GREEN INNOVATION

BEYOND LINEAR:
MOVING TOWARDS A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

FUTURE OF THE ECONOMY
WHERE BUSINESS BELONGS

British Chambers of Commerce
GREEN INNOVATION

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FOREWORD

Sarah Mukherjee MBE
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Shifting the UK's economy from its current linear state to a circular one is imperative. The current way we make, use, and dispose of products and materials has become unsustainable. It is a major cause of environmental damage and is helping to propel dangerous climate change.

Leading research from the Circle Economy Foundation suggests that over 90% of the UK's material use comes from virgin sources and only 7.5% of materials are circled back into the UK economy after use. This must change drastically if we are serious about creating a greener future.

The following report, produced by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), provides a series of powerful policy recommendations that will help the government in its work to create and deploy a Circular Economy Strategy over the course of this parliament.

Focusing on areas including business engagement, access to funding, procurement through a UK lens, the report usefully distils where policy action is required and how it should be delivered.

What's more, the report also provides useful background to key circular economy concepts and principles. This is an important read for businesses of all sizes looking to embed circularity into their operations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The idea of a "circular economy" might sound complex, but for both businesses and consumers it really just means finding smarter ways to reduce waste and be kinder to our environment. This can involve everything from recycling more effectively to rethinking how we design products and manage materials throughout their lifecycle.

But even at a basic level, BCC research from earlier this Autumn has shown that most businesses do not have a target in place for recycling or waste reduction, with only 38% actively having a target in place. However, a circular economy can and should go much further than simply having recycling targets in place. A successful approach to the circular economy is one which can be embedded in a vast range of sectors and takes a holistic, innovative approach, looking at use of materials, services, and supply chains.

UK business already has a great story to tell on Green Innovation. Our recent Chamber Business Awards showcased firms with exciting net-zero focused projects. The overall winner was a social enterprise from South Yorkshire leading the way in creating green and resilient urban places.

The BCC's Green Innovation report, published in January 2024, provided detailed analysis of the UK's Net Zero Framework, as well as the UK's green workforce and the development of growing technologies such as Sustainable Aviation Fuel and Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage. Crucially, it also made the case for a deeper partnership between businesses and the government.

Building on this, our report examines the current policy framework across the UK in relation to the circular economy, looking at developments in the devolved nations and the different approaches taken across the UK. The report highlights three examples of organisations that have successfully implemented circular practices into their organisations' approach at a more regional level.

The report sets out seven key recommendations that will support businesses on their journey to a more circular future. Together, these will ensure that a holistic approach is taken when it comes to the circular economy and that the government strikes the right balance between setting national direction to support a circular economy and ensuring regions of the UK have the tools they need to develop a more tailored, local approach too. It also sets out ways in which the business community can be supported to adopt more circular approaches, to ensure that they can benefit, both environmentally and economically, from the circular economy journey.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

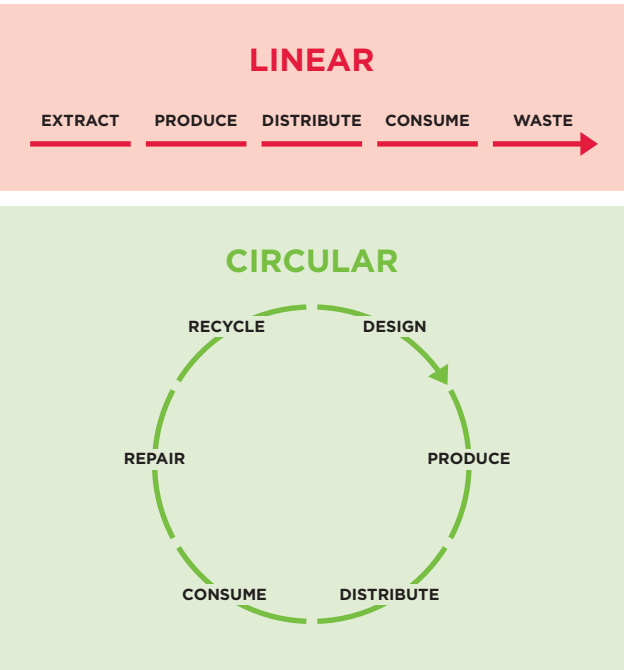
While the term circular economy could be considered an umbrella term incorporating numerous elements relating to waste, the environment, and innovation, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation offers a useful definition, interpreting it as:

"A system where materials never become waste and nature is regenerated. In a circular economy, products and materials are kept in circulation through processes like maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling and composting. The circular economy tackles climate change and other global challenges, like biodiversity loss, waste, and pollution, by decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources."[i]

