

# Getting on track for a circular economy

How the government can  
avoid mistakes of the past





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# Summary

**“Progress has been inconsistent and key measures are not going in the right direction.”**

England’s 2018 resources and waste strategy had lofty ambitions, stating the “plan is to become a world leader in using resources efficiently and reducing the amount of waste we create as a society”.<sup>1</sup> Progress against the document’s own ‘strategic indicators’ has been inconsistent and key measures, including on raw material consumption and recycling, are not going in the right direction.<sup>2</sup>

Much of this is likely to be due to a failure to deliver initial reforms to schedule, broadly limited to packaging and recycling collections, and the resulting lack of capacity to progress to the more fundamental changes that would benefit the wider economy. Promises to introduce extended producer responsibility for packaging and a deposit return scheme (DRS) faced major hurdles, with the DRS not expected to be up and running until 2027, nearly a decade after the former Environment Secretary Michael Gove said England would have one.

And an explicit commitment to “match or where economically practicable exceed the ambition of the EU’s Ecodesign standards” was disregarded. These standards deliver benefits to consumers by improving the quality and efficiency of products allowed on the market. But the EU is pulling ahead of the UK, agreeing new requirements for tablets and phones, including around durability and repairability.

The UK has yet to follow suit, leaving the public frustrated and out of pocket because of shoddy products.

The government was elected in 2024 on a hopeful message of change, with a manifesto promise to

**“Without deeper understanding of why the previous government’s strategy failed, current ambitions could suffer the same fate.”**

create a circular economy. This was swiftly backed up with the announcement of a taskforce to develop a new strategy with the aim of supporting growth and new jobs, accelerating action towards net zero. This shift could lead to many of the benefits which Green Alliance and our business partners in the Circular Economy Task Force have been highlighting for over a decade.

But, without deeper understanding of why the previous government’s strategy failed, current ambitions could suffer the same fate and fail to meet expectations.

We interviewed and surveyed parliamentarians, officials and advisers involved with the previous administration, allowing them to speak anonymously and frankly from their experience.

Their views provide valuable insights on why it has been so hard to move these policies forward in the UK, helping to identify how the current government can overcome barriers to change.

In this policy insight, we outline why previous attempts at progress stalled and offer lessons from devolved administrations which have moved more decisively.

The advice we heard can be summarised in three main points:

1. Advocates should avoid abstract references to the ‘circular economy’ and use effective framing.
2. More champions in businesses and parliament should be cultivated, beyond lone voices.
3. The new government should grasp and build on the quick wins.

We will be using this advice to inform our own work, emphasising how better management of resources across the economy will help to achieve the government’s stated missions on clean energy and growth, as well as directly improving people’s lives. To realise all these benefits, it is vital to relate the somewhat abstract circular economy concept to

people's everyday concerns, as recycling already does. As well as the valuable quick wins recommended by the experts we spoke to, we believe that transformation needs a long term plan with clear targets, with a framework of action across sectors, similar to the UK's plan to address climate change.

The initial signs are that the new government is open to taking a new approach to ensure the circular economy moves beyond warm words. The strategy will be developed along with a new taskforce representing industry, academia and civil society interests and will report to a small ministerial group to achieve joined up change across departments. Plans for sector specific roadmaps will follow the overarching strategy. We look forward to working with the new government to make this exciting prospect a reality.

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# Introduction

**“  
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Issues around how we use and treat resources, and create a more ‘circular economy’ to preserve them, have long been neglected in environmental policy. Other policies focused on nature and climate have commanded greater public and political attention. Even where policy makers do act in this area, it is often on single issues where there is high public concern, like plastic pollution, packaging or recycling. But this means the biggest opportunities to change our unsustainable ‘take-make-waste’ linear economy stay out of reach.

The start of a new government is a unique point in the political cycle, with a chance to embed a compelling vision for the circular economy and inspire this generation of leaders to support the critical interventions needed. This is all the more true in this parliament, as the government was elected with a manifesto commitment to do more on the circular economy. Environment Secretary Steve Reed has personally embraced the idea and his department is leading the development of a new, cross departmental circular economy strategy, co-designed with sector experts. He has said that a zero waste economy would bring “benefit after benefit after benefit” and “I want us to get serious about ending the throwaway society.”<sup>3,4</sup> In opposition, the Labour Party expressed support for a target to reduce resource consumption, which we believe should be the north star guiding meaningful action.<sup>5</sup>

However, history suggests political ambitions are not always realised. To help this government avoid the pitfalls experienced by previous administrations, we examine here why policy stagnation has happened. Along with this policy insight we are publishing a series of three explainers on behalf of Green Alliance’s business led Circular Economy Task Force. These aim to underscore the critical opportunity now presented and they summarise the significant benefits a circular economy offers to the public, businesses and the wider economy.<sup>6</sup>

To inform our recommendations, we interviewed and surveyed 17 individuals who were close to the decision making process in former government administrations. We gathered insights on the reasons for slow progress in Westminster and the comparatively greater success of some devolved administrations over the past decade. Our interviewees included members of the UK parliament (MPs and peers), members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs),

members of the Welsh Senedd (MSs), former civil servants and advisers, and other Westminster insiders working on the environment.

