

In the loop

“ green
alliance...”

Stories of businesses
delivering the circular
economy



In the loop: stories of businesses delivering the circular economy

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Green Alliance

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Summary

“

Early mover circular businesses are setting the example for others to follow.”

UK businesses across industries and regions are adopting circular practices, based on resource reduction, reuse, remanufacturing and recycling, increasing their resilience, cutting waste and inefficiency, while at the same time creating new jobs. If adopted more widely, these models would make local economies stronger, drive greater innovation and reduce the UK's exposure to volatile international markets

The ripple effects from early mover circular businesses in supply chains are setting the example for others to follow. But these pioneer businesses are currently only a small part of the economy.

England's first circular economy strategy is due to be released for consultation late in 2025. With strong political leadership and supportive policy, this is the chance to make circular business models the norm.

This report showcases the benefits that ten businesses operating circular models on an industrial scale are bringing to the UK:

1. New market opportunities

When one business goes circular, it creates opportunities for others: major retailers like Ocado foster a whole ecosystem of supporting businesses around them, while large logistics providers like Advanced Clothing Solutions help existing retailers to adopt circular models and access new markets.

**“
Selling
refurbished
products is a
win-win for
businesses and
consumers.”**

2. Profits and savings

Selling refurbished products is a win-win for businesses and consumers, breaking the cycle that forces people to buy and then replace poor quality goods, boosting profits for major businesses like Screwfix and B&Q by providing an additional revenue stream.

3. Supporting farmers

Whole crop purchasing helps eliminate the food waste and financial risks for farmers caused by supermarket standards. These partnerships, like Tesco's with Branston, provide farmers with a guaranteed income and retailers with an additional source of ingredients.

4. New green jobs

Circular businesses create high quality jobs, and these are especially needed in areas that have faced industrial decline, with companies like JCB and Caterpillar offering apprenticeships and helping to move their existing skilled workers into remanufacturing and refurbishment roles. The clean energy transition offers new opportunities for engineers and material scientists in remanufacturing and recycling decommissioned energy infrastructure.

5. Local community benefits

Circular businesses can help to cut the cost of living, with organisations like the Greater Manchester Renew Hub reselling and redistributing affordable second hand goods, while fostering new community links and helping people to develop new skills.

“

Strong regulatory standards and protections are essential to build trust.”

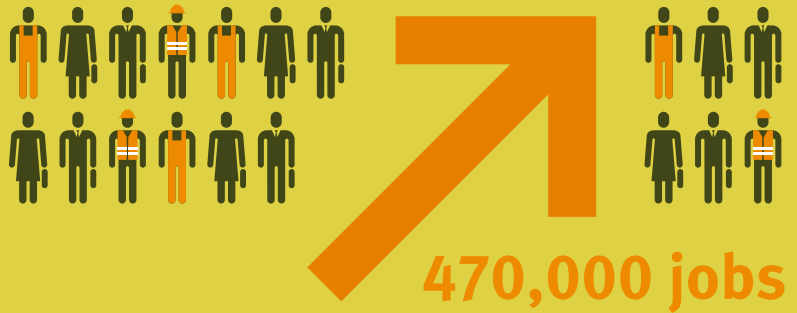
We also draw on international examples and lessons from countries going further and faster to make priority sectors like construction and transport more circular.

Green Alliance’s Circular Economy Task Force has already set out broad aspirations for the government’s circular economy strategy.¹

These case studies and international comparisons point to three specific actions that should form part of the strategy to support the growth of circular businesses:

- 1. Finance:** the Treasury should correct perversities in the tax system and introduce incentives that reward circular businesses for the value they provide to the economy.
- 2. Consumer confidence:** strong regulatory standards and protections are essential to build trust, reduce costs and drive demand for circular products and services.
- 3. Skills:** a skills development plan would attract and train workers with transferable skills from other industries. Strategic funding for universities, colleges and training providers, along with a green skills ‘super deduction’ (tax relief for businesses investing in green workforce training), would equip more workers with the skills to thrive in a circular economy.

