

Why a circular economy is good for people



The best motto to think about is not to waste things. Don't waste electricity, don't waste paper, don't waste food. Live the way you want to live but just don't waste."

David Attenborough¹

Introduction

In a circular economy, materials are highly valued, so are kept in use as long as possible, minimising the need to use more virgin resources with all the associated environmental impacts of extraction, processing, use and disposal.

But the reasons for ending the throwaway society are not just about the environment. By eliminating waste and promoting the repair, reuse, remanufacturing and high quality recycling of products, the government can meet wider economic goals.

The new government has stated an ambition to deliver a “decade of national renewal” for the UK, focusing on key missions, including growth, energy security and greater opportunities for all. Creating a circular economy should be at the heart of achieving these goals, as a source of job creation and to grow new industries.

By wholly embracing this approach, as countries like the Netherlands are already doing, the UK can enhance resource security, build its own lucrative reprocessing operations, upskill the workforce for high quality new jobs, including in the UK's industrial heartlands. And, through the greater independence a circular economy brings, it would help to minimise the risks of volatile international supply chains, contributing to prosperity and economic stability.

To realise these benefits, a whole government approach is necessary, with all departments getting behind the mission to transform our unsustainable 'take, make, waste' economy into one that offers a more secure and prosperous future.

Five public benefits of a circular economy


1 _____ Cutting the cost of living

Reused or repaired products often cost less, particularly when upfront costs are high, and people are increasingly open to buying second hand items. Reusing products could save UK households together between £2 billion and £8 billion per year, equivalent to between £74 and £280 per household every year.²

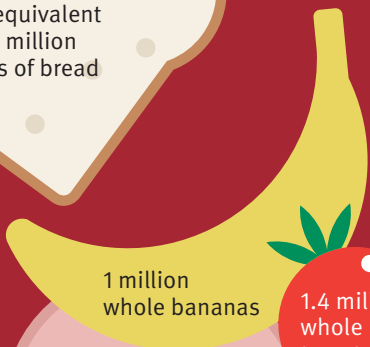
Buying second hand clothes saves 60-80 per cent of the price of buying new, and buying reused phones can save nearly 30 per cent on the cost of the latest models.³

Avoiding food waste, on its own, cuts household budgets significantly, with the potential to save £600 a year on average.⁴

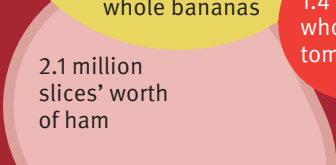
Every day in the UK, we waste approximately...⁵




The equivalent
of 25 million
slices of bread



1 million
whole bananas



2.1 million
slices' worth
of ham



1.4 million
whole
tomatoes



33,000
whole apples



360,000
whole oranges

Avoiding food
waste could
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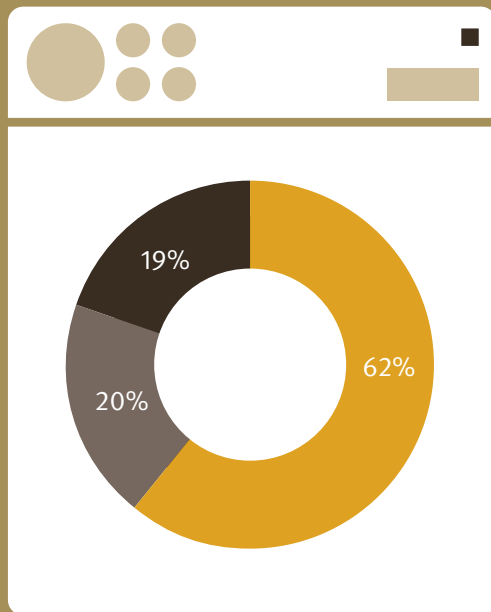
2 _____ Ending planned obsolescence and its costs

Our research shows that 65 per cent of people are regularly frustrated by how products don't last and 62 per cent find them hard to repair.⁶

This comes with a financial cost too: people can become trapped in cycles of repeatedly buying cheap goods that break quickly. But repairing a washing machine can cost more than buying the cheapest option on the market.⁷ Those that cannot afford the higher price of better made machines end up paying more in the long run.