## Inaction and broken promises

The UK has had years of inaction on resources policy. Despite public acknowledgement by all the major political parties of the need for a more circular economy, strong support for it in parts of the business community and pressure from some environmental NGOs, none of this has yet translated into action.<sup>7</sup> The lack of progress on the previous government's 2018 resources and waste strategy is a good illustration. Despite high ambition and strong ideas, most of the policies it promised were delayed and nearly all of its key milestones have been missed.

Although the strategy was framed around “maximising resources and minimising waste”, the focus of policy delivery remained firmly on recycling, even though there is a legal obligation, enshrined in the ‘waste hierarchy’ to put waste prevention and reuse first.<sup>8</sup>

Both the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) issued scathing assessments of the last government's progress, with the NAO concluding that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) “does not know what it needs to do to achieve its ambitions over the long term”, and the OEP saying that “action to move waste management up the waste hierarchy is largely ineffective.”<sup>9,10</sup>

At a political level, too, parliamentary engagement with this agenda has been limited, meaning there has been little pressure on the government to act, keeping the focus at the bottom of the waste hierarchy on recycling and waste and stifling transformational change.

This policy insight, based on our insider interviews, explores why this has been the case and what can be done – by the government and other advocates and practitioners of the circular economy – to succeed where previous administrations have failed.

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## Nearly all the key milestones of England's 2018 resources and waste strategy were not delivered<sup>11</sup>

### Progress under the 2018 strategy

Original timeline	Promised in the strategy	Action
2019	Appointment of a food waste champion	Achieved, but the work of the champion ceased without explanation in 2022
	Launch of £15m food redistribution projects	Partly achieved (£12.5m) but there are no further plans
	Consultation on standards for bio-based and biodegradable plastics	A call for evidence ran in autumn 2020, but resulted in no action
	Consultation on food waste reporting	A consultation eventually ran in 2022 and measures were widely supported, including by businesses, but it has resulted in no action
	Stage one of mandatory digital recording of waste movements complete	A consultation ran in 2022 and the full rollout is now expected in 2025
	Reform of exemptions from waste permitting for high risk activities	Reforms announced in 2023
	Transposition of the Circular Economy Package	Partially transposed in 2020
2020	Consultation on extended producer responsibility for waste electronic and electrical equipment	A consultation ran in late 2023 but has resulted in no action
	Removal of single use plastics from the central government estate	Not achieved
	50% recycling rate for household waste target deadline	Not achieved: in 2020, England's recycling rate was 44%, falling from 45.5% in 2019
2023	Roll-out of a deposit return scheme	Now expected in 2027
	Legislation for mandatory separate food waste collections	To be finalised, but mandatory food waste collections are expected for all households by 2026. Unclear if food waste will have to be collected separately from garden waste
	Extended producer responsibility for packaging comes into force	Full implementation will happen from 2025
2024	Revision of the resources and waste strategy	Not achieved

