own craft resurgence but still it is a unique moment – influenced by years of austerity in Britain, for instance, and by the climate disaster.

Making and mending are once again becoming more mainstream. Major high street retailers now offer repair and alterations services: Marks and Spencer customers can book in for a range of services, from reattaching buttons to darning holes, with service provider SOJO. John Lewis also trialled a repair service in 2024 in partnership with Timpson, a company with a decades-long history of repairing shoes that, in 2017, added clothing repair and alterations to its offerings. We are seeing more of this culture on our screens, too. The Repair Shop debuted in 2017 and tackles all kinds of repairs including soft toys, upholstery, and footwear. The Great British Sewing Bee, often credited with relaunching interest in dressmaking, spent a whole episode during its 2024 season on ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle’ – and every episode features a ‘Transformation Challenge’ where contestants creatively upcycle something.



The power of craft, community, and community craft

“It is time to wipe words such as ‘consumer’, ‘customer’, and ‘user’ from our vocabulary. Time to speak of ‘people’.”

Donald Norman [Bridgens]

Craft helps us forge connections to things, people, and places. We constantly engage with textiles, from the curtains we open to welcome the day to the clothes we put on our bodies. Deciding to make or mend our own clothing challenges the dominance of fast fashion and helps us craft (literally) our identities and communities [8]. Labouring to make something develops our technical skills and increases our emotional connection with what we made [9]. This can be a form of ‘quiet activism’ that plays out in our everyday lives [10]. Because these items are so familiar to us, large-scale climate issues can feel relevant to us and something that we can influence [11]; it ‘play[s] out in the space of the vernacular, the everyday, and the amateur’.

Community craft pays a ‘double dividend’ in our personal and public lives. It both improves the life of the individual and helps them contribute positively to the world around them. This social impact is likewise twofold: the community groups we work in reap the first benefit, but that impact then filters out into wider culture [12]. Working with everyday and local examples is key to understanding and tackling global issues – it breaks down the gigantic into ‘smaller scales of meaning’ [13].

Community craft organisations are well placed to help us do just that, and the presence of craft in our communities improves them. Those who make or mend will often employ these skills in the workplace and out of it [14], maximising the benefits offered to their community. Likewise, craft and circular spaces like repair cafes, tool libraries, scrap stores and upcycling hubs pivot our engagement away from big business to small, local enterprises [15]. All of this repersonalises fashion and textiles, compared to the remote, global production chains which depersonalise.

The more familiar we are with craft, the circular economy and related issues, the better placed we are to tackle the ‘cultural void’ between theory and practice [16], and start to ‘generate a new ethic, or sensibility’ towards the clothing and textiles we have [17].



‘Sustainability’, ‘circular economy’ – What’s in a name?

‘Sustainability’, ‘circular economy’, ‘eco-friendly’, ‘green’ – it’s very easy to get caught up in how they differ and which word is best to use. The terminology might confuse people or alienate them from taking part in research [18], and researchers debate whether to use it because of that (although there is a tension between understanding this and still wanting to properly recognise the actions being discussed [19]). Likewise there is debate over whether to talk about ‘sustainability’ or the ‘circular economy’ – are they the same, are they different, and to what extent does this matter?

Researchers from the Ellen Macarthur Foundation argue that ‘sustainability’ is probably the more recognisable term, used as an ‘easy social shorthand’ for anything being done ‘better’, whether on a large scale or at a household level. Yet ‘circular economy’ is probably the more precise term, with three clearly defined strands: eliminating waste and pollution, circulating products and materials, and regenerating nature. More crudely, the difference might be viewed as doing ‘more good’ (circular economy) versus ‘less bad’ (sustainability) [20].

This is further complicated by the fact that what is ‘good’ for one craft may not be for another, so we need to iron out our own definition [21]. What sustainability looks like changes from person to person and organisation to organisation – there is no one size fits all. We must balance best practice with an open practice: to encourage participation and progress without becoming exclusionary.

For this report, I spoke with representatives from craft and circular economy organisations, like the Knitting and Crochet Guild and Culture for Climate Scotland (previously Creative Carbon Scotland), to get their perspectives on this balance. They represented both ends of the spectrum: craft organisations that might do sustainable work, and sustainability organisations that might do craft work.

The Knitting and Crochet Guild does not give out specific advice on sustainability and finds it a complicated issue. Often there is a tension between affordability and sustainability. Acrylic or other synthetic yarn tends to be less expensive than yarn made from cotton, merino, or silk. In one view, natural materials are preferable because they are biodegradable, but their production does put a strain on the environment, and they are usually more expensive.



Other questions also play a part in influencing material choices. People ask: will this yarn be easy to wash and care for? Will it set off my allergies? Clearly many factors go into making this decision and there is no universal rule that the Knitting and Crochet Guild can set for its members. However, the Guild works towards a circular economy in other ways. Many branches gift free knitting needles or crochet hooks to people who would like to learn, keeping these tools from landfill and helping the crafts be accessible to all. Furthermore the Guild's journal, Slipknot regularly publishes articles that encourage members to not buy new – to buy from charity shops and scrap stores, perhaps, or to look again at their own stashes.

Culture for Climate Scotland (CCS) spoke about their Green Arts Charter (a sister Green Crafts charter is under review) as a tool to inspire and measure change. Professionals and amateurs alike are welcome to sign up and pledge to improve their carbon footprint by working on four key areas. Every new signup is announced and welcomed into the 'Mighty Network' of other pledgers. This is a small but effective touch. CCS congratulates people for taking that first step and instantly inducts the new pledger into a community.

Furthermore, the organisation reminds anyone signing up that change does not happen overnight and we do not all have the same resources to hand. CCS recommends working with Stephen Covey's circles of concern, influence, and control to filter out what is beyond our control and prioritise what we can change. For example, a knitting group may not be able to give its members eco-friendly materials, but it can encourage them to carefully consider the yarn they use, share resources to avoid unnecessary waste, or create items to raise awareness of environmental issues [22].