Ensuring all products are designed to last and are easy and affordable to repair when they break would save people money and end this frustration.

62 per cent of people think products are difficult to repair



“Currently products are difficult to get repaired”

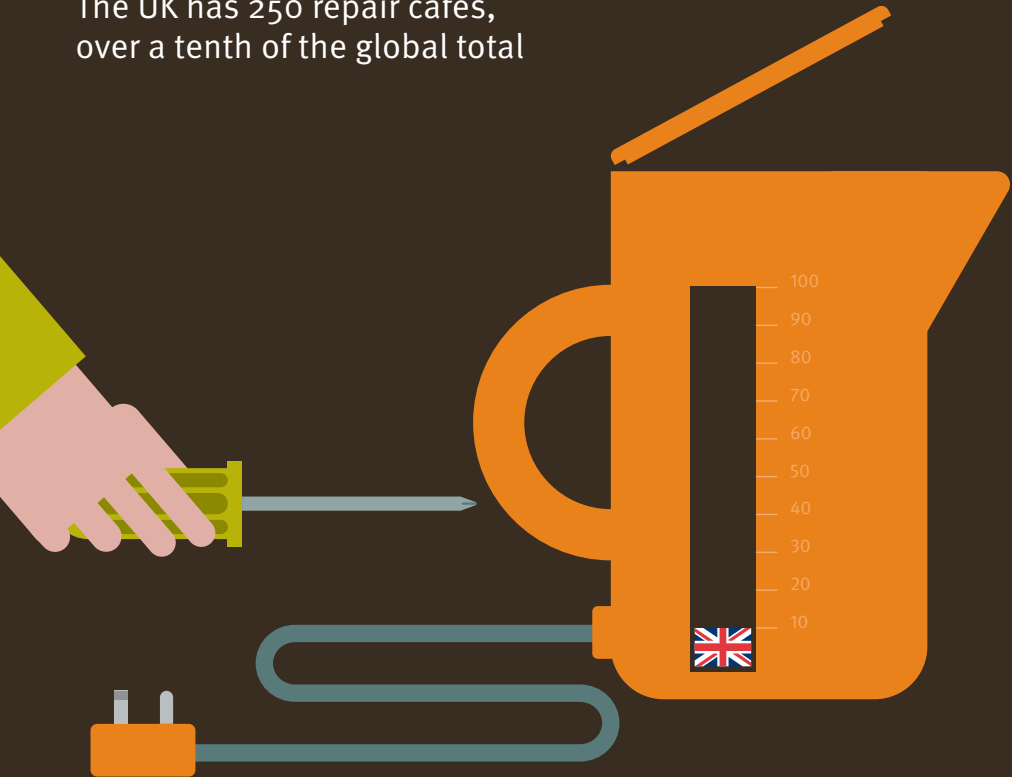
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

3 _____ Reviving communities

High streets are struggling, with 47 shops a day closing across the country in 2022 and 29 a day shutting down in 2023.⁸ People are increasingly looking for social connection, purpose and community spirit to draw them back to their local high streets.⁹

Repair shops and cafes can help to keep high streets vibrant, by increasing footfall and building strong community links.¹⁰ The growing interest in repair has led to 2,400 repair cafes worldwide, over 250 in the UK.¹¹ London-based charity Restart has counted over 300 professional repair shops in the capital alone.¹² Second hand shops selling reused clothing and items are bucking the high street trend, with sales up 147 per cent in 2023.¹³