A circular economy can be contrasted with a linear economy; a process where materials are taken from Earth, products are made from them, and they are then thrown away as waste.[ii] The Ellen MacArthur Foundation's report on the circular economy, republished in 2021, argued that efforts to combat climate change have focused on the role of renewable energy and energy-efficiency measures, which can only address 55% of emissions. However, the report highlighted that the remaining 45% of emissions come from the production of materials, products, food, and the management of land. Transforming the way products are made and used is, therefore, vital for reducing emissions.[iii]

A recent report by Zero Waste Scotland referred specifically to the term 'Circular Economy Practices' as initiatives and activities a business can adopt that support a circular approach. These relate to not only products, but also services. Zero Waste Scotland also highlighted the role of "supply chains through which companies obtain the necessary secondary and regenerative materials." This demonstrates how a circular economy extends beyond the markets in which businesses operate.[iv]

Linear and Circular Economies (Circular Glasgow)



Source: Circular Glasgow, What is circular economy, https://www.circularglasgow.com/what-is-circular-economy/"

A circular economy presents significant economic opportunities in addition to environmental ones, which can lead to intervention in sectors such as remanufacturing and engineering, supporting growth and bringing economic benefits. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation has said that the replacement of a linear economic approach with a circular economic approach presents a creative opportunity, with greater technological development, improved materials, labour, and energy efficiency.[v] The European Parliament has said that moving towards a more circular economy could "increase competitiveness, stimulate innovation, boost economic growth, and create jobs", and has also emphasised how consumers can benefit from more durable and innovative products, saving them money.[vi]

In 2015, Accenture estimated that the circular economy could generate $4.5 trillion of additional economic output by 2030[vii], and a report by the International Labour Organization in 2018 said that a shift to a greener economy could create 24 million new jobs globally by 2030.[viii]

When the principles of a circular economy form part of an organisation's strategic approach, instead of being presented as single strategies to reduce waste,[ix] this can present a significant economic and innovative opportunity, future-proofing businesses and supporting the shift towards sustainable economic growth. A successful approach to a circular economy is one which creates the conditions where economic growth and environmental benefits are achieved in parallel.

Benefits of a Circular Economy (IEMA)

BETTER FOR BUSINESSES

New profit streams from developing services to support resale, repair, rental and so on.

Reaching new customer groups through provision of high-quality remanufactured or refurbished products.

New revenue streams from pay-per-use or shared services.

Reduced costs by sharing or selling unwanted assets, equipment and consumables.

Recovering embedded value from end-of-use objects, through returbishment, remanufacturing and eventually recycling.

Reduced volatility and increased supply chain security from reducing the reliance on virgin materials and dependence on single sources.

Reduced material, energy, carbon, and water footprints.

Improved customer interaction and loyalty, with longer-lasting relationships, enhanced reputation and visibility in the market.

Engaged employees and suppliers, with everyone sharing a purpose for people and planet.

BETTER FOR THE PLANET AND SOCIETY

High-quality, durable, and repairable products with lower carbon and material footprints.

Less pressure on land, biodiversity, and water, with reduced pollution and improved health for humans and living systems.

More affordable products and services from easier access to reuse, refurbishment and sharing.

Reduced mining and environmental damage through access to longer lasting and shareable products and equipment.

Meaningful new jobs in core areas, such as repair, refurbishment, renewable energy, waste, and resource management, and enabling areas, such as education, design, and digital technology.

Source: Benefits of Circular Economy (IEMA).

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

HOW EFFECTIVE IS PUBLIC POLICY IN DRIVING BUSINESS ACTION?

POLICY FRAMEWORK IN THE UK

Following the general election, Mary Creagh was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, with responsibility for the circular economy. She has said that the government is committed "to setting a clear roadmap to a circular economy – a future where our resources are used as efficiently and productively as possible for as long as possible, and waste is reduced". In addition, the government has announced plans to convene a circular economy taskforce.[x]

In March 2024, it was reported that the Labour Party would aim to achieve a zero-waste economy by 2050, with the then Shadow Environment Secretary Steve Reed saying that this would save billions of pounds and that "regulation would give businesses the confidence to invest in their facilities and they can be reusing materials".[xi]

In relation to legislation, the Environment Act became law in November 2021, setting targets on waste reduction and resource efficiency, as well as air quality, biodiversity and water. The specific target for waste reduction and resource efficiency included halving residual waste by 2042, as confirmed by the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Dr Thérèse Coffey, in December 2022.[xii]

At a national level, through UK Research and Innovation, the previous government supported the National Interdisciplinary Circular Economy Research programme with £30 million of funding. This includes investment for a Circular Economy hub, specific centres, and collaborative research and development competitions. The provision of funding through centres supports the involvement of SMEs.[xiii]