What works for one maker may not work for another, but combined efforts help us progress towards crafting more sustainably. It's important that we don't get so distracted by terminology that we forget to act at all. In this report, I talk about 'sustainability' and 'circular economy practices' because these were terms that at least some of the interviewees used. Some, on the other hand, used no labels – but that does not mean their work is not sustainable.



Five Scottish organisations contributed to this report:

- **Rags to Stitches** – a weekly textile craft group for adults based at Sandy’s Community Centre in Craigmillar, Edinburgh. Run and organised by Jeannie Robertson-Frazier.
- **Acorn Quilters** – a patchwork and quilting group run by a committee of twelve, whose members meet every fourth Wednesday in a church hall in Broughty Ferry, Dundee.
- **R:evolve** – a social enterprise with shops in Cambuslang and Rutherglen, South Lanarkshire. Their textile workshops and weekly clubs for knitting and sewing take place in the Community Hub, a space in their Cambuslang unit.
- **Remake Scotland** – a community reuse charity operating in Crieff, Perthshire. Their textile and haberdashery collection and textile workshops can be found in a large warehouse at the Crieff Visitor Centre, and its monthly repair cafes take place in a local school.
- **Knit and Natter** – this group meets at Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre, Dundonald, Ayrshire every Monday. But other textiles work is housed in the castle’s Visitor Centre too, including costumes made for education visits and souvenirs created locally for the gift shop.

These groups were chosen to get an insight into circular economy practices in different community settings. Conversations with the Rags to Stitches club at Sandy’s and with Acorn Quilters shows that interest in sustainability filters down to hobby clubs, even if this is not advertised. I chose to contact Rags to Stitches because, in a list of craft groups in Edinburgh, the group’s description mentioned ‘repair’. I reached out to Acorn Quilters because the group does patchwork, a craft that easily lends itself to working with even the smallest scraps of fabric.

At the other end of the spectrum, R:evolve and Remake Scotland are charities born from a strong interest in promoting sustainable living. Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre sits somewhere in between – its team cares about operating sustainably and its circular practices have a lot in common with the other groups, but it is first and foremost a heritage site.

I met with members and organisers from these community groups between October 2024 and January 2025. Where possible, I attended craft sessions to better understand the group’s activities and get to know the people who ran and participated in them.





Circular economy practices: What can sustainable community crafts look like?

Using our materials thoughtfully

Making from scratch

All five groups I met with care about making proper use of resources: they value materials and tools. This has an impact on what they choose to use and how they approach it.

“We respect the materials and try not to be wasteful.” – Jeannie Robertson-Frazier, Rags to Stitches, Sandy’s Community Centre

Making a commitment to value resources is important to Jeannie. The above statement actually refers to the children’s arts and crafts club that follows Rags to Stitches on a Monday afternoon: it’s one of the pledges that pupils commit to when they come along. The adult sewing group may not write up its rules on a poster, but the same mentality underpins the club. Jeannie encourages members to go slowly, measure twice before putting shears to fabric, save scraps for future projects, and fix mistakes instead of rushing ahead. Many members still like to work with new materials but the mindful approach promoted by Rags to Stitches nonetheless helps to avoid waste.

The participants at Acorn Quilters also care about this. The members take turns demonstrating techniques or projects to the group, and are conscious of making the best use of materials. A quilted bag workshop planned by one of the founding members of Acorn Quilters, Norma, deliberately uses few materials. All it needs is one metre of a single fabric, a fat quarter of another, some wadding, and a fourteen-inch zip. In fact, Norma reminds other members, “Don’t go cutting into a nice bit of wadding, stitch pieces together”. The bags will therefore help the crafters use up spare pieces of fabric, save ‘unnecessarily’ cutting into others, and altogether make the most of a stash.

Other groups concentrate on using materials that may otherwise be thrown out.

“The fabrics we deal with don’t have anywhere else to go, really, landfill is their only destination, because they’re often offcuts. They’re scrappy bits that people have finished with.” Amulree Welch, General Manager at Remake Scotland

Both Remake Scotland and R:evolve work with ‘scrappy bits’. The R:evolve shop features ‘Wee Jinty’s Haberdashery’, named after a beloved late volunteer and stocked with second hand craft materials such as wool, ribbons, patterns, and fabric. Keeping these materials reasonably priced means that the shop does not end up storing them instead of selling them but, more importantly, it means the local community has fair access to arts and crafts. One ball of wool weighed on my visit cost just 30p.



R:evolve haberdashery stock



Remake fabric shelf



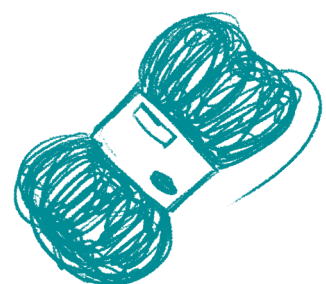
Remake Thread drawer

Remake Scotland stocks similar items but, as it has a larger space, it's able to house more things. Unlike R:evolve, Remake Scotland does not work with clothing. Some donations come from commercial partners (like end of line fabric from fashion houses) but the majority of donations come from the public.

"We became known for textiles quite early on, and then it just worked naturally to introduce the workshops, the textile reuse and repair workshops, because the items come into us as donations. So, whenever we run and deliver a workshop, we don't need to buy any equipment for that. There are no consumables we need to purchase, we're able to just use what's been donated." — Amulree Welch, General Manager at Remake Scotland

Doing so is not always straightforward, of course. Amulree says, "We have to ensure we get enough of a particular donation to be able to form a workshop around it, but we have a very talented team who are good at doing that." Textiles coordinator Izzy also tries to design workshops around materials that might otherwise be overstocked and difficult to sell as is, like curtains, waxed cotton, and denim.

"Community craft both improves the life of the individual and helps them contribute positively to the world around them."



Reuse and upcycling

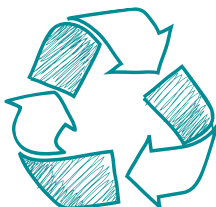
“It’s about giving things another life.” – Lauren Mitchell, Marketing Manager, Dundonald Castle.