Why the UK needs a circular economy



> 470,000 UK jobs by 2035²



+ £25 billion to UK GDP by 2035³



11 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050⁴

Tried and tested

Five major benefits of circular business

To find out more about what businesses are already delivering in the UK through more circular approaches, we undertook a combination of desk based research and interviews with business representatives.

Many of the businesses we spoke to are large, established companies. These are not small startups at the margins, but major players beginning to move away from linear models and towards the opportunities offered by more circular approaches.

Some are adopting circular practices within their own operations, while others are enabling the transition across wider value chains, driven by a growing business case.

The experiences of these businesses revealed five major benefits they are already delivering to the UK economy.

1.

New market opportunities

When one business becomes circular, it opens up opportunities for multiple businesses to profit. Large retailers adopting circular models create demand for a supporting ecosystem, enabling new businesses to emerge in a growing market.

Large circular logistics companies make it easier and cheaper for existing linear retailers to implement circular practices and tap into highly profitable markets, like clothing rental and resale.

Advanced Clothing Solutions



Based in Glasgow, Advanced Clothing Solutions (ACS) is the UK's largest circular fashion business, handling logistics for services like rental, resale, repair, refurbishment and returns, all of which can extend the lifespan of garments and reduce demand for new production. It provides existing retailers, including high street brands, like Decathlon and Moss Bros, with an easy way to offer customers circular options alongside their usual products, without the challenges or cost of running the services themselves. More and more retailers are able to tap into the highly profitable rental and resale markets via this model, bringing profit not just to ACS but also to retailers, with new income streams.

As a large scale logistics provider, ACS is accelerating the fashion industry's circular transition, and technological innovation has been vital to staying competitive on costs.

As Michael Cusack, chief sustainability officer, highlighted to us, circular fashion is “competing against organisations that are exploiting the environment to reduce their costs, that are exploiting communities.”

ACS aims instead to bring benefits to the community in Glasgow: its local workforce includes 15 per cent with disabilities, ten per cent refugees and three per cent ex-offenders, and it partners with initiatives like Smart Works to support disadvantaged women into employment.

To achieve economies of scale to compete without being exploitative, ACS is “using AI automation and nanotechnologies for sanitisation to help drive down costs and help increase volumes.” With automated systems for picking, packing and dispatching orders, as well as an automated sanitisation chamber, the warehouse can process over six million garments annually, using radio frequency identification (RFID) technology to track every item.



We've got to be as creative as we can. Share our passion for what we do and collaborate, invest in technology, invest in our people. I think we're on the verge of something very impactful. It's just a matter of time. If the government help us, they'll help the whole industry and then the UK can be a world leader.

Michael Cusack
Chief sustainability officer, ACS



Ocado Retail

Ocado Retail spent four years developing a pilot refill scheme which was launched to customers in 2024. The scheme offers refillable containers for everyday products, aiming to create a system for the whole online retail sector to use.

This builds on progress in the B2B space, where collaboration to create standardised reusable transit packaging to transport goods between businesses has reduced dependence on disposables. For example Bakers Basco, a partnership between the UK's five largest bakeries, has introduced a system of standardised reusable bread baskets for transporting loaves from bakeries to store shelves. Laura Fernandez, senior packaging and sustainability manager at Ocado Retail, told us that its goal was similarly to create "one system, easy to understand, easy to adopt," adding that "standardisation will bring scalability, and commercial and operational viability."

The trial included rice, pasta, laundry detergent and softener, with customers returning containers to drivers after use. Early feedback was very positive, with Fernandez sharing that "100 per cent of customers believe the scheme is easy to engage with, 100 per cent believe in the hygiene and cleanliness of the system, and 96 per cent of them said that they will

definitely use reuse again in the future." Products in refillable packaging achieved higher ratings than their single use counterparts, ranging from 4.8 to 4.9 out of five stars.