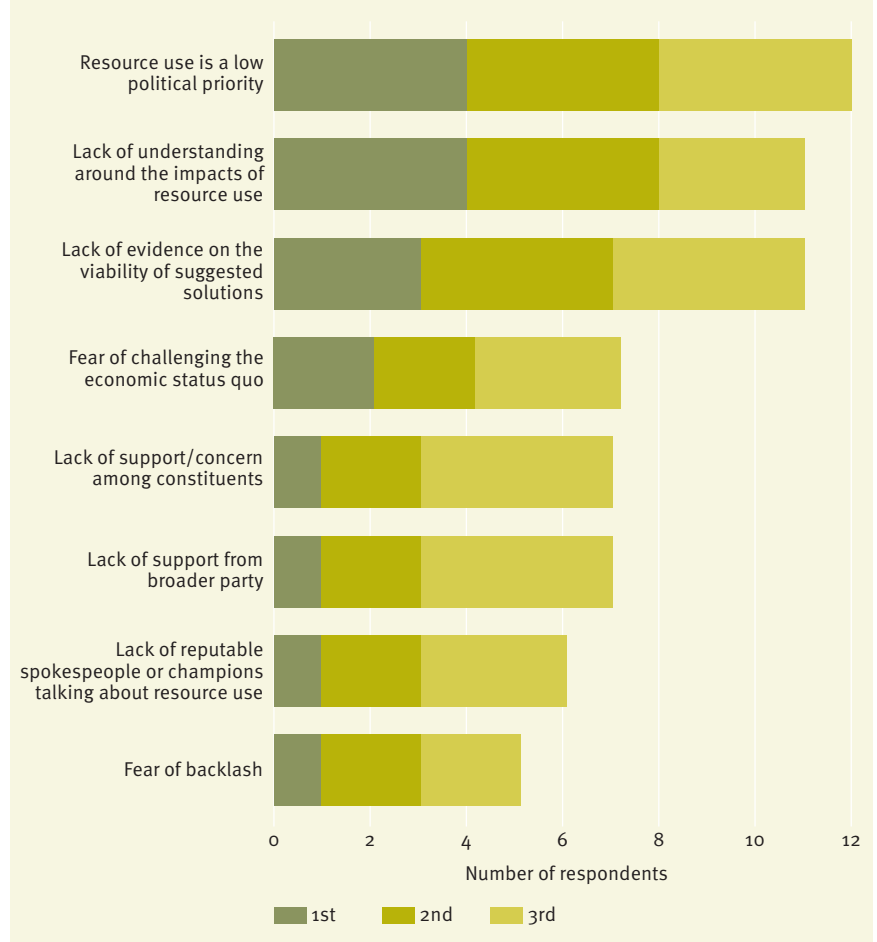


## Barriers to progress

Our interviewees agreed that the major barrier to policy progress was a lack of consistent government support and momentum. It has been neglected in the face of competing priorities, even losing out to a focus on other environmental issues it directly affects. This has been an almost insurmountable block.

Without momentum from the centre, or an influential minister clearly championing the need to focus on resource preservation and efficiency, civil servants have not been granted the time or means to gather evidence or pursue policies that prove the case for ambitious action.

Why parliamentarians choose not to speak out about resource use<sup>12</sup>



Ministers will say: 'Prove it – we need to know what the circular economy will achieve.' You end up in a catch-22 where you are not able to get off that position because you don't have enough resource to get the facts and figures together.

Former Defra civil servant

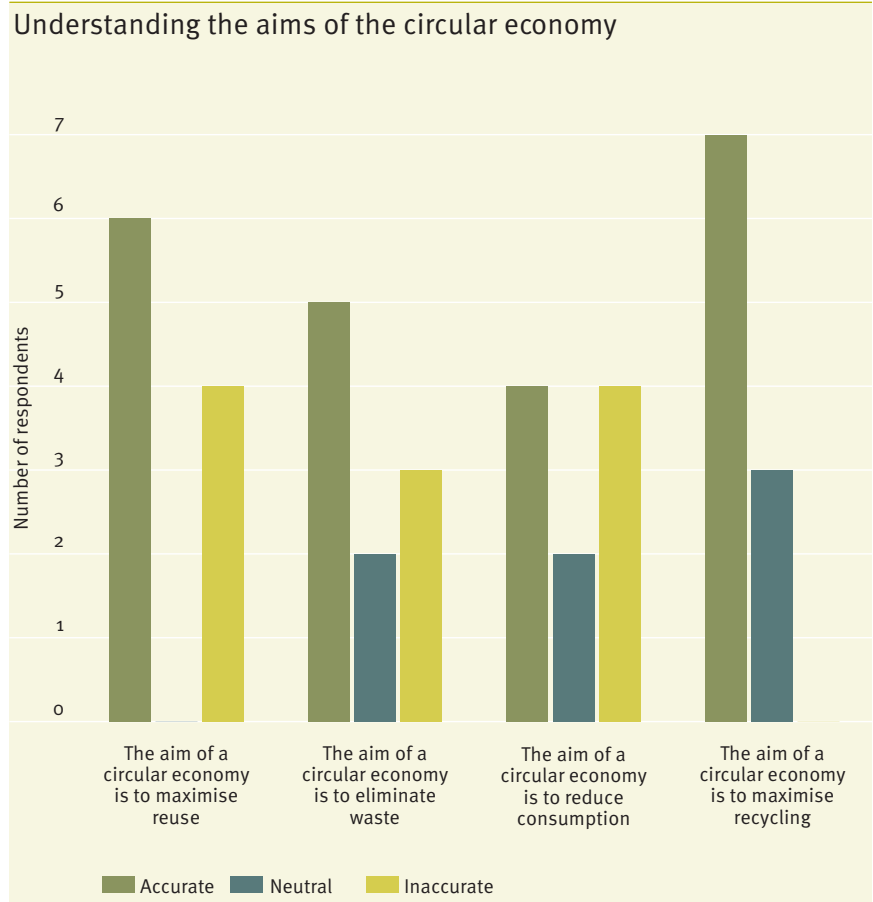
In our survey, a major reason respondents believed parliamentarians were not speaking out on issues around resource use was that it was a low political priority. But that was not the only concern. The overarching issue of insufficient government support appears to stem from the factors we discuss in the following pages, which we explored with interviewees in depth.