Reusing materials and making items into something different or better is another way to help craft be sustainable. Jeannie from Rags and Stitches encourages people to bring in old clothes or textiles to use for projects instead of buying new fabric. Although she recognises many modern clothes are “not worth” taking apart because the material is poor quality or hard to work with, Jeannie recommends buying bed linen from charity shops as a great source of cheap and plentiful fabric.

Members of Rags to Stitches try to use up scraps of material, keeping leftovers to serve as stuffing for future projects or setting themselves the challenge of imagining a use for it. The strips of spare material created by shortening a hem, for example, can quite simply be turned into hair scrunchies with some elastic, as one member did to the delight of her daughters.



Scrunchies at Rags to Stitches



“We’re thinking outside the box” – Winnie, R:evolve

Combining technical know-how with creative imagination can facilitate sustainable craft. Many of the items for sale in R:evolve’s shop are made by people who attend the weekly craft sessions, or are made by the session leaders. Materials for these items come from fabric donations, or are adapted from clothing past its best. One worse-for-wear cashmere jumper can be transformed into a few baby hats and wrist warmers. Marianna Hamilton (Community Connector for R:evolve) and another colleague, Lisa O’Hara (Head of Creative Direction), are responsible for deciding how donations can be used if they cannot be put out on the shop floor as is, either as an item of clothing or a piece of haberdashery. If something is upcycled once but hasn’t sold, after a while it will be made into something else.

For example, picnic blankets can be cut up into smaller ‘sit mats’: the same idea, but much more portable for walks. Even smaller offcuts, particularly tweed and tartan fabrics, are made into bow ties and bandanas for pets. R:evolve plans to offer a personalisation service to stitch pets’ names onto the items, as they recently received an embroidery stitch, and believe this would make the bow ties and bandanas even more popular.



R:evolve bowties



R:evolve cashmere



Duncan wearing a R:evolve bowtie

In the show-and-tell section of their monthly session, many Acorn Quilters members show off projects that reused materials creatively. What was once a quilt is now a jacket, what had been intended for use in one project was used in another. One crafter showed a cushion cover she'd made the previous month, that had lived previous lives as a tablecloth and table runner. One member, Joyce, showed two bags she had made with reused materials from around her home and wardrobe. Part of one bag came from a pair of curtains that, when she moved house, were too long for the windows. The other used the lining of a coat; Joyce even kept the inside pocket, complete with button, and made this a feature of the bag. Similarly, the storage bag Alison (the secretary of Acorn Quilters) showed was made of re/upcycled materials: the outer shell came from the leg of an old pair of jeans, and the inner lining was part of a Guides leader uniform she no longer used.



Acorn bag one



Acorn bag two



Acorn bag three

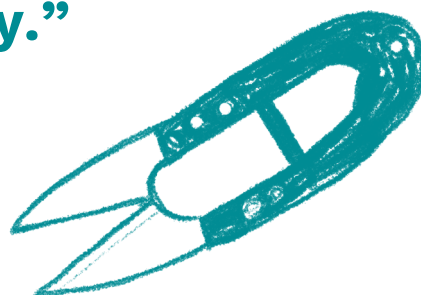
Some of the Acorn Quilters had worked on a quilted jacket inspired by an episode of The Great British Sewing Bee. Rather than having to make and quilt each pattern piece, some members chose to cut up something they had already made instead, like a quilted throw. One member worked with a zero-waste pattern (templates designed to generate as little fabric waste as possible, unlike traditional patterns) to make sure that the artistic design of her original piece, a quilted blanket, remained mostly intact as she cut it up to make the new jacket. After cutting out the planned materials, she found she still had some fabric left over, and so fashioned a collar.

Many crafters, including this quilter, undersell their imagination and skill. They undervalue an item because it was created by following a pattern, rather than having ‘made it up’ themselves – even though any craft project requires countless creative decisions, from choosing fabrics to picking colour palettes. Recognising this work as a ‘highly creative’ practice is important [23].

One of Acorn Quilters’ demonstrations centred around the chenille technique. This technique involves sewing together multiple layers of fabric, making diagonal slices into the square, and distressing the edges of fabric to make it smooth. A chenille square should have at least five layers, but only the top and bottom fabrics will show. The three sandwich layers are hidden, so can be a way to use up scraps of fabric you don’t like. Some special tools were used – a type of rotary cutter to cut the diagonal strips and a rug brush to distress the edges.

The group demonstrator, one of Acorn Quilters’ members, pointed out that these were not needed, however, as the job could be done with just a pair of scissors and a pet or steel brush. This is a neat demonstration of just how naturally craft groups work sustainably: members giving advice on how a pattern or project can be adapted to suit materials and equipment people already have, instead of encouraging them to buy new ones. Phrases such as “I did it like this, but you could make do with that” were commonly used.

“Often there is a tension between affordability and sustainability.”



Making our clothes and tools last longer

Mending our clothing and tools is another way of diverting materials away from landfill. Academic research shows that people mend, or enlist others to mend for them, for several reasons. Things might hold practical, sentimental, or economic value. The value an item has to a person directly affects how likely they are to invest time or money in mending it. Since planned obsolescence has become the norm, the idea that our possessions will wear out either physically or fashionably so that we will buy more, repair becomes an act of resistance. Making something functional again or making it work better for you, even if we cannot put off disposing of it forever, extends its life. [24]

Altering and repairing clothing, toys, or soft furnishings helps these items ‘live’ longer. Learning to make small adjustments can have a significant practical and emotional payoff. For example, one group member first went along to Rags and Stitches to hem a pair of trousers. Thanks to Jeannie’s help, and the Rags to Stitches supplies, she now has not only a better-fitting garment but a self-belief that she can develop a new skill and use it well. Another attendee wanted to shorten her jacket sleeve without losing any of the feature cuff. She and Jeannie worked together to complete this and turn the not-quite-right jacket into something much more wearable.