ENGLAND

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for England was launched in 2023 under the previous government, with "improving our use of resources" cited as one of its strategic goals. This acknowledged that the agenda around maximising resource and minimising waste had been set back during the Covid pandemic and committed the government to a "truly circular and sustainable economy".[xiv] In July, the new government announced a rapid review of the EIP to be completed by the end of 2024, engaging with key stakeholders, including across environment, resources, and waste sectors.[xv]

The previous government made a number of commitments around waste, including the implementation of consistent recycling between different councils; a deposit return scheme for plastic and metal drinks containers by October 2025; extended producer responsibility for packaging; and the ban of a range of single-use plastics.

The government then launched a more detailed Waste Prevention Programme for England in August 2023.[xvi] This set out three cross-cutting themes, across seven key sectors (construction; textiles; furniture; electronics; vehicles; plastic and packaging; and food):

1. Designing out waste: Including ecodesign and consumer information requirements, and Extended Producer Responsibility schemes.
2. Systems and services: Including collection and take-back services, encouraging reuse, repair, leasing businesses and facilities.
3. Data and information: including materials databases, product passports (sets of data, unique to the specific product that can be accessed online and give detailed information on, for example, contained materials, components and history, to support improved outcomes such as higher quality recycling) and voluntary corporate reporting.

In addition, a consultation was launched in December 2023 by the previous government on the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013, with the aim of improving collection for re-use and recycling, improving treatment standards and critical mineral recovery, supporting the drive to a more circular economy. The government said that it planned to publish a response, but no response was published before the general election.[xvii]

SCOTLAND

The Scottish government published Scotland's first circular economy strategy, Making Things Last, in 2016. This set out the Scottish government's priorities for a circular economy and the opportunities it presents. These include both environmental opportunities—through reducing waste and cutting emissions—and also economic ones—through improving productivity and opening up new markets. While committing to action in numerous areas, the strategy prioritised four key areas for action: food and drink; remanufacture; construction and the built environment; and energy infrastructure.[xviii]

In June 2022, legislation came into force in Scotland, banning a number of single-use plastic items, including plastic cutlery, plates and stirrers. While celebrating that Scotland was the first UK nation to ban these plastics (others have since introduced restrictions on single-use plastics), the Scottish government raised concerns about the Internal Market Act, saying that an exclusion for this ban was needed for it to be effective.[xix]

To further support the circular economy, the Scottish government introduced the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill, requiring Scottish Ministers to introduce measures to help develop a circular economy. This includes publishing a circular economy strategy, developing targets, reducing waste, increasing penalties for litter offences and supporting the disposal of waste for households and businesses. This completed parliamentary stages in June 2024.[xx] Businesses in Scotland have been advised to be prepared for this legislation, as they could be liable for the actions of their drivers with fly tipping and littering incidents, for example.[xxi]

In addition, the Scottish government had committed to introducing a deposit return scheme (DRS). Through a DRS, consumers who buy a drink in a certain type of container are charged a small deposit, which is returned to them when they take the bottle or can to a recycling point. This encourages recycling, reduces litter and helps tackle climate change through reducing the amount of material going to landfill.[xxii] In May 2020, the Scottish Parliament legislated to create a DRS, which included glass.

In June 2023, the Scottish government confirmed that the launch of the DRS would be delayed, with the Circular Economy Minister saying that the UK government had refused to agree a full exclusion from the Internal Market Act.[xxiii] This legislation helps to preserve the UK internal market, providing continued certainty for people and businesses to work and trade freely across the whole of the UK.[xxiv] However, the Scottish government has said that this Act enables the UK government to have powers to change the devolution settlement through secondary legislation, which can affect the Scottish government's ability to pass legislation on areas such as Scotland's DRS, which was designed differently to other schemes in the UK.[xxv]

The UK government had said that the inclusion of glass would "create undue complexity for the drinks industry" and it increases storage and handling costs for retailers. Glass containers are heavy and fragile, making them more difficult for consumers to return and receive the deposit they have paid. The then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Robbie Moore, said that there were no plans to exclude any DRS from the UK Internal Market Act "now that there is maximum possible alignment and interoperability across the UK to protect businesses and consumers."[xxvi]

WALES

In 2021, the Welsh government published its Beyond Recycling strategy, which set out eight key actions to accelerate Wales' journey towards a circular economy. This includes supporting Welsh businesses to reduce their carbon footprint by becoming more resource efficient, phasing out unnecessary single-use items, increasing recycling rates, and reducing the environmental impact of waste collection from homes and businesses.[xxvii]