The UK has 250 repair cafes,
over a tenth of the global total



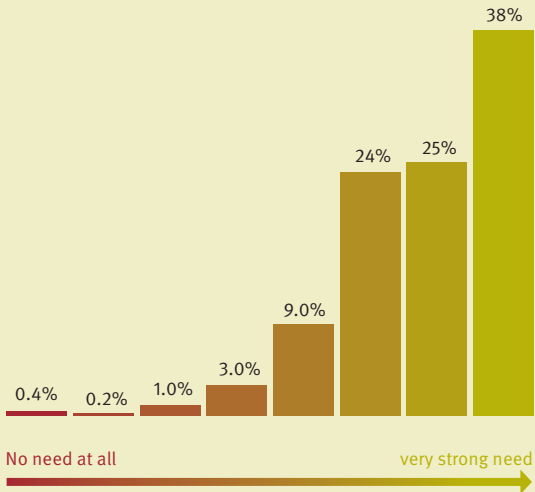
4 _____ People hate waste

Our research in 2021 showed that 90 per cent of people believe there is a strong or very strong need to use resources more efficiently, with 60 per cent supporting a shift in resource use even when it means substantially changing their lifestyle.¹⁴

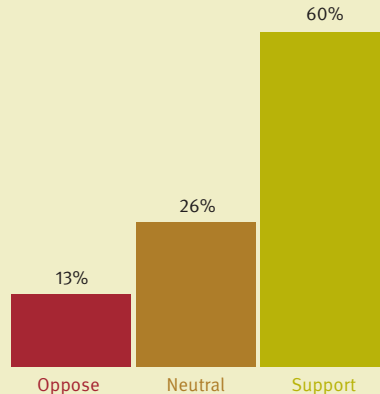
Litter and pollution are also major public concerns. A poll of over 7,500 individuals in 2020 found that 96 per cent thought that litter in general is a public health problem and 85 per cent think it is a big or major problem.¹⁵

Most people want a society that uses resources better

Q. To what extent do you think there is a need to shift towards a society that uses resources more efficiently?



Q. How much would you support a drastic shift towards a resource efficient society, even if that substantially changes the way you live?

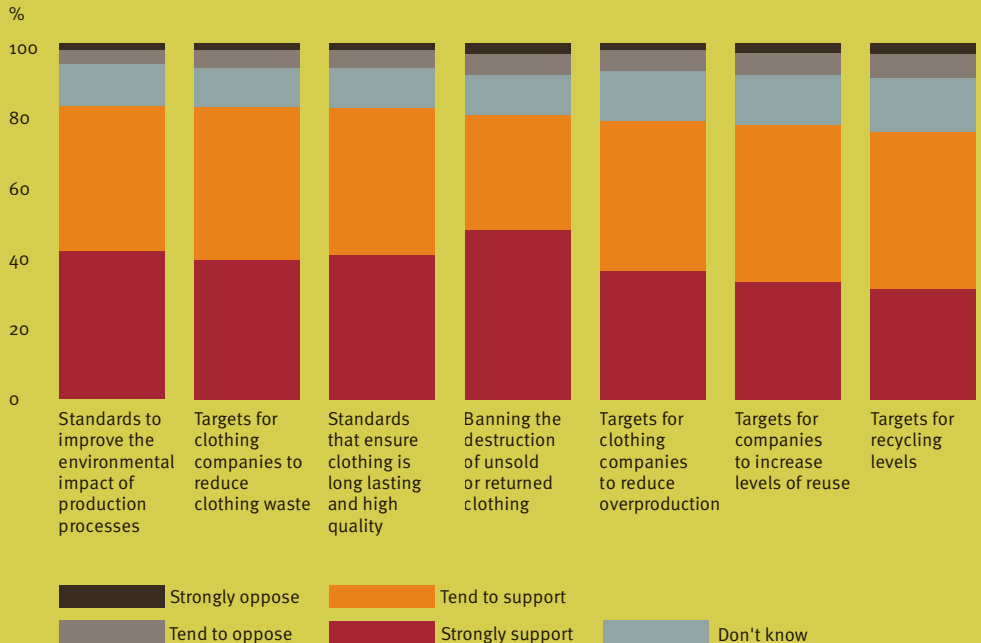


5 _____ People want more action

Our polling has found that 80 per cent of people think the government should be responsible for tackling environmental issues and that there is widespread support for a range of policies to cut resource use.¹⁶