The R:evolve group gathered together on my visit worked on things for the thrift+gift shop. Some focussed on small jobs to make garments ready to sell, like replacing a lost button or adding a buttonhole. Other tasks were more involved, for example one volunteer sewed in the ends of a hand-knit jumper. Another added decorative stitches to a jacket that had already been (poorly) worked on, to make the overall effect more stylish and intentional. In all cases, taking the time to mend the garments restored their value and redirected them from the bin back onto the shop floor and, hopefully, into someone’s wardrobe.

Remake Scotland plans to start a repair club in light of the cost-of-living crisis, understanding that more people might be interested in making things they already own last longer instead of creating something from scratch.

“We’re introducing a Repair Club which will be where people can bring along any kind of textile-based item. Something they’ve had in their home for ages and they keep thinking, ‘Oh gosh, I should really try to do something about that’. They can bring it along and gain peer-to-peer advice, as well as facilitator advice, on how they can undertake that repair.” – Amulree Welch, General Manager, Remake Scotland

It's not only clothes and textiles that can be mended, the tools we use need maintenance and repair, too. For instance, sewing machines are also for sale in the fabric and haberdashery side of Remake Scotland's Reuse Hub. These are donated to Remake on a regular basis. One of the volunteers, Ken, is a retired chemistry teacher and started at Remake doing odd jobs. It later transpired that he had worked as an engineer with Singer, the sewing machine manufacturer, and Ken began to repair machines that were donated. Volunteers also service machines for some older and disabled members of the community who might otherwise struggle to get their machines repaired, if travelling to nearby Stirling or Perth is difficult. Providing this help to potentially isolated members of the community can make a significant difference to their quality of life.

Crafting with intention

Connecting with people

Working on a project with a clearly defined recipient or reason makes it more likely the item will get used. This was a tactic used across the community craft groups I visited. At R:evolve, for example, the team thought carefully not just about how to reuse materials but how to make sure they were useful for their demographics. A relatively small bunch of fabric can be pieced together to make cosies for hot plates and bowls, especially popular with older and disabled members of the community.



R:evolve cosies

Similarly, the projects made at Rags to Stitches often came from ‘need’ rather than ‘want’. Jeannie does not have a set programme for the adult sewing group, unlike her children’s craft club. Instead, she works around what members want to make or change. Since attendees suggest projects that fit their needs, like hemming trousers or sleeves, the group’s activities are very mindful. A specific, defined intention drives each project, even if the attendees need help to decide what exactly to make or how to do so.

For example, one member’s parent kept losing her keys. Therefore, that week’s session focused on making a small purse with an inner loop to keep them safe. Although these pouches were made from new materials, they have a clear purpose and so are much less likely to go unused or clutter up wardrobes and homes.



Rags to Stitches purses

These projects are examples of everyday sustainability and, even better, can be a great way into craft. Beginners can walk away from a session feeling proud that they have created something useful and beautiful.

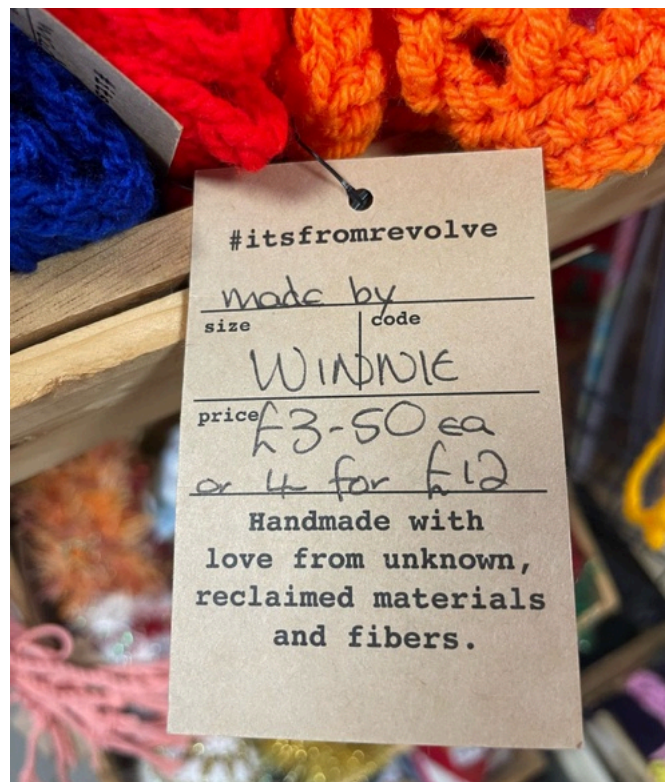
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Making for charity is another rewarding way to ensure what we create is put to good use. Many of the Acorn Quilters members work on incubator quilts for newborns or children at their local hospitals. This is done in collaboration with the charity Project Linus UK. The members say it’s a great way to use up scraps of fabric, and that it feels a worthwhile project to be part of. Others have worked on quilted jackets for older adults in care homes, taking pride in the idea that something they have created can be a comfort to someone.

“If something has been created by a human being, it can be deconstructed and recreated by a human being.” – Jeannie Robertson-Frazier, Rags to Stitches

Engaging with community craft groups like these, whether as a participant or a customer, makes a difference to how we view clothing and textiles. These groups show crafters how capable they are, and demonstrate the difference people can make as they learn or develop a new skill. Being sustainable can mean changing your mindset and committing to a new way of thinking. Part of this is learning to respect materials, time, and labour – that of others and your own. Having direct experience of an activity such as knitting, crocheting, dressmaking, and beyond helps us to better appreciate the knowledge and experience that goes into making or mending an item.

Attendees of the ‘Meet, Make and Mend’ session at R:evolve talked about the importance of understanding where our clothes and possessions come from, and appreciating that another human being makes them. R:evolve supports this by using labels that tell a little of an item’s story, such as ‘made from preloved materials’ and naming the volunteer who worked on it.