In addition, the Welsh government's Environmental Protection (Single-use Plastic Products) (Wales) Bill became law in June 2023. This makes it an offence to supply a range of single-use plastic products, including plastic plates, cutlery, drinks stirrers, drinking straws, cups make of polystyrene, and plastic single-use carrier bags. As the Bill was going through the Senedd, the Welsh government

said that this legislation would "help accelerate the shift in consumer behaviour away from single-use products towards greater re-use and will encourage businesses in Wales to lead the way in developing more sustainable alternatives."[xxviii]

NORTHERN IRELAND

As part of the commitment laid out by the Northern Ireland Executive in the New Decade, New Approach document, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) has been carrying out work on the Plan to Eliminate Plastic Pollution (PEPP) in Northern Ireland. This will collate the targets incorporated into existing policies and strategies and identify actions and activities taking place that will contribute to eliminating unnecessary plastic in Northern Ireland. According to DAERA's website, the PEPP will be issued for public consultation in 2024/2025.

In addition, DAERA funded the Tackling Plastics Tackling Textiles Programme, which aims to change behaviours and raise awareness of waste prevention from plastic and textiles through education, targeted advertising and awareness campaigns.[xxix]

SECTOR ENGAGEMENT WITH CIRCULAR ECONOMY POLICIES

The government's Waste Prevention Programme for England examines seven key sectors for action: construction; textiles; furniture; electronics; vehicles; plastic and packaging; and food.

In relation to textiles, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has set the aim of reducing textiles going to residual waste through increasing product utilisation, diverting products and materials from residual waste, and stimulating a profitable textile recycling industry. In the Waste Prevention Programme, the government set out plans to develop a textiles waste hierarchy to provide robust guidance to businesses managing textiles and fashion products and material, as well as enhance voluntary action to reduce textiles waste by continuing to fund Textiles 2030 to reduce carbon and water footprints and accelerate action on circularity.[xxx]

The hospitality sector has a range of textile use, including linen, bedding, uniforms, cushions and curtains. As this paper was being developed, one large company in the hospitality sector highlighted to the BCC that while hotel owners may have their own policies and procedures around textile waste, they do not currently have a centralised policy on how end-of-life textiles should be treated. Linen waste in the hospitality sector is quite high, with up to around 40% of linen going missing through theft. The Textile Services Association has provided resources to support the hospitality sector, such as guidance on how to make linen last longer, as well as examining the case for "infinite textiles".[xxxi]

The importance of effective engagement with businesses when circular economy policies are being designed and implemented is demonstrated through issues with the Deposit Return Scheme in Scotland. In addition to disagreements around the Internal Market Act, it was reported in January 2024 that there had been widespread concerns from Scottish businesses about the cost, implementation and design of the scheme, with the Scottish government criticised for not having adequate engagement with businesses.[xxxii]

MOVING FASTER: WHAT ARE BUSINESSES DOING VOLUNTARILY?

Below are some case studies of how businesses have been able to effectively engage in circular economy approaches at more local levels. These demonstrate how the circular economy can provide both environmental and economic benefits.

CASE STUDY | CIRCULAR GLASGOW[xxxiii]

Circular Glasgow was developed in 2016 as a unique business-led initiative by Glasgow Chamber of Commerce and designed in partnership with Zero Waste Scotland and Glasgow City Council. Circular Glasgow focuses on innovation and inspiring businesses to adopt circular business models and strategies to support Glasgow in realising its net zero and circular targets.

Through business engagement programmes, networking events, interactive workshops and circular campaigns such as Plate Up for Glasgow, Circular Glasgow brings together businesses and city stakeholders together to learn from each other and from experts about how to best implement circular economy strategies for environmental and economic benefit. One such example is the Circular Glasgow Network, which was launched in 2019 and now has over 350 members from across the Glasgow business community.

The net zero transition offers a significant opportunity to develop Scotland's future economy and, given Glasgow's target to reach net zero by 2030, businesses will play a key part in meeting this goal. Related to Circular Glasgow, the Step Up to Net Zero project aims to support the city's net zero ambitions and provides employability support for Glasgow's workforce. Now in its second phase, this project supports Glasgow SMEs in their efforts to reach net zero by funding up to six-month work placements who will help organisations take action towards net zero and circular goals.

Fully funded by Glasgow City Council and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and delivered by Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, Step Up to Net Zero has supported almost 70 businesses in Glasgow to adapt, innovate and kickstart their net zero and circular journey.[xxxiv]

CASE STUDY | RELONDON[xxxv]

ReLondon is a partnership of the Mayor of London and the London boroughs to help improve waste and resource management in London. According to ReLondon, around seven million tonnes of waste are produced every year in London, with food waste and plastic packaging making up for around 30% of this. ReLondon works to help London waste less and reuse, repair, share and recycle more.