# 1. Lack of knowledge

## There's no consensus on what a circular economy is

Even our survey respondents, who all self reported that they understood the term 'circular economy', had no common understanding of it. Although they all agreed its purpose was to maximise reuse, some disagreed that critical aspects of shifting away from a linear economic model – ie cutting consumption and eliminating waste – were also circular economy aims.



The public understand waste and recycling. But they do not know what the circular economy is. Politicians likewise. I heard that one Defra secretary of state said it sounded like the economy going around in circles.<sup>13</sup>

Westminster insider

It is still relatively recent in the debate in places like DESNZ that people admit resources are relevant, let alone important.

Former civil servant



## Everyone is stuck on ‘waste’

Parliamentarians, civil servants and advisers all highlighted a failure to understand that the resources agenda goes beyond waste issues. It is not well understood that it must encompass business models, reducing resource extraction and all the factors that lead to waste in the first place.

One MSP lamented that: “No one is talking about how to change business models or consumption patterns.” A former civil servant echoed: “Every MP’s experience of resource management... is local bin collections.”

A particular threat to progress is when this lack of understanding extends to those within influential departments, like Number 10 or the Treasury. One former Defra civil servant recalled that, when speaking to the Treasury to advocate for a circular economy policy, the process was delayed since “you first had to explain to them why circular economy wasn’t a dirty word.”

## Failure to connect it with other environmental policies

The relevance of ambitious resource policies to preventing climate change and nature’s decline is also not well understood.

Even among our interviewees, a former MP and former Number 10 adviser respectively described resource policy as “unable to compete with” or “in competition” with the net zero agenda. This illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the fact that sustainable management of resources is integral to protecting nature and achieving net zero goals. It will lead to faster carbon reduction than many policies the government has pursued.<sup>14</sup>

## Personal prejudice can be a major influence

Concentration of power in the hands of a few can also limit action when those in power have prejudices or misapprehensions. For example, a former Number 10 adviser shared an example of delays to the deposit return scheme caused by one senior decision maker opposing it because they only used online supermarket deliveries.

In some instances, our interviewees named specific individuals as blockers, and one, an adviser in Number 10, even frankly admitted their own role in limiting the scope and ambition of resources policy.

There is a flipside, in that a particular champion, with influence and a genuine grasp of what needs to be done, can be highly effective at driving action across a department or even across government.

Defra managed to build relationships with BEIS, and the team lead, in particular, was very positive about the circular economy and was driven to take this agenda forward. And that drive is what got it into the initial BEIS strategy.

Former Defra civil servant

I think I was part of the problem. Some civil servants were ahead of the curve in thinking beyond recycling at the time, but not many.

Former Number 10 adviser



## Lobbying and influence

Lack of understanding about the circular economy is compounded by the influence of lobbying and external pressures surrounding Westminster. When external advice is sought, advisers and former civil servants noted that the loudest voices are often those with vested interests.

A former Defra civil servant told us that only a limited number of people have the ear of those in power, specifically noting that “the most powerful people, the people who get the ear of the deputy directors or ministers, are most likely to be the waste industry”. This is problematic when it is assumed that voices representing traditional linear models speak for the circular economy.

This is made worse by the relatively few NGOs effectively lobbying on the issue. An MSP lamented that “waste and the circular economy don’t really have a lot of effective lobbying advocates”, and a Westminster insider compared this to other policy areas, noting that, even within the environmental NGO sphere, those advocating for the circular economy are often “lone voices”.

Those who would like to see greater ambition have struggled to cut through in the face of competition from those with vested interests. A compelling and coherent political narrative about why a circular economy is important, that counters negative messaging and misapprehension, has not yet taken hold.

Everybody advising on this topic is going toe to toe with decades of lobbying by very big brands and very powerful actors and, indeed, to some extent, the waste managers who have skin in the game.

Westminster insider

When you have a lobbyist who has little subject expertise, and no first hand experience, speaking to a civil servant who also doesn’t have real world experience, and a minister who also doesn’t have real world experience, how on earth do you get the best outcome in that sort of scenario?

MSP



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## 2. Misunderstanding public attitudes

### Single issues get more attention

Public interest is a significant steer to environmental policy making, one example in recent years being the ‘Blue Planet effect’. The second series of the BBC documentary, first aired in 2017, saw concern about plastic pollution skyrocket, with a Westminster insider telling us: “It was David Attenborough who raised plastics up the agenda. He’s always what gets cited in this space.” A former civil servant explained that this directed policy focus to plastics and packaging, rather than to wider reforms Defra could enact; although, theoretically, they noted, it also opened up potential for ministers to be “nudged towards bigger actions”.