R:evolve label

Connecting with places

Taking part in community craft not only connects participants to the people around them, but their environments – both built and natural. The team at Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre use clothing and textiles to help them educate visitors about the castle, its history, and the people who came before us.

“We want to bring the castle back into village life.” – Friends of Dundonald Castle

Dundonald’s ‘Knit and Natter’ group works on its own projects but also knits and crochets items for the Centre’s use. Balaclavas in dark yarn serve as knights’ armoured helmets, and an adapted pattern for a headband becomes a gold crown fit for a medieval monarch. ‘Knights and Castles’ is the most popular topic in Dundonald Castle’s education programme and students love to dress up when they visit. As the Knit and Natter group happens in the same space, the makers get to see the children enjoying the items. The dress-up box and wardrobe also contain sewn garments. Some of these are secondhand while others have been made by their Education Officer, Blythe. Many of these costumes used to be curtains, bed linen, or other donated fabrics – materials that were no longer useful or wanted in their original state that now have a new purpose.



Dundonald knitted helmets



Dundonald wardrobe

Dundonald wardrobe - tabards

Wearing clothes inspired by the past, or thinking about how people in history would have dressed, helps us to imagine a different world. Education sessions ask the participants to picture someone from another time, raised from the grave. How did they live and work? What did they eat and wear? The Young Archaeology Club (YAC), another education programme, gets hands-on by taking part in traditional craft workshops. During the summer, one YAC session taught members to weave rope (cordage), using foraged nettles from around the castle grounds as their material. Another session has already been requested for next year, when Lauren hopes to improve it by learning to weave cords into a belt for members to take home and wear.

Another example of connecting with our environment through craft came from Margaret Clarke of Acorn Quilters. As part of her City and Guilds Patchwork and Quilting qualification, she made a 3D scene of historical Broughty Ferry life. Margaret used jute for her project, a material synonymous with the local area. The extract below, taken from her reflective writing on the scene, demonstrates that an important part of sustainable craft is appreciating our local heritage, especially around textiles, when it raises our appreciation for our environment and community.



Jute 'Beachie' scene by Margaret Clarke

“Using a technique based on what I remembered from making a costume doll in 1980, using a kit I had bought in Oberammergau, I experimented with using jute (one of Dundee’s 3Js of jute, jam and journalism) to make a figure.

Unfortunately, the jute that I had used for my test sample was of a finer quality than is available nowadays, but the technique was able to be replicated and I enjoyed creating my mini-family. The mother was based on the photograph of my friend’s grandmother and the father, wearing his sou’wester, was based on a model of Willie Norrie in Broughty Castle museum. The boat proved another challenge, but I decided to stick with jute and use chenille to create the impression of wooden panels.

The beach was created using tiny pebbles collected from around the lifeboat shed, with some dyed green jute representing the raised area of the beach. The ensemble was finished by adding ropes, fishing nets, bollards and coil baskets complete with tiny twigs (representing firewood) and reeds gleaned from the beach.” – Reflective writing from Margaret Clarke, a member of Acorn Quilters.



Circular economy practices: What barriers do community crafts face?

The enthusiasm that the representatives of these groups showed for community craft was inspiring and made for some productive, rewarding conversations. However, it did mean that teasing out challenges or difficulties faced was not always easy – motivated, perhaps, by a desire to focus on progress over obstacles. Some issues raised sit well outside their immediate circles of control, meaning that there was little the groups could do to effect change. Still, across the smaller clubs and the larger-scale organisations, groups shared some common concerns which usually filtered down to three themes: people, space, and money.

Changing attitudes and the pull of ‘new’, ‘more’, ‘now’

“R:evolve’s work is a means of environmental education, which is the first step towards positive change.” — Annual Report, R:evolve Recycle

Changing people’s minds and behaviours is not always straightforward. More than one of the groups interviewed said stigma against pre-loved clothing or materials persisted, and they had to work hard to prove that second-hand does not mean second-best. Furthermore, sometimes community craft groups have to engage with what makes fast fashion so attractive but repackage it in a more thoughtful, sustainable way.

Although R:evolve Recycle wants people to think about fashion and style in a new way, the team understands that people like to explore seasons and trends. Buying second-hand clothing or upcycling donated materials can be a way to do this in a more mindful way. Lots of Christmas jumpers and festive outfits were on display when I visited in early December, encouraging people to go for something pre-loved. The Make, Meet, and Mend group had also made Christmas trees from scrap felt, topped with a carved wooden star, and tied leftover fabric to make a wreath. Gift displays in the window were wrapped in embroidered napkins and doilies.



R:evolve Festivalwear



R:evolve Christmas Trees



R:evolve Christmas Wrap



R:evolve Flower

In October, R:evolve Recycle encouraged the community to buy second-hand costumes, and the team ran a workshop to make ‘jumpkins’: pumpkin decorations made from old jumpers that have been stuffed and sewn into shape. While summertime workshops focus on crocheting bikinis or sewing beach cover-ups.

The staff and volunteers have to plan ahead to ensure projects are made in plenty of time to meet demand. Volunteers in the stockroom are already hard at work in December to make flowers for spring. Donated yarn becomes the flower heads and leaves, and knitting needles, especially those unsuitable to pass on, become the stems. This same idea can be repackaged for Valentine’s Day, swapping out the crocheted flowers for a heart. Another example of their seasonal work happens at the end of the school year, when R:evolve hosts prom drives to offer second-hand evening gowns and suits for local secondary school students. School uniform drives are also held with second-hand rails put in schools.

