

Bike Hubs: a community activation model

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Abstract

In April 2017, EcoMatters Environment Trust in Auckland opened a community bike hub with a goal of making cycling accessible to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, age, income, or social position. Over the subsequent 12 months, the facility has hosted over 1700 visitors, repaired and restored nearly 700 bikes, sold over 100 low-cost, restored bikes, and given away 38 bikes to those in need. This has been achieved with the help nearly 850 hours of volunteer support! EcoMatters has subsequently opened a second Bike Hub, and is exploring opportunities to open similar facilities in 3-4 other sites across Auckland.

The Ecomatters Bike Hub operates out of a 20ft shipping container with attached 3m x 6m sheltered canopy. It is open four days a week (thursday -Sunday), from 10am-2pm. There is always one, paid staff member on-site, usually with 2 or 3 volunteers. The facility offers the following services:

- Free basic bike maintenance/set-up advice and support
- Used and some new parts and accessories
- Loan bikes to try
- Low-cost , restored bikes for sale
- Information on cycle routes and cycle groups

Bike Hubs are an exciting opportunity to engage with communities in cycling, and achieve wider community development goals.

Background

The EcoMatters Environment Trust, a community-based, charitable entity based in Auckland, opened their first community Bike Hub in April of 2017. The trust has been operating since 2001 and has always actively been involved in supporting sustainability outcomes in the community, through a number of different activity areas. The trust has long held the belief that more needs to be done to encourage and support cycling in the communities of West Auckland. With the social, health, environmental, and economic benefits of cycling, it was an obvious choice for the trust as an area to focus on. The location of the EcoMatters trust site was also at one of the end points of the proposed Te Whau pathway, an extensive walk and cycle route following the nearby Whau River and inlet.

The Whau Local board provided establishment (and ongoing) funding for the project in 2016/17, with the neighbouring Waitakere Ranges local board also providing funding to support some 'pop-up' events in their area. With the added support of access to Auckland Council Parks land, the trust was able to further progress these plans in 2016. The trust spent time investigating and reviewing similar entities in Auckland, across New Zealand, and internationally, before deciding on a broad vision of what they felt they would like to achieve. The trust has extensive experience in project initiation and development, as well as a sound track record in creating viable long-term community services. Initial project development was undertaken in-house, with existing staff, before a part-time, Bike Hub Manager role was recruited...a couple of months prior to opening.

Location

Based on the research, and vision for the Bike Hub, it was decided that it could be operated out of a space the size of a shipping container, on adjacent land. It was also necessary to have access to a space (roughly the size of another shipping container), to store donated bikes, prior to restoration. In this case the trust had secure space under an adjacent gym, and alongside their other facilities, as well as a garden shed. The Trust had secured enough funding to purchase a refurbished, and re-designed, shipping container, with a pop up opening side doorway, to act as the main facility to house the primary Bike Hub community engagement space. The interior was then fitted out in a manner that followed the strong environmental ethos of the trust –recycled pellet timber was used for interior wall finishings, with natural earth-based stains to add further character. There is power to the container for both light, and power points where required (stereo system, etc). A sheltered canopy, covering the same area again as the container, was subsequently added, to provide all-weather access and space for engaging with the public.

The layout of the facility is such that there are permanent tables and seating located in a pleasantly landscaped space adjacent to a shipping container, which the Bike Hub operates from. The hub is located adjacent to the other buildings owned by the trust, including a visitor centre and retail store.

The operating model

The Bike Hub aims to be (as the name suggests) a central place for the community to engage around cycling. In order to help facilitate this, it was decided early in the set-up process to have fixed, regular hours, when the hub would be open to the public, and to spread those opening hours over multiple days to help ensure there were times available that anyone could attend. It was decided that the Hub would be open 16 hours per week, Thursday to Sunday, from 10am to 2pm. In order to ensure these opening times, and to also maintain a good level of service, the model is such that there is always one paid staff member on-site, to open and close the facility, and provide professional oversight to the many volunteers who attend and contribute.

Volunteer support is an important part of the operating model. As stated above, there is only one paid staff member on-site at any time, so there are obvious limitations to what this person can manage. Not only do the volunteers help interact with the public, especially at busy times, but also with restoration of donated bikes, and stripping bikes for parts.



Figure 1: the original New Lynn Bike Hub facility

The hub aims to provide a fun, welcoming, and informative environment for people of all ages and backgrounds to engage around cycling...whether people have a bike or not. To help achieve this objective, it offers the following services:

- free basic bike servicing advice & support (working alongside visitors to help teach them those skills)
- used bikes for sale and loan (checked and serviced bikes that have been donated)
- fun novelty bikes to try (choppers, mini-penny-farthing, etc)
- new and used bike parts and accessories
- organised group rides
- information on cycling routes/maps and support groups.