### Fear of backlash

Several of our interviewees thought previous administrations had avoided intervention for fear of being seen as meddling in people’s lives, which chimes with the narrative around the ‘nanny state’. Instead of changing regulations, introducing effective bans or behaviour change campaigns, decision makers have depended on the public’s own understanding, willingness and ability to change their consumption patterns as a policy steer.

But this fear by politicians is misplaced. One former MP suggested that reluctance to intervene or address behaviour change lies mainly with “libertarian” politicians “opposed to red tape”, noting “there aren’t many of these, and they are easily overruled.”

We also heard that the public is likely to be more receptive to circular economy policies than the government believes. This underestimation of public opinion has been a significant barrier to greater ambition.<sup>15</sup>

The government is sometimes behind the general public and businesses, who can get really excited about reuse.

Former Defra civil servant



## Fear about cost

Those we interviewed commented that politicians often harbour misconceptions about costs too, assuming that they are bound to increase with a circular economy or that cost is the only factor driving what people do. For instance, a former Number 10 adviser echoed the common belief that “cost conscious consumers will always prioritise cheap products over eco-friendly options.” Similarly, a former MP observed that, while many consumers “want to do the right thing”, they are “wary of raising costs” due to the cost of living crisis.

These views show that the huge potential of circular economy policies to cut costs is being overlooked, as are the many drivers of behaviour unrelated to cost.<sup>16</sup>

Even within environmental discussions, the concept of circular economy is all too often overshadowed by concerns about cost.

Former Number 10 adviser



### 3. Dealing with waste is simpler than preventing it

As we have highlighted, the overwhelming majority of policies related to resources focus mainly on dealing with waste and improving recycling. This narrow emphasis limits the potential for more ambitious and productive policy interventions that could improve lives, deliver bigger economic benefits and reduce environmental harm.

Across the board, our interviewees identified that it was the relative simplicity of solutions lower down the waste hierarchy – ie in waste management and recycling, as part of broadly linear business models – that maintained their predominance, given the complexity of a more circular system.

The simplicity of recycling as a concept is attractive to policy makers with limited knowledge of the other options. It is an everyday activity which, as a former Number 10 adviser told us, “is the obvious thing people can do on a personal level” to improve their environmental impact. This familiarity and tangibility contrasts sharply with the apparently more nebulous concept of a circular economy.

[The circular economy] sounds less practical and is still not a concept that is widely recognised outside of those that promote it.

Peer

[A minister] can see how you may take something like waste and work out how to manage that waste and make sure it's not littering the streets, or the ocean, but to think, I'm going to change this linear system into a circular system, it sounds very complex.

Former civil servant



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# Lessons from the devolved administrations

Resources and waste policy is devolved, and ambitions and progress in devolved administrations have often moved ahead of Westminster. Advances made in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland offer valuable lessons for shaping UK-wide policy.

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## Wales

### Excellent at recycling and getting more ambitious



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

The Welsh government's *Beyond recycling* strategy aims to make Wales a zero waste nation by 2050, with a strong emphasis on the sustainable management of natural resources.<sup>17</sup> The foundation for this forward thinking approach was laid by the 2009 sustainable development plan, *One Wales, one planet*, which centred around using a fair share of the earth's resources, and the 2010 waste strategy *Towards zero waste*, which ushered in an era of high recycling. It is complemented by other, government-wide measures such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which requires public bodies to consider long term sustainability in all their decisions.<sup>18</sup> This legislation aims to ensure that current choices do not compromise the needs of future generations.

To date, Wales has outpaced other devolved nations on recycling, largely due to its increasingly strong recycling culture and a willingness to invest, as well as to set statutory targets for local authorities. The Welsh government has invested £1 billion in municipal recycling since devolution, seeing rates jump from just 4.8 per cent in 1998-99 to 65.7 per cent today, 20 per cent higher than in England.<sup>19</sup>

A former Welsh minister emphasised the public momentum behind this transformation, noting, "People just don't like waste of any form", adding: "You get people on board and you can do it." This widespread participation in recycling has not only reduced residual waste but also, it is hoped, laid a solid foundation for further circular economy initiatives. Even in Wales, though, these have not yet been fully grasped, with the former minister explaining: "We didn't move faster than what the public would accept."

Wales is hoping to change this and its new strategy commits to achieving "one planet resource use" by 2050. It is in the process of developing detailed targets, which may become statutory. Much like how other nations approach climate goals, Wales is letting science guide its resources policy and targets.