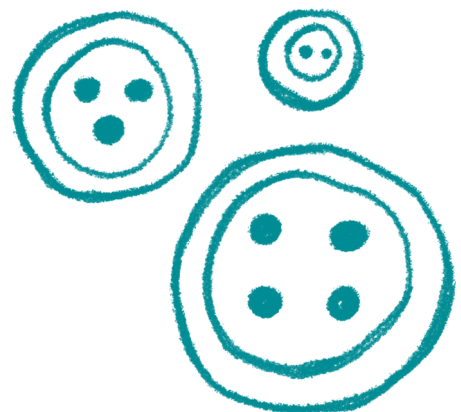
Some of the stock that comes into R:evolve’s Hub, especially anything vintage or costume, is donated to the drama departments of local schools. R:evolve has also hosted pop-ups at the Connect and TRNSMT music festivals. These organisations have donated their banners to R:evolve, who transform them into tote bags. Marianna is keen to turn more of these into ‘festival wear’ like tops and trousers, to tap into a market of people who enjoy getting special outfits for occasions like these, helping them to find a more ethical and sustainable choice.

Other groups also work hard to educate their local community about how important it is to lessen our impact on the environment – and, through craft, demonstrate some tactics to work towards this goal. Remake Scotland's work not only reaches the adults who come along to its textile workshops. Marie-Claire Fisher, the organisation's Community Engagement Coordinator, shares Remake's vision with children and young people by working with local schools.

As part of Sustainable Fashion Week 2024, Marie-Claire worked with primary school children to create their own outfits out of old fabric and items that had been repurposed and recycled. The children had a catwalk and put on a fashion show to show off what they had made. This kind of outreach work with younger generations is vital because it means they learn about circular economy practices and their positive impacts on wellbeing, communities, and environments at a young age, thereby making it all the more easy to make better choices about clothing and textiles as they grow up.

But applying this mindset can be difficult, when the excitement that comes with learning to sew, knit, crochet, etc. lends itself to wanting to make more, not make-do with less. Consuming less is a deliberate choice. Focusing on the good we can do through slowing down reminds us why it is the better choice. Above all, believing that we can succeed and make a difference is crucial.

"We will make beautiful things that we can be proud of. That's my expectation: that these children can, and it's the same with the women. Yes, we can do it! We've got all the equipment that the best designers and makers have. We've got our eyes, we've got our hearts and we've got our minds." – Jeannie Robertson-Frazier, Rags to Stitches



Physical space

Issues associated with space (accessibility, storage, suitability) are limitations which many community groups have to manage [25]. Any craft that calls for a sewing machine inevitably takes up a fair amount of room: dressmaking, after all, demands a ‘particular kind of space’ [26]. Part of the community craft organiser’s task is to rise to that challenge.

Not all groups struggled in this respect. Acorn Quilters uses a church hall in Broughty Ferry with enough space to hold the number of members who come along from month to month – usually at least 35 out of around 60 members total. The church hall can accommodate the group because not every member brings their own machine each session. Although the space can hold all members, Alison and the other committee members sometimes have to think on their feet about how to set up the tables: they don’t always know in advance how many people will come along and what tools and materials they’ll bring.

The Rags to Stitches group at Sandy’s Community Centre is much more limited by its premises. The room set aside for the craft group is relatively small, especially with the space that sewing machines, ironing boards, and resources take up. Yet this can be framed as a positive: keeping numbers low helps Jeannie, as the only organiser, remain able to help everyone who comes along. Furthermore, it can help teach participants how to share resources and space comfortably, and returning members can be a tight-knit group.



Dundonald Castle



Dundonald Visitor Centre

Space was a more significant problem for the teams at Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre, R:evolve, and Remake Scotland. The Knit and Natter group at Dundonald Castle does not have a separate room to meet in the Visitor Centre. The participants either work in the cafe or in an adjoining (open-plan) recess among the educational materials. The Friends of Dundonald Castle plan to add another building to the centre to support its ever-expanding events diary, but are conscious of doing this in a cost and environmentally-friendly way. R:evolve would also like to expand its space so that volunteers have room to work on their separate tasks, whether making or mending something for the shops, sorting through donations, completing admin work, or taking their breaks.

Finding a suitable space in the community is not an easy task, however, a lament shared by Remake Scotland in its 2023-24 Annual Report. Like the other organisations, Remake has had to manage some obstacles in the space it works in. The textile workshops used to take place on the shop floor (“In fact, they’ve been all over, they’ve been in every room at one point or another,” says Amulree) but space has now been cleared to have a room dedicated to these sessions. Only six people can attend each session, in part because sewing machines take up so much room, but also to maintain a good-sized group for instruction. If a machine isn’t needed, the session can go up to eight people. The repair cafe has done so well that Remake has had to source a new space to keep up with demand. The monthly sessions were held in the Crieff Connections building until early 2025 and will now move to the high school campus.

Physical accessibility can also be a challenge: if there is no step-free access to the building hosting the community class group, for example, or if travelling there can only be done by either public transport or car (both of which may cause problems for different people). These groups strive to do the best they can with the space that they have and, if intending to expand, plan to do so in ways that are inventive in how they support the community – and always with the goal of sustainable progress in mind.



The financial climate

Last but by no means least, the final barrier to community craft doing more is, of course, money. Interestingly, however, this was probably the least discussed issue – perhaps a reflection of how normal poor or precarious funding feels for community groups. Mostly, groups talked about what they would do if they had more funding to support their vision. R:evolve, for example, would like to invest in solar panels on its buildings, tend the community garden at the back of the Cambuslang hub, and purchase an electric van. This would make travel between shops and to festivals and pop-ups more environmentally friendly. Jeannie pointed out that Sandy Community Centre’s budget could not accommodate buying materials for Rags to Stitches; with more funding, this could change.

Amulree at Remake Scotland expressed it most directly: “Money is always an issue for any charity.” There is a lot of competition for grant funding to support their activities, and applying for these takes significant time and effort. There can also be tension between what funders would like to see and how charities themselves would like to operate. One funder, for example, will not support any workshop that costs more than £5. Although it is of course important to keep things financially accessible for the community, this might not generate enough income for Remake. This directly impacts what the organisation can offer in terms of workshops and courses, and how much they can support staff positions.