Wider adoption of this reusable packaging system could unlock economic opportunities, with new businesses emerging and existing ones expanding their operations. As Fernandez emphasised: "No one company will be able to deliver a successful, efficient reuse scheme. We all need to collaborate."

For this pilot alone, Ocado had many partners: Berry Global designed the vessels, GoUnpackaged managed washing

We wanted to demonstrate that reuse can happen, that reuse can be successful. What we need now is collaboration, we need standardisation, bringing benefits to businesses through economies of scale and improved efficiency.

Laura Fernandez
Senior packaging and sustainability manager, Ocado Retail



and logistics, Avery Dennison provided RFID tracking, and Polytag added QR code technology to engage customers.

The pilot covers around two thirds of Ocado's customer base and products in refillable packaging have achieved sales of around a sixth of their single use equivalents. Fernandez stressed the scale of the future opportunity if this were

realised across the sector, estimating that if around a third of packaging were reusable by 2030, 520 million packages would need to be filled, sold, washed, refilled and transported each week, creating growth opportunities for businesses in the circular logistics ecosystem, and countering the fall in disposable packaging production.

2. Profits and savings

Businesses selling refurbished products do not just help consumers break the cycle of constantly having to replace cheap, low quality items, they can also boost their own revenues. This is good for people and profits, as businesses tap the previously lost value in the second lives of products, all while giving people more access to high quality goods.

Screwfix and B&Q

Screwfix and B&Q, both subsidiaries of Kingfisher, have launched refurbished product lines: 'Refurb by Screwfix' was launched in 2021 and 'Refurbished by B&Q' followed in 2024. At a shared returns processing facility in Staffordshire, items returned by customers, which would previously be sent for recycling, are refurbished, graded and prepared for resale. They will be sold online, typically for around 20 per cent off the price of a new product and with a one year guarantee. Screwfix now offers a range of 1,800 refurbished products. Over 250,000 have been refurbished to date, and 100,000 were sold in 2024-25. Listing these alongside new products encourages customers to consider the lower priced refurbished option, even if they were not searching for them initially.

Screwfix has found refurbished products are outperforming new products. Jason Gordon, returns and after sales manager revealed: "We actually get higher customer review scores for a refurbished product in most instances than the original product." Many customers are surprised by the high quality: "They see it in a pristine box, the whole product's been cleaned, and they think 'Wow, I've got a discount and it's literally an almost new product!'" And this goes beyond appearance; while new items



There's a clear benefits case economically, and a clear benefits case environmentally. It's a logical marriage and a win-win for us.
Duncan Tanner
Lead technical manager for product quality at B&Q



are randomly inspected, all Screwfix and B&Q refurbished products receive basic safety, PAT and function tests, making breakdowns rarer for them than new products. Refurbished ranges are providing access to high quality goods for a lower price, offering longer term value and durability than similarly priced equivalent new products.