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## Scotland

### Way ahead on narrative but needs to deliver



In June 2024, MSPs unanimously passed a Circular Economy Bill, which requires Scottish ministers to publish a circular economy strategy and takes wide-ranging powers, including to set targets to reduce material consumption or waste. This builds on the foundation laid by earlier key political milestones, such as the 2010 *Zero waste plan* and the 2016 strategy, *Making things last*.

It remains to be seen if these powers will be used to their full extent. An MSP we spoke to highlighted that, while Scotland may be ahead in terms of narrative – fostering strong public awareness and motivation to lead on these issues – delivery has lagged. They said that, “The narrative battle has been won, but delivery has not been there.” However, they cautioned against complacency, emphasising: “There is still much work to be done across all nations regarding the circular economy narrative.”

The MSP we spoke to also advocated a collaborative approach between the devolved nations, urging them to use their respective strengths. Scotland’s smaller, more flexible market, they suggested, could act as a testing ground for new business models, progressing them more rapidly, while the UK could implement a larger scale investment programme to build the necessary infrastructure for a circular economy transition.

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## Northern Ireland

### Cross governmental buy in to strategy



The Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland aims to shift the country from a linear to a circular economy, promoting responsible production and consumption. The strategy includes 12 proposals for change, framed around five circular economy policy goals: stimulate design for the circular economy; manage resources to preserve value; make the economics work; invest in innovation, infrastructure and skills; and collaborate for system change.<sup>20</sup> A draft strategy was put to public consultation in January 2023, and included a non-binding target to halve the country’s material footprint, which is in line with what the science says is necessary to keep resource use within planetary boundaries.<sup>21</sup>

Strategy development is credited to several factors. Cross departmental collaboration was instrumental. Crucially, this was led by the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy, working closely with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with the support of a cross departmental steering group as well as an advisory panel, including representatives from industry, academia, local government, the third sector and the Northern Ireland civil service. It was also informed by a Circularity Gap Report, commissioned from the consultancy Circle Economy, providing data to underpin the draft strategy.

# How to get on track to a circular economy

## Advice from the political insiders

Our interviewees advised how to lay the groundwork for more ambitious policy and overcome barriers, as well as stressing the priorities for businesses and political leaders.

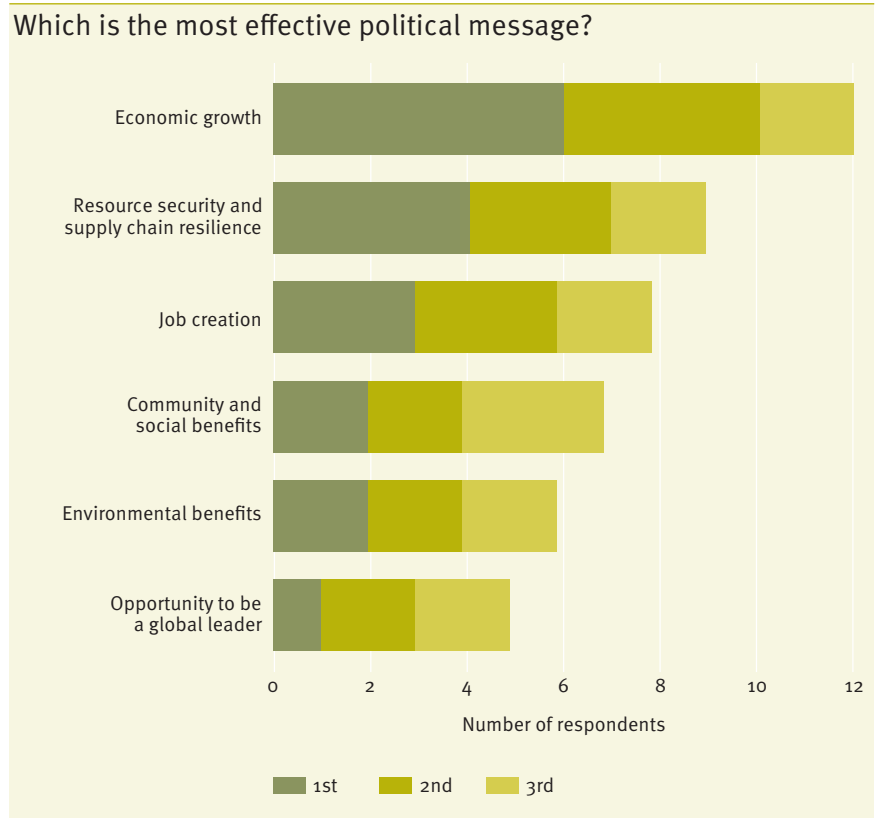
Three priorities emerged from the insights we heard:

### 1. For advocates: don't be abstract, use effective framing

There is a clear need to communicate the concept better. But, rather than abandon the relatively poorly understood term 'circular economy', our interviewees suggested it could still be useful with some audiences, though terms like 'resource efficiency' might be more palatable for audiences like the Treasury, while 'zero waste' and 'ending throwaway living' are more meaningful to the wider public. Where the term circular economy is used, greater tangibility was recommended, grounding it in practical, relatable outcomes that resonate better with people.