The cost-of-living crisis has affected attendance levels, as people have less disposable income. This can lead to staff taking the time to prepare for workshops that don’t end up happening, which can feel quite demoralising. But Remake knows that people are interested, it’s just a matter of making things accessible. Going forward, the staff are going to trial a different approach of running classes as clubs rather than one-off workshops. Remake is also looking to trial a donation-based approach with these clubs where people pay what they can afford towards the cost of the session. The recommended contribution is £2 per head.

“We found that this model really works, that those tend to be the classes which run repeatedly with full attendance and sometimes even have waiting lists in place.” – Amulree Welch, General Manager, Remake Scotland



Conclusion and recommendations

All five groups interviewed for this report make valuable contributions to their communities. Whether a small club or a medium-sized charity, all take part in circular economy practices. The more that group leaders and participants develop their making and mending skill, the better equipped they become to sidestep fast fashion.

Making something from materials that would otherwise go to landfill shows a respect for resources, for the planet and for the people who first produced those resources. Mending clothing, items, or tools does the same. Community craft also has a way of increasing our sense of connection with the things we own, the people around us, and the places we live. Crafting something for a specific person or place in mind increases the likelihood of that thing being useful and, most importantly, used.

Most of the issues which affect community craft groups are seen in other grassroots creative spaces. Working with people means working with individuals' ideas about the world and their personal circumstances and influences – things which might be very different from your own. Teaching people about a new skill or a new set of ethics is not always easy.

Likewise, the spatial and financial limits that affect community craft groups are often out of their control. Many community crafts groups are volunteer spaces where people are not paid for their labour; they may have other part- or full-time jobs that make demands on their time. Combined with precarious funding or imperfect venues, this can add up to a challenging environment in which to effect change.

What the different groups show is that there is no universal path to take. What suits one organisation will not work for another, and needs will change from person to person. We need to be open to dealing with that subjectivity while still working towards collective progress. To do this means adopting some short- and long-term strategies.

Taking steps towards sustainable craft

- **The words we use to define something matter, but what we do is more important.** The decision to call something ‘eco-friendly’, ‘green’, ‘sustainable’, ‘circular’ or anything else is ultimately a personal (or organisational) choice. What term we use might change depending on context. Being consistent is best practice but if using something you think not everyone will be familiar with, take the time to explain. Above all, however, concentrate on doing. Theory definitely has its place but practice is most important.
- **Work through your circles of control, influence, and concern.** As Culture for Climate Scotland recommends, take some time to think about your circles of control, influence, and concern. The largest circle, concern, should contain the worries you have about sustainability and (community) craft. Then, identify the concerns you have some influence over: things you can help to change but don’t have sole power over. Lastly, pick out the concerns that you control and, therefore, can change.

Breaking our worries down into things that we can control or influence makes tackling daunting issues much more tangible. Someone hoping to lead a community craft group might worry that they know too little to do this sustainably. Searching for examples is a concrete action that they can take to change this: in short, it’s something they can control.

- **Revisit the examples in this report.** Do any of the projects mentioned use resources that you have access to? Could you use them for the same purpose, or could you be inspired to think of a different use? Think about visiting a scrap store for fabric and haberdashery items, or using old bed linen, curtains or clothing that’s past its best as it currently is but could be upcycled into something great.
- **Do an inventory.** Making the best use of what you already own is a lot easier if you know exactly what you have, on both a personal and an organisational level. Quilters and dressmakers, what fabrics do you have in your stash? Crocheters and knitters, what yarn do you have tucked away? Keep a record in a notebook or on your phone or wherever you’ll naturally come across it. This will help you make more informed decisions about when you do ‘need’ something new.

- **Take note of inspiration (or pitfalls).** It can be hard to think of what to do (or what to avoid) when we're put on the spot. What can you do with a duvet cover no longer in use? Did the last project that you tried using a particular technique work out? Keeping a note of projects you're curious about or mistakes you've seen, firsthand or at a distance, can be a tool to ensure you're putting your materials, skill, and time to good use.
- **Make and mend with intention.** This isn't to say that everything you make has to be 'functional' – making something in order to refine a technique, or even just because it looks beautiful, is worthwhile. Still, it's worth carefully considering what that item can do for you. If learning to embroider, for example, could each new stitch be practised on different fabric squares that are later joined together to make a bag or blanket? Or if you want to create something for a purely aesthetic purpose, make sure that you place it somewhere that you'll see it often.

If you want to make something for other people, consider working with your friends or family to create the perfect gift by letting them choose colours and patterns (rather than hoping to surprise them with the right one and risk making something which ends up hiding in a cupboard or worse, goes out with the rubbish). Plenty of charities issue calls for crafters to put their skills to good use, if you want to make for a good cause.

- **Forge networks for inspiration and support.** Change doesn't happen overnight, a fact that can feel demoralising if you feel like you're going it alone. Running or participating in a community crafts group that works sustainably can connect you to others who share your interests and values. Reaching out to other like-minded groups in your immediate community or beyond for support can also be invaluable. Hearing about others' sustainability successes and failures, and sharing your own, can help bring a community together to work towards something better.

Creative Lives champions community and volunteer-led creative activity, and works to improve opportunities for everyone to be creative. We believe in the importance of taking meaningful actions to reduce our environmental footprint and mobilising positive change to contribute to the pathway to net zero emissions.

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Meet the groups . . .

Acorn Quilters (Broughty Ferry, Dundee)



Acorn Quilters is a patchwork and quilting group based in the seaside town of Broughty Ferry, Dundee. The group is run by a committee of twelve members. A monthly meeting is held every fourth Wednesday in the hall of St Stephen's and West Church where members gather to show what they have been working on, and to learn new techniques and projects from each other. Workshops from members or visiting craftspeople are often held in between meetings, with a syllabus planned out for the year.

Each monthly meeting usually has a central theme or project. 'Many of the Acorn Quilters have strong memories attached to the fabrics and tools they use. The women remembered exactly where something was bought and how long they'd had it, maintaining connections with places that no longer existed (like the haberdasher Remnant Kings, which went into administration in 2020) or past periods in their lives (even decades ago).'