Every policy option to deal with waste in the fashion industry was supported by more than 70 per cent of over 2,000 adults in Britain we polled in 2024.¹⁷ Similarly, in 2023, every policy presented in a survey conducted by the Restart Project about preventing electronic waste had over 79 per cent support from more than 2,000 adults in Britain.¹⁸

Strong measures to cut resource use in the fashion industry are well supported



What the government should do

The new government has announced a time limited taskforce to create a circular economy strategy for England. This is a positive step towards unlocking these benefits. Here are three actions that will ensure it makes the most of the opportunity:

1. Embed cross government action on resources

A new approach to resources requires effort right across government. The new taskforce will report to a small ministerial group, including the Treasury, environment, energy, transport, housing and business departments. Long term success will depend on all these departments promoting and adopting circular economy approaches.

2. Reboot the UK's resources plan

Care is needed to avoid pitfalls encountered by previous administrations. The promised strategy should include concrete measures, including specific plans for high

impact sectors like construction, electronics, batteries, textiles and food, and mechanisms for improving data, including the long promised National Materials Datahub. Economic incentives should align with the circular economy objective. Higher product standards should be adopted, with a more ambitious approach to extended producer responsibility, focused on reuse and reduction.

3. Set a national resource reduction target

The UK's material footprint, which measures the virgin resources extracted to meet demand for products and services, is rising and, at 16.5 tonnes per person per year, it is over twice the UN's suggested sustainable range of six to eight tonnes per person per year.¹⁹

The north star of a new approach should be a national resource reduction target, along the lines of emissions reduction targets, providing a guiding framework for policy that brings resource use in line with what science says is needed. This was supported by the Labour Party in opposition and now, in government, it should introduce it using existing powers through the Environment Act 2021.²⁰

Further reading



By popular demand What people want from a resource efficient economy



A greener tax system The people's verdict



Endnotes

- 1 *The Guardian*, 19 October 2019, “Just don’t waste”: David Attenborough’s heartfelt message to next generation’
- 2 WRAP, 2022, *The role of reuse in helping families through the cost-of-living crisis*
- 3 Green Alliance, 2023, *Profit without loss: how conserving resources benefits the economy businesses and consumers*
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- 7 Green Alliance, 2023, op cit
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- 9 University of Exeter, 14 December 2021, ‘Repair cafes and “20 minute neighbourhoods” should be used to revitalise Cornish high streets’
- 10 Rethinking poverty, 17 March 2021, ‘The repair café: what can we learn from it’
- 11 BBC, 11 August 2023, ‘The rise of repairing: why more if us are trying to fix things’
- 12 London Repairs website. Available at: <https://londonrepairs.org/>

- 13 Which.co.uk, 24 May 2024, 'Charity shops on the rise: how to get the most from second-hand shopping'
- 14 Green Alliance, 2018, *By popular demand: what people want from a resource efficient economy*
- 15 Clean Up Britain, 27 July 2020, 'Major national campaign launched today with Britain's largest media group'
- 16 Green Alliance, 2021, *A greener tax system: the people's verdict*
- 17 Green Alliance, 2024, *Changing fashion: what people want from a greener clothing industry*
- 18 YouGov/Restart project survey results, 12-13th October 2023. Available at: ygo-assets-websites-editorial-emea.yougov.net/documents/RestartProject_ElectricalDevices_231013_W.pdf
- 19 Green Alliance, 2024, *Measuring up: the potential of targets to reduce resource use*
- 20 Hansard, 'Record of delegated legislation committee debate on draft environmental targets regulations 2022': debated Monday 23 January 2023
- 21 *The Irish Times*, 18 July 2021, 'Mary Portas: "I had no idea consumerism was killing the planet"'

“The central tenet of rampant consumerism has been killing our planet. It has been exploiting vast numbers of people. It has been draining the only resources we will ever have. And, in its relentless drive to make us sate our anxiety by consuming more and more, it has been killing our collective wellbeing.”

Mary Portas²¹

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