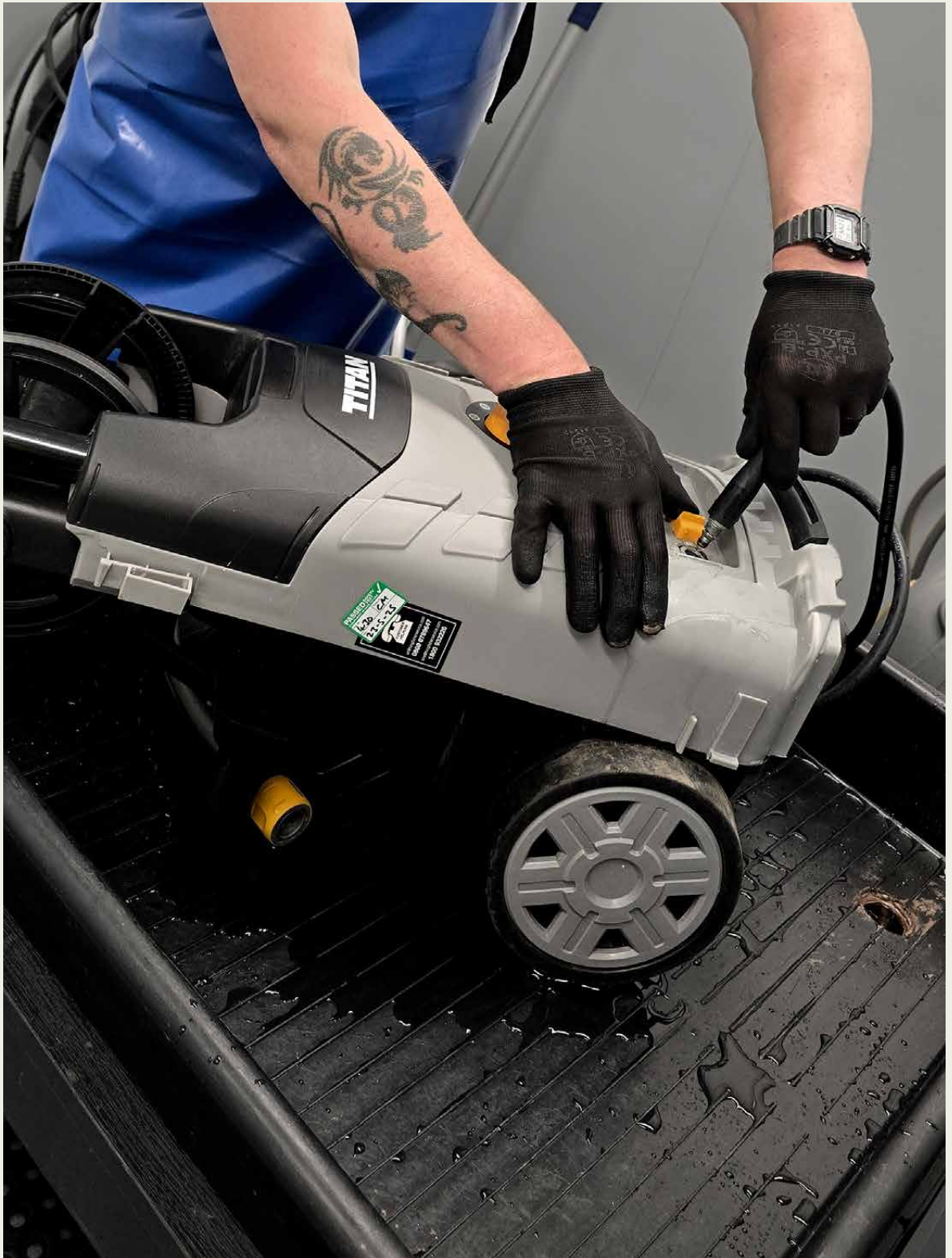
Refurbishing customer returns means B&Q and Screwfix can capture value that would otherwise be lost to them and avoids the needless waste of materials. As Gordon explained, returned items cannot go back into mint stock, creating “a problem if we didn’t refurbish, as we wouldn’t be able to resell the product, and it would be diverted to recycling.”

Without in-house refurbishment, products are sent to third parties for recycling. This both stops them from being retained at their highest value and causes value to leak

out of the business. As Duncan Tanner, lead technical manager for product quality at B&Q, explained: “Where there is life in a returned item, a lot of retailers tend to pass those on to third parties to handle them. What we’re doing now is taking that operation into our own hands so we can realise that value for ourselves.”

This is expected to be a growth area for both businesses. For B&Q, “the refurbishment solution is an important, growing part of B&Q continuing to become more circular over time, helping to salvage products that could have a second life and stop them going to waste.” Screwfix shared this confidence, with Gordon highlighting rapid growth to date: “In 2021, we had 12 products on screwfix.com, and as of today, we’ve got 1,800. Month after month after month, we’re exceeding the previous 12 months’ sales. It’s definitely set to grow and is seen as a massive focus area for the business.”