As soon as you talk about individual changes and examples within the circular economy, that's when you start to get the buy-in from ministers.

Westminster insider



Arguments in favour of a circular economy are many and varied and can be tailored to different audiences. Our survey respondents shared their insights into which framing they considered best for political audiences, favouring economic growth, resource security and jobs as the top three.

## 2. For those working with businesses and parliamentarians: cultivate champions

Parliamentary and business champions – as well as stronger advocates from civil society – are needed to drive forward ambitious resource policies and build the momentum for economic transformation. While high level advocates in government are important, it will take more than one or two lone voices. A chorus of support across sectors is needed.

In parliament, champions who are not confined to a single political party or a particular cause are crucial to ensure ideas have widespread appeal and are resilient to government or leadership changes. Diverse motivations – economic, corporate, equality and security – will spread the message beyond environmental circles.

If you truly believe in and want to make a circular economy, you need to make some drastic interventions, and you're going to need a champion to help deliver that, presumably [someone] in Defra but who has buy-in across cabinet.

MSP

What's important is having different types of MPs speaking to it, rather than just the one that you put on a pedestal. You need to find the voices, and hone them, on different wings of each party, rather than just one person across the entirety of parliament that everybody flocks to.

Westminster insider

If we had a champion of even one aspect of the circular economy that isn't waste, that would be really helpful. There are elements that you can have different champions of without necessarily having to be a champion of the totality of the circular economy narrative.

MSP

What we need is for industry to say that there is a clear market failure here that government could solve.

Former civil servant



In the business community, influential leaders who understand this agenda can use their platforms to build wider acceptance and momentum. This could help to allay the government's fears about being interventionist and help to remove sticking points around gaining support and funding from the Treasury.

### 3. For government: grasp the quick wins early

Many of our interviewees stressed that momentum could be gained by implementing policies early that have clear, rapid benefits. They insisted decision makers and the public need to see proof of success to get behind the idea.

Business case studies, demonstrating what a circular economy means and can achieve, can help others recognise the advantages of change and, in the words of one former Number 10 adviser, help to explain "by example instead of talking in the abstract."

A shift will need a combination of public campaigning, businesses who spy first mover advantage, and political champions.

Former civil servant



The longer circular economy policy stays as this theoretical thing, the longer it gets held up and the more resentment grows, because there is nothing to show for it.

Westminster insider

Ministers want quick wins; they want to be able to see in three, four, five years' time that they've done something.

Former Defra civil servant



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# Green Alliance's view

As a long term advocate of a zero waste circular economy, for the many opportunities and benefits it can bring to the country and the environment, we appreciated hearing the frank views of a wide range of decision makers with political experience of this agenda. We hope their insights will be invaluable to many others, but they are already helping to inform the direction of our own Circular Economy Task Force's work. In response to these insights, we would add the following points.

## **The circular economy will help to achieve government missions**

We believe that 'big picture' frames help policy makers understand the broad impacts of resource policies on the economy and national security, and open up opportunities for collaboration with other departments, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury. In the new parliament, these should clearly link to the government's missions. To be most compelling, arguments based on resource security should connect to the priorities of the energy security mission, while economic benefits should be linked to the government's growth mission.

## **It is vital to relate directly to people's lives**

Energy security and growth are not the only reasons why a more circular economy is a good thing. For some audiences, including the public, it will be more effective to relate to their daily lives and concerns, as recycling already does. For instance, it can have more impact to highlight how reusing items reduces living costs and how improving the quality of products ends frustration with 'built-in obsolescence' and shoddiness.

## **A long term plan is needed**

Quick wins will only be effective if they are part of a coherent long term plan to create a circular economy that brings resource use within planetary boundaries. Small but concrete wins can be stepping stones to set the country on the road to a zero waste, circular economy, but only if the government identifies the final destination and also plans greater intervention to get there.

The government's promise of a new Circular Economy Strategy, underpinned by roadmaps for key sectors, is positive news. If the expert advice is heeded, the strategy will finally allow the country to benefit from a transformative plan for resources, avoiding the pitfalls that have hampered so many efforts before.