Initially the container included 'refreshment' services, such as coffee, cold drinks, and ice-blocks/ice-creams. However, within a relatively short time, the operation had grown to such an extent, that these additional 'food & beverage' services were relocated to the trusts adjacent shop, to allow more space in the container for bike operations. The sale of these items helps to create more of a 'destination' space for the community to engage with, and the proceeds from sales help fund the trust activities.

As mentioned in the previous section, the area around the bike hub has been designed to be a pleasant space that 'invites' people to hang out, with permanent tables and seats. There is shade and shelter from the rain, and music is played through a sound system to help add to the sense of atmosphere.

The 'novelty' bikes onsite, are there to help create a sense of fun around engaging about cycling, and are often a key point of discussion, or the first eye-catching element that attracts a visitor to the space. Adults and kids enjoy these bikes with people encouraged to take photos on the bikes and have a ride around our site. The novelty bikes are also a key element in any pop-up events that the Bike Hub attends (see images below).



Figure 2: Some of the Bike Hub 'Novelty' bikes (from top left, clockwise) 'Trevor' the tandem, 'Oscar' the Orange County Chopper, 'Chilli' the chopper, and 'Miss Penny'

The Bike Hub aims to try and support the growth of the cycling sector as a whole. The advice and support to maintain and service a bike just focuses on the basic areas of tyre inflation and repair/replacement, brake and gear tuning, brake pad and cable replacement, and chain maintenance/ replacement. This work will only be undertaken onsite if the visitor is prepared to help and learn. Any other type of work required on a bike results in visitors being referred on to local bike repair shops. It was the intent from the start to compliment and support the local bike shops, and the relationship between the Bike Hub and these shops has been very positive. Local Bike shops have also referred people to the Bike Hub for assistance, and have contributed by donating used bikes and parts.

The funding model



The Bike Hubs aim to have a diversified funding base to help provide a long-term viable funding model. The longer-term goal is to establish a model whereby there are three key sources of funding...self-funding through a social enterprise model, grants and funds from council and other community funders, and part commercial sponsorship.

A key part of the model is an element of self-funding, by operating as a social enterprise. They accept donated bikes and parts, and in turn complete a full safety check and service on the bikes before offering them for sale back in to the community for relatively low cost. They also sell a range of basic bike maintenance parts such as brake pads, tubes, cables, etc. As referenced in the previous section, the trust also sells organic cold drinks, filter coffee, Ice-creams and Nice-blocks. They also have a recycled, old exercycle that has been converted into a smoothie bike, and sell smoothies that people blend themselves on the bike (see attached image)

As previously stated, the Whau Local Board has provided a portion of the ongoing operational funding, with another significant contribution from the Lotteries Commission. There have also been some minor grants from Auckland Transport, and others. The trust is now in the process of looking to secure further commercial sponsorship to help underwrite ongoing costs and assist with funding investigations into further sites.

Results

The first year has seen phenomenal support from the community for the bike hub model. With limited promotion and marketing, the bike hub has seen the following results achieved within the 16 hours of opening time each week:

- 1730 visitors (includes people of all ages and backgrounds)
- 668 bikes repaired
- 103 bikes sold
- 38 bikes gifted away
- 47 bikes loaned
- 187 bikes received (donated)
- and 848 hrs of volunteer contribution!

The Bike Hub has been fortunate to attract a good number of highly capable volunteers to help out...often there are 2 or 3 volunteers on hand to assist.

These figures are only one measure of the success of our Bike Hub...we feel the images and stories from our community are just as important! Figures 3 & 4 (below) capture just some of the many images of the community we engage with, along with some of the direct feedback we have received below...