Beyond product volume, Gordon saw scope to broaden the services in the future, with further investment in the Staffordshire facility “a precursor to other things in the future that we’d like to do, like offering extended warranties.”



3. Supporting farmers

Business models that eliminate the scourge of food waste and reduce financial risks for farmers have a positive impact on the entire food supply chain. They offer farmers a guaranteed income and provide retailers with an additional source of ingredients, helping to create a fairer system.

Branston

Tesco has entered a partnership with Branston, one of the UK's biggest potato suppliers, under which it has committed to buy Branston's entire crop. The fresh produce that meets market standards is sold whole in supermarkets and the rest is used for ready meals, frozen foods or sold on to other suppliers in the hospitality sector. This large, long term contract has enabled Branston to invest £20 million in factory equipment and technology to improve efficiency, quality and yields.⁵ Efficiency has also been boosted since the

Our long standing relationship with Tesco is pivotal to maximising supply chain value and resilience, regardless of the crop season. Creating a modern produce supply chain which can retain the whole crop value requires an innovative model, coupled with the confidence and expertise to invest, which only true long term partnership agreements can provide.

Jim Windle
CEO, Branston



sale of all potato grades has helped to streamline processing and reduce waste.

This benefits Tesco too, as Branston's investments in improvement mean it can receive greater quantities and better quality produce, improving customer satisfaction, which can help raise sales. These gains are then reinvested into the supply chain, supporting British suppliers and creating a virtuous circle.⁶ Reliable access to large volumes of additional ingredients by accepting lower grade

produce has led Tesco to expand its business as an ingredient supplier, as well as its affordable wonky vegetable offering.

WCP is well suited to markets like the UK where a small number of large retailers dominate, as they have the scale and infrastructure to deal with the whole crop.⁷ This approach leads to fairer supply chains, reduces waste and supports farmers.

4. New green jobs

Circular businesses generate much needed new jobs, particularly in areas of the country that have faced industrial decline. Workers with existing skills in manufacturing can transfer into remanufacture and refurbishment, while circular businesses are also training up a new generation. Practices in the clean energy industry, like remanufacturing wind turbine parts, also offer opportunities to increase the number of high skilled jobs.

Caterpillar and JCB

Caterpillar and JCB, major players in the heavy machinery industry, have long embraced remanufacture, with hubs in Shrewsbury and Staffordshire respectively. They run programmes that return end of life products to 'as new' condition, meaning they provide customers with remanufactured products capable of another full service life. This cuts owning and operating costs for customers, and reduces the need for raw materials for new parts.^{8,9}

The companies' efforts are complemented by a strong commitment to develop their workforces, with apprenticeships and retraining schemes designed to ensure that the next generation of engineers and technicians are equipped for the circular economy of the future.^{10,11}

Original equipment manufacturers dominate remanufacturing, but the growth of clean energy is likely to increase the opportunities. Analysis for the Coalition for Wind Industry Circularity has shown that remanufacturing just ten wind turbine components with well established supply chains, over the next ten years, could create a UK market worth £9.6 billion as well as 20,000 jobs.¹²

Project PProGrESS

Even for parts unsuitable for remanufacturing, like wind turbine blades, there are likely to be opportunities. Project PProGrESS, a £2 million pilot running from 2022-2025, has tackled this challenge by developing a process to separate glass fibre and resin from wind turbine blades for reuse, involving a gasifier in Glasgow and a shredding site in Preston. The pilot was led by Composites UK, in partnership with Aker Offshore Wind, SUEZ, GRP Solutions, Cubis Systems and researchers from the University of Strathclyde and the University of Nottingham.