It runs the London Recycles campaign, which is designed to help inform and encourage people to recycle the right materials in the right place in London. The campaign has included messages on waste prevention, reuse and repair initiatives, and London boroughs are provided with communications support, including workshops on social media advertising.

Supporting business in London in relation to the circular economy represents one of ReLondon's pillars. In 2022-23, 119 businesses in London were supported to adopt or scale circular business models. The business transformation programme has led to a net job creation and a reduction in waste and carbon emissions, as well as an increase in recycling, demonstrating both the environmental and economic benefits of ReLondon.

CASE STUDY | THE NATIONAL MANUFACTURING INSTITUTE SCOTLAND (NMIS)[xxxvi]

NMIS, which sits within the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District Scotland, supports manufacturers to develop and embrace new technologies to support their net zero ambitions. This focuses on key research and development projects, including helping manufacturers embrace the circular economy, as well as supporting highly skilled green jobs. An example of the work NMIS has been involved with includes Project PRoGrESS – a £2 million, three-year scheme working to develop a wind turbine blade recycling plant in the UK. This will reduce waste, support climate change targets, and support the creation of green jobs in the UK.[xxxvii] NMIS's work in the circular economy represents a high value opportunity for the business ecosystem and demonstrates a positive, forward-thinking approach.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT DO BUSINESSES NEED FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

To help ensure that businesses are fully supported to develop a more circular approach, this paper recommends the following steps:

1. The new government's commitment to a Circular Economy Roadmap is welcome and should be published as soon as possible, with a clear focus on innovation. This should include the promotion of design-led skills within businesses, especially engineering, advanced manufacturing, scientific and technology sectors, which will support the design of circular models to replace linear models, creating more jobs in the UK.

2. The government should set out how to adopt a more place-based regional approach to the circular economy in both local governance and policy. This should recognise both the potential of regional approaches and also help facilitate better co-working between the UK government and devolved governments. This demonstrates the more tailored approach that can be applied at more regional and devolved levels and recognises the success of schemes in cities such as Glasgow and London.

3. The UK government and devolved governments should ensure extensive and regular consultation with businesses and industry as policies are developed and implemented. This will ensure that there is maximum business engagement, that businesses are aware of upcoming changes, and that there is full understanding of changes that may need to be made to ensure compliance with regulations.

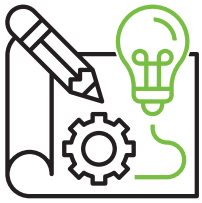
4. The government should prioritise cross-sectoral innovation opportunities for businesses to maximise the value of current waste streams, while simultaneously ensuring delivery of waste management policy areas. This includes the opportunity for businesses to repurpose a waste stream to maximise its value. At the same time, delivery of key waste management policies could include "end-of-life" materials, such as end-of-life vehicles, reforms to the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Regulations, and waste disposal costs, as well as strengthening recycling and waste collection rates across the UK.

5. The government should improve access to innovation funding for SMEs on the circular economy and reinforce the role of innovation centres across the UK. This will support SMEs in adopting a long-term, strategic approach to a circular economy which is embedded into their organisation.

6. The government should carry out a review into how procurement, supply chains and planning policy can be strengthened to support the circular economy. This will ensure that the circular economy is supported at all stages of the production of materials and resources, and that businesses are positively incentivised to shift away from a linear approach and adopt a more circular approach.

7. The government should examine how to support investment from the financial services sector to promote the circular economy. Recognising how a lack of policy certainty and weak demand signals can inhibit investment, the government should consider how to integrate circular economy principles into policy development and planning, standardising the measurement of carbon emissions reductions and sending demand signals in the government's role as a major procurer.

THREE KEY GOALS FOR CIRCULAR BUSINESS MODELS (IEMA)



SLOW: USE LONGER GOAL
This enables business to develop strategies that encourage longer product lifetimes by offering high-quality, repairable goods, avoiding short-term styles, and facilitating maintenance, repair and upgrade of these products.

INTENSIFY: USE IT MORE GOAL
This enables business to develop strategies that encourage us to share, exchange and rent those products we might not need to own. Examples of sharing or renting business models in action might include tool hire, car hire, community libraries of things, and much more.

CYCLE: USE IT AGAIN GOAL
This enables business to develop strategies that might include recovering end-of-use items so they can be revived for another cycle of use. Refurbishment and remanufacturing business models can lead to recovery of high value materials, e.g. IT

Source: Three key goals for circular business models (IEMA)

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