Me and my family totally enjoyed the experience we had with you and your assistant yesterday. Thank you for donating me and my family some bikes, we were really blown away at the sincere generosity, also thank you very much for the knowledge you shared with us regarding bike safety

and the best routes me and my family could take. Much appreciated. We know where to come when we need help, and where we can also help others, or contribute to our community –Jaimee

Thank you so much! I'm a full time youth worker volunteer & couldn't afford the bike repair places. I'm so excited to find this place and be able to learn so much! My wheels/brakes have never been so straight and functional. Thank you for teaching and empowering me to fix my own bike. You guys are fantastic!!! Very much appreciate that this facility exists and makes cycling accessible for people with all incomes. Huge thank you! Nga mihi nui! –Heather

We visited the Bike Hub for the first time on Sunday with a bike purchased at a garage sale for my 8 year old son. Eugene was AMAZING and held my son's focus over 3.5 hours in between helping other customers in order to get our bike road worthy. My son (and I!) learnt so much and my son became so confident he helped another customer with a small job while Eugene was busy with the help of another volunteer. Teach a boy to fish... Love What a fantastic initiative." -Emma

Thankyou EcoMatters Bike Hub in New Lynn for my Avanti bike which I hired for ironmaori 2018 taupo last weekend –helmet, bike, bike lock, drink holder...all for \$20. You sorted me our and 20km bike ride was a breeze...love these guys, you need to be all over NZ. If our in Auckland and sick of being in traffic, get a bike for travelling –Evangeline (facebook post)



Figure 3: visitors to the EcoMatters Bike Hub enjoying the variety of services on offer



Figure 3: further images of Bike Hub visitors

Recent figures indicate the New Lynn Bike Hub is projected to have visitor numbers of around 2500 people in its second year. The success of this original Bike Hub in New Lynn has contributed to the establishment of a second bike hub in nearby Henderson (see Figure 5 below). This also operates out of a refurbished shipping container which has been provided by Panuku Development Auckland, along with operational funding. The Henderson-Massey local board has also contributed to fund this site. Initial funding has also been secured for a Bike Hub type activation around the Glenn Innes area in East Auckland.



Figure 4: EcoMatters second Bike Hub recently opened in Henderson

To further enhance and grow cycling in the community, the EcoMatters Bike Hub has developed a West Auckland focused, family friendly cycling circuit known as the 'Flat White'. The trust identified that there was scope to combine a number of existing bike friendly cycling areas into greater loop, that also passed by a number of excellent cafés located in the West. The trust approached a number of the cafés on the basis that if they helped to fund the development of the map, then they would be promoted for the ride. The cafés also subsequently offered discounts on coffee or ice-creams for visitors who mention they are doing the 'Flat White' ride. The ride has been designed so that the community can choose to do any of the ride in sections, or complete the circuit, and is located along the rail network where bikes can be taken on the train.

The Bike Hub also offers a guided ride of this circuit, promoted as a 'Pedal and Pizza' event with Pizzas provided at the end made in the Trusts earth constructed pizza oven. This map and ride have become incredibly popular in the community, with many of the café's reporting large groups of cyclists visiting, stating they are doing the 'Flat White' ride. People travel from right across the region to do this ride.



Figure 6: EcoMatters Bike Hub developed the 'Flat White' ride and map, and attendees on one of the group rides

Conclusions

The EcoMatters trust believe that the community Bike Hub model they have developed and tested, is a desirable and viable service for many communities across New Zealand, especially in area where there is growing interest in cycling. A permanent entity in the community that supports all aspects of cycling, can be vital to breaking down existing barriers, such as: information on safe cycle routes and pathways, basic bike safety and maintenance knowledge, access to affordable used bikes (both to own or borrow). The current model has demonstrated that it caters to people of all backgrounds and age groups –from when you first start to ride a bike through to the elderly looking find low-impact, active modes of transport, and cycle touring.

The process of ensuring there is a paid staff member onsite helps ensure that opening hours are maintained (and not reliant on volunteers), and that service levels are maintained. The funding to support having a paid staff member can be covered through incorporating a social enterprise model, and appropriate local funders (local and regional councils, community funds –has health, transport and environmental benefits), and we believe is well suited for some commercial sponsors. It is anticipated that most communities could access volunteers to help out, provided they provide a friendly, fun work atmosphere, and not place too many onerous expectations on them.

The entity can operate from structures as simple as old shipping containers, or could pop-up in unused council property. Additional space is required to store bikes if a social enterprise model of selling or loaning donated bikes is to be incorporated.

It is useful to have the support of an organisation that can handle logistics like payroll, sales income and expenses, coms and marketing, fund-raising, procurement, leases, etc. Charitable trusts have the obvious benefit of being able to access certain community funding and provide tax certificates

for donations/sponsorships. The EcoMatters trust is interesting in supporting communities across NZ to investigate and develop similar entities.

Acknowledgements

The EcoMatters Bike Hub would like to acknowledge the vital contribution of 'Bruce', the Bike Moose – Head of Operations, and 'Stan', the Bike Ram – Head of BR (Bike Relations)! Pictured below with Brent Bielby, our Bike Hub Manager ☺