Thomas Merry, commercialisation and innovation manager at SUEZ, said: “We recovered really high quality fibres and were able to test them in a good number of products, and got positive feedback on their suitability.” If this trial’s success can be replicated, it would be a technological breakthrough. Given the projected growth of the wind turbine blade market, this also signals strong potential for future circular economy job creation.

A full scale operation could create roles across waste management, engineering and manufacturing, with strong potential for skills transfer. As Merry observed: “There’s definitely a skill overlap here with other industries”. He noted that anyone



with skills in energy process control would be suited to working with the gasifier, including workers from oil and gas, nuclear and pharmaceuticals. Engineers and material scientists would be needed to drive innovation in blade recycling and additional jobs would emerge in logistics and manufacturing to work on repurposing the materials.

5.

Local community benefits

Some circular businesses are supporting communities and helping people to access affordable products. By reusing and redistributing items, like furniture and toys that would otherwise go to waste, these initiatives not only reduce environmental impact but also bring people together, foster a sense of community and help individuals develop valuable new skills.

The Greater Manchester Renew Hub

The Greater Manchester Renew Hub, the largest reuse facility in the UK, was established in partnership between SUEZ and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). It refurbishes donated items for resale or direct donation to local causes. It has redistributed over 360,000 items to date, including 175 tonnes given directly to those in need. It has generated £1.5 million to support more than 90 community groups, including workshops, bike repair schemes and repair cafés.

These community benefits are also driven by the hub's education, training and volunteering programmes. Sarah Ottoway, sustainability and social value lead at SUEZ said: "We've got a real sense of community now, and we see the same faces coming through to volunteer."

In partnership with local charity Recycling Lives' Achieve programme, 53 ex-offenders completed eight week placements, with 22 moving into permanent roles, including 13 with SUEZ in Greater Manchester. The hub has also trained two furniture restoration apprentices and hosted five interior design students, who refurbished display pods in the event space as part of their work placement.

Refurbished items from the hub are helping to ease pressure on stretched public



Our impact is not just what is being delivered at the hub itself, it's the ripple effects that go off into the local community.

Sarah Ottaway
Sustainability and
social value lead, SUEZ

services, reducing council costs in supporting local residents. Ottaway revealed that this is partly achieved through “a lot of ad hoc requests, people in need come in with a social worker, and we donate what we can.” Other requests are more planned, such as furniture donations to support the housing department in furnishing social homes, and the hub’s provision of refurbished bikes and sports equipment to schools. Both request types can reduce costs for the council, through social housing and education budgets.

Lessons from abroad

“

Austria has set ambitious national targets to reduce material use.”

Over 70 countries have launched circular economy roadmaps, calls to action or strategies since 1999, giving them a head start in capturing the benefits from supporting circular businesses.¹³ England is falling behind the EU’s regulatory approach by not creating equivalent binding targets or standards around resource efficiency, like ecodesign standards or the Batteries Regulation. Fortunately, the priority sectors identified in England’s upcoming circular economy roadmaps closely align with those already targeted internationally, putting the government in a stronger position to learn from global best practice.¹⁴

What can England learn from the countries already ahead?

Engaging businesses is critical. Finland, one of the first countries to publish a national circular economy roadmap in 2016, has secured long term business buy-in by developing priorities through extensive engagement with businesses and civil society, with the roadmap clearly defining the roles of the public and private sectors.¹⁵

Ambitions to reduce material use should be paired with strong financial incentives. Given the climate and biodiversity impacts of overconsumption, reducing material use is a central ambition in virtually all circular economy strategies, with many setting targets to achieve this.¹⁶ A strategy that fails to explicitly address this risks falling behind international best practice. Austria has set ambitious national targets to reduce material use and backed these goals with strong financial support for businesses to make the transition. Alongside targets to reduce material footprint and improve resource productivity, it has used its Green Finance Agenda to direct private capital toward circular investments. As part of this effort, €310 million from its 2022 green bond was allocated to circular initiatives.¹⁷

“

France has a strong extended producer responsibility scheme.”