The group uses a mix of provided materials and their own fabrics from home. Members share local recommendations for where to source materials. Norma, one of the founding members, recommended a shop somewhere in the region that sold 'rag bags' (offcuts of lots of different bolts of fabric) for around £5. If looking to complete a scrappy project, this could be a cheap way to challenge your creativity to work with colours and patterns you may not have chosen yourself. The group also keeps an informal pattern library where spare patterns are shared and borrowed.

Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre (Dundonald, Ayrshire)



Dundonald Castle and Visitor Centre is a heritage space in South Ayrshire looked after by Friends of Dundonald Castle (FoDC) and Historic Environment Scotland (HES). The castle is a 14th-century hilltop fortified ruin boasting barrel-vaulted ceilings and beautiful views across Ayrshire and over to the isles of Arran and Jura. Friends of Dundonald Castle run the visitor centre and look after the castle day-to-day, while HES is responsible for the castle's long-term maintenance.

FoDC is a medium-sized charity with fifteen staff members and over 60 volunteers. Together, they deliver tours and talks, host community groups, run an education programme, operate the centre's cafe, and even plan weddings. The annual excavations carried out on castle grounds, #DigDundonald, also rely on volunteers to help learn more about the castle and its history. Weddings and Marketing Manager Lauren Mitchell says the organisation's message to the community is always "It's your castle" to use now and to take care of for future generations. Since the youngest volunteer is six and the oldest is 94, it seems this message has been well-heard.

The organisation's mindful approach to their work comes from a genuine dedication to green tourism, as well as from the limitations of being a charity. Lauren reuses chair covers and decorations for the castle weddings. These items have often been donated by local brides. FoDC asks the community for any spare Christmas trees to decorate the castle and centre. A small second-hand book swap shelf sits in the meeting space. The cafe and gift shop support more than 30 local suppliers and artists. FoDC also wants to make the original building's lighting and heating system more energy efficient. All this contributes towards the site's carbon footprint which is already minimised by its commitment to "doing what it can".

Remake Scotland (Crieff, Perthshire)



Remake Scotland is a community reuse charity in Crieff advocating for sustainable living. The Hub houses textiles and haberdashery but also many other things that may otherwise end up in landfill – furniture, houseware, electronics, and beyond. Their Food for Good store is committed to promoting sustainable engagement with food and household products by offering things like plastic-free goods and bulk refills. Remake Scotland also hosts monthly Climate Cafe gatherings, where the community can gather to hear from guest speakers, chat about environmental issues that worry them, and brainstorm effective local solutions together.

Another key part of the organisation's work is their well-used tool library. Their 2023-24 Annual Report states that Remake issued 101,175 loans over the year. This is the number of loans rather than the number of tools borrowed, as a loan can include more than one item. People will often borrow up to five tools at a time so the real number will, in fact, be much higher. Loans usually last for a week but extensions are available on request and Remake is happy to be flexible. Sewing machine loans are a great example of that flexibility. A week's loan, especially if the borrower is trying out sewing or quilting for the first time, would be far too short – so the Remake team will work out a longer-term loan that better suits the borrower.

R:evolve (Cambuslang, South Lanarkshire)



“We are passionate about sustainability and believe that everyone should have access to affordable, stylish clothing, shoes and accessories. That's why we offer a wide range of services, including a swap shop, haberdashery, and community hub.” – R:evolve

The staff at R:evolve are all there because of their interest in sustainability and helping the community. Marianna (Community Connector Cambuslang) recently graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University and is passionate about using upcycled materials in her own projects. Volunteer Jenny studied at South Lanarkshire College and sees her work at R:evolve as a way to build up a portfolio to one day become a costumer for theatre or film. Winnie is in charge of the space's many textile-based groups because she “does everything” from knitting to crochet, cross-stitch to dressmaking.

The ‘Make, Meet, and Mend’ sessions are run weekly on Thursdays and Fridays. A ‘Knit and Natter’ session also runs on Tuesdays. These are two-hour blocks free for anyone who wants to drop in and take part in some crafting, whether they're working on a personal project or something to sell in the shop. Skill levels range from complete beginners to well-versed. Around fifteen people come along to the Community Hub for the Thursday sessions each week, and the other days are similarly well attended. This space hosts all events run by R:evolve Recycle and can also be hired by the community as a venue.

For the Make, Meet and Mend sessions, a large table sits in the middle of the room surrounded by smaller desks with sewing machines. R:evolve provides materials such as fabric, thread, scissors, and trimmings. These can go towards populating the thrift+gift stock or people can work on projects for themselves. The sessions are important to attendees as a place to relax, socialise, and craft. Most have more than one hobby and come along to different groups over the week.

Sandy's Community Centre (Craigmillar, Edinburgh)



Five generations of Craigmillar locals have supported Sandy's Community Centre since it opened in 1935. Originally focused on football, boxing, and basketball, today's offerings go far beyond sports. Residents keen in the kitchen can attend Sandy's cookery or baking clubs, and eager linguists can pop along to its Polish school. 'Sandy's Golden Gems' brings together senior citizens in the area, and other weekly groups give parents and children a space to play and meet. Regular outdoor events are also hosted by the centre. All activities and volunteers work together to foster a strong sense of community for everyone in Craigmillar.

Two arts and crafts groups meet every Monday, led by centre president Jeannie Robertson-Frazier. 'Let's Get Crafty' is an after-school club for pupils aged 5–15, where they can make something to wear, keep, or give as a gift. 'Rags to Stitches' (also called 'Adult Sewing Group') meets earlier in the afternoon. Anyone interested in needlecrafts is welcomed along, at no charge, to spend a few quiet hours working on a project. Most attendees take the opportunity to use the centre's sewing machines, but Jeannie also happily supports any knitting and crochet projects. Everyone from novices to experts is welcome.

Rags to Stitches has become a welcome fixture in attendees' lives. Proof of its success is shown in its small but steady group of participants who come along week to week. Members praise the group as a peaceful setting to unwind, with some participants even changing their shift patterns so they can attend.



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