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# Endnotes

- 1 UK government, 2018, *Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England*
- 2 Raw material consumption figures have been falling erratically since a high in 2004, and in the UK increased from 13.9 tonnes per person in 2020 to 16.5 tonnes per person in 2021, the latest year figures are available for. See: ONS, 2023, 'Material flows account for the United Kingdom 1990-2022'. (Per person figures are not available for England for 2021, though England accounts for the majority of the UK's material footprint.) Recycling in England has been flatlining for nearly a decade and dipped in the most recent accounts: in 2022, England's 'waste from households' recycling rate was 43.4 per cent, down from 44.1 per cent in 2021. See: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), 1 March 2024, 'Local authority collected waste management – annual results 2022/23'
- 3 *The Guardian*, 8 March 2024, 'Labour says it would aim for zero waste economy by 2050'
- 4 Steve Reed speech at Green Alliance's summer reception, 4 September 2024
- 5 Former shadow minister for environment, food and rural affairs, Daniel Zeichner, now minister of state for environment, food and rural affairs, expressed Labour's support of a target to reduce resource consumption in a delegated legislation committee debate. See *Hansard*, record of delegated legislation committee debate on draft environmental targets regulations 2022: debated on 23 January 2023.
- 6 Green Alliance, November 2024, *Why a circular economy is good for the UK; Why a circular economy is good for business; and, Why a circular economy is good for people*
- 7 Beyond Green Alliance's Circular Economy Task Force, progressive business voices advocating for ambition on the resources agenda include the World Economic Forum, Business in the Community and the Green Building Council. See for instance: World Economic Forum, January 2023, *Circular transformation of industries: unlocking new value in a resource constrained world*; Business in the Community, August 2023, *In your hands: going circular for net zero*; Green Building Council, January 2023, *System enablers for a circular economy*
- 8 A legal duty to the waste hierarchy is enshrined in various pieces of legislation, including The Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2011. Waste prevention should be the priority activity, followed by preparation for reuse, recycling, recovery and, finally, disposal, as the least preferred option.
- 9 National Audit Office, June 2023, *The government's resources and waste reforms for England*
- 10 Office for Environmental Protection, January 2024, *Progress in improving the natural environment in England 2022/2023*
- 11 Chart adapted from the 'Key milestones' chart on page 13 of 2018's *Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England*
- 12 Green Alliance polling of Westminster insiders conducted in early 2024.
- 13 This is likely to be a reference to Thérèse Coffey, who said something similar, although not when she was Defra secretary of state. In 2016, when she was a junior minister in the department with responsibility for resources, she told the Environmental Audit Committee: "On a very personal level the words 'circular economy' to me is at risk of implying there isn't growth." See: Environmental Audit Committee, 7 September 2016, 'Oral evidence: the future of the natural environment after the EU referendum'

- 14 Green Alliance, 2018a, *Less in, more out: using resource efficiency to cut carbon and benefit the economy*
- 15 This view aligns with previous Green Alliance research showing that 60 per cent of people would support a shift towards resource efficiency even if it changed their lifestyle. See: Green Alliance, 2018b, *By popular demand*. Taking the example of reuse, public acceptance, particularly among young people, is growing. Suggesting the stigma of buying secondhand is a thing of the past, Virgin Media O2 polling found that nine out of ten were, in principle, willing to buy used goods. See: Virgin Media O2, 25 May 2022, 'Virgin Media O2 reveals stigma of buying used goods is now a thing of the past'
- 16 Green Alliance research has identified many opportunities for circular measures to help with the cost of living, including buying second hand clothing and electronics, as well as repair and rental. See: Green Alliance, 2023, *Profit without loss: how conserving resources benefits the economy, businesses and consumers*. Our previous research has also shown that public preferences are shaped by values such as fairness, convenience, safety and community connection, as well as an intervention's impact on the environment, the economy and product quality. See: Green Alliance, 2018b, op cit
- 17 Welsh Government, 2021, *Beyond recycling: Wales's circular economy strategy*
- 18 Welsh Government, 2015, Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
- 19 Welsh Government, 7 December 2023, 'New waste and recycling stats published today'
- 20 Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021, *Universal circular economy policy goals*
- 21 The UN has suggested that a sustainable level of per person primary resource use, including food, fuel, minerals and metals, is six to eight tonnes per person per year, including in: UNEP, 2014, *Managing and conserving the natural resource base for sustained economic and social development*. The draft Northern Ireland strategy sets out: "Our target is that, by 2050 we will have reduced our annual material footprint to eight tonnes per person." For more on potential targets to reduce resource use, including material footprints, see Green Alliance, 2024a, *Measuring up: the potential of targets to reduce resource use*.

Green Alliance  
18th Floor  
Millbank Tower  
21-24 Millbank  
London SW1P 4QP

020 7233 7433  
ga@green-alliance.org.uk

www.green-alliance.org.uk  
@GreenAllianceUK  
blog: www.greenallianceblog.org.uk

## **Getting on track for a circular economy**

How the government can avoid mistakes of the past

### **Authors**

Emily Carr, Heather Plumpton and Libby Peake

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### **Green Alliance**

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