Good regulation expands markets. Strong regulation can grow the market for circular goods and services by stimulating demand, and France exemplifies this in its construction and transport sectors. It has whole life carbon limits for buildings to encourage the use of low embodied carbon materials, and has mandated pre-demolition assessments to evaluate all existing materials from large buildings for reuse.^{18,19} Reused construction materials are not only viable but sought after, benefiting French businesses like Mobius, which catalogues materials in pre-demolition buildings, develops reuse strategies and refurbishes high carbon materials.

In transport, France has a strong extended producer responsibility scheme and requirements for retailers and repairers to offer second hand parts. This made France the ideal base for Renault’s ReFactory, Europe’s largest used car reconditioning centre, which reconditions 45,000 vehicles annually, focusing on retrofit, second life battery applications, remanufactured parts and engineer training.²⁰

Sector transition plans should complement headline ambitions. The Netherlands has shown the value of complementing headline targets with tailored sector transition agendas to target the specific needs of businesses across different industries. In construction, whole life carbon limits have existed since 2018, it has supported initiatives like the Dutch Green Building Council which fosters collaboration across government, industry and academia, and circular principles are embedded in procurement through tools like the Circular Building Index.^{21,22} These interventions are guided by headline national targets, including to halve raw material consumption by 2030 and become fully circular by 2050.²³ Local benefits are emerging. Amsterdam, for example, has become a flagship circular city, with the built environment as one of its priority areas. It has launched over 200 circular economy projects, including a live dashboard tracking material flows across the city and a digital inventory of construction materials for architects.²⁴

Supporting circular businesses to grow

“

Supporting circular businesses has to be a cross departmental effort”

The UK government was elected with a manifesto commitment to move to a circular economy. Now, aided by its Circular Economy Taskforce, an independent expert advisory group, it is developing a strategy to position England as a global leader.

Supporting circular businesses has to be a cross departmental effort, requiring buy-in right across government and parliament. Many MPs representing constituencies where circular businesses are located will want a strategy that helps companies thrive.

As recognised internationally, climate change and environmental degradation are driven by unconstrained levels of resource use.²⁵ In line with international best practice, an ambitious strategy must set a clear target to bring resource use down to sustainable levels. Such a target can serve as a guide for all interventions, including support for circular businesses. The strategy should send a strong signal of intent, making circularity attractive for existing businesses and start-ups, as well as committing to practical measures that support them to succeed.

We recommend extending government support to help circular businesses thrive in England in the following ways:

1. Finance

Going beyond levelling the playing field between circular and linear businesses, the Treasury should provide incentives that reward circular businesses for the value they deliver. It should correct unhelpful perversities in the tax system, for instance around VAT so that circular practices like repair and refurbishment are incentivised. It should also establish dedicated funding to support circular business models, stimulate innovation and reflect the value these businesses deliver to the UK economy.

“

Attracting workers from other industries with transferable skills will form part of a fair transition.”

2. Consumer confidence

The government should raise consumer confidence in circular products and services through high product standards, along with strong consumer rights and protections. This would help to reduce costs, improve quality and build the trust needed to drive demand. This includes measures like improving ecodesign standards to ensure products are durable and repairable, giving consumers a real right to repair and setting quality control and consumer rights standards for emerging circular models, like subscriptions and product sharing, to ensure a level playing field.

3. Skills

Circular businesses need a skilled workforce to thrive and grow. Attracting workers from other industries with transferable skills will form part of a fair transition. They should be supported with retraining programmes and work coaches to guide them into new roles. Strategic funding to universities and colleges should raise awareness of circular economy options among young people deciding on a career, while a green skills ‘super deduction’ (tax relief for businesses investing in green workforce training) could equip more workers with the skills to thrive in a circular economy.

Further reading

Read more detailed recommendations relating to finance, consumer confidence and skills development for a successful circular economy strategy:



Endnotes

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