

## Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill - MSP Briefing for Stage 2

### Background

[Consumer Scotland](#) is the statutory body for consumers in Scotland. Established by the Consumer Scotland Act 2020, we are accountable to the Scottish Parliament.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee will commence Stage 2 proceedings on the *Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill* at its meeting on 30 April. Consumer Scotland has provided both [oral](#) and [written](#) evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee as part of their consideration of the Circular Economy Bill at Stage 1 and we welcome the Committee's report. In addition to this, Consumer Scotland submitted a [briefing](#) for the Stage 1 Debate.

### Introduction

The transition to a circular economy is one of the significant challenges of our time. Scotland's per capita material footprint is nearly double the global average. The [Circularity Gap Report](#) suggests that Scotland is currently only 1.3% 'circular', with more than 98% of materials extracted from virgin resources. Increasing circularity could help to reduce emissions in Scotland by up to 43%. Achieving this will require action at a number of levels, from Government, businesses, communities and individuals.

Supporting individual consumers to understand the changes that are required and putting the right support mechanisms in place to enable them to make more sustainable choices will be critical to the transition to a circular economy. The Bill has the potential to have a significant positive impact on the way that consumers interact with resources, keeping high quality materials in circulation for longer.

Consumer Scotland supports the general principles and the ambition of the Bill. In order to support consumers in Scotland to make the changes required to transition to a circular economy there are two key ways in which the Bill can be strengthened. Consumer Scotland recommends that the Bill should **focus on actions further up the [waste hierarchy](#) and provide consumers with the full spectrum of support needed to enable them to make the changes required to their consumption habits**. This will mean placing more emphasis on measures to reduce resource use and increase reuse of resources.

## **Moving action further up the waste hierarchy**

Around four-fifths (82%) of Scotland's [carbon footprint](#) comes from the products and services we manufacture, use, and throw away. Supporting consumers in Scotland to focus their actions higher up the waste hierarchy, to reduce resource use and maximise reuse, and to dispose of goods responsibly will be a key part in achieving our net zero targets.

It is important that the Bill, along with the upcoming [Circular Economy and Waste Routemap and Circular Economy Strategy](#), does not focus disproportionately on waste management and disposal. In order to achieve the transformational change required, **action must be prioritised higher up the waste hierarchy and address the problems of overconsumption and unsustainable resource use** along with improving recycling and decarbonising disposal.

## **Supporting consumer behaviour change**

Consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of the products and services that they buy and are motivated to purchase products and services which minimise harm to, or have a positive effect on, the environment. [Research](#) commissioned by Consumer Scotland found that **77% of people in Scotland are concerned about climate change; however, only 34% agreed that they know what to do to help Scotland reach net zero**, with 33% disagreeing and a further 34% saying they were unsure. Respondents cited a lack of information as one of the barriers to positive change.

It is important that the Bill keeps consumers at the centre of the process and provides the necessary support to help them to make more sustainable choices. If the goals of the Circular Economy Bill are to be achieved, **attention must be given to ensuring the system properly supports consumers to make meaningful behaviour changes.**

There is a significant amount of ongoing government action that interacts with the transition to a circular economy. A focus on making sure that the range of interrelated strategies, plans and policies are well sequenced, joined up and coordinated will be a key part in supporting consumers to understand what is being asked of them and supporting them to understand their role in the transition to a circular economy.

While a detailed strategy is desirable it is also important to focus on delivery of the measures set out. When considering effective delivery, it is important to consider how consumers will engage with any policies and to ensure consumers, and consumer bodies, are actively engaged in the design of services. Consideration should also be given to the needs of different consumers, such as those living in rural areas or tenement houses or disabled or digitally excluded consumers to ensure that policies meet the needs of consumers.

**Consumer Scotland would welcome any future Circular Economy Strategy including more detail on how to support behaviour change** as recommended in the Committee's Stage 1 report.

### **Access to advice, information and support**

If the Bill is to deliver real change, consumers and businesses will need **support and information to change current purchasing and consumption behaviours**. This information must deliver clarity, consistency and certainty about these changes, explaining why they are needed, the impact that they will have and what support and alternative options are available to meet consumer needs.

Our [research](#) shows that many consumers don't fully understand the changes that will be needed and don't know what actions are most effective in reducing their environmental impact. The Climate Change Committee has previously recommended empowering people to make green choices by communicating more clearly the most impactful way that individuals can reduce emissions and supporting people to make these choices. A key task will be to produce messaging that is simple, consistent across sectors and adequately targeted in order to support consumers and businesses to understand the actions needed by them to transition to a circular economy.

In order to make the changes required to transition to a circular economy, there must be accessible alternatives to the unsustainable behaviours we are seeking to change. Where changes are made to services such as household recycling or charges are put in place for problematic single use items these should be accompanied by the necessary support for consumers.

### **Waste Management**

Evidence to the Committee at Stage 1 suggested that there is more that can be done to **support consumers in undertaking effective recycling practices**, including developing more consistency in what items are collected across local authorities, improving collection systems and providing better information for consumers. These approaches should be prioritised before the application of any punitive measures such as household fines. **We support the Committee's recommendation for an awareness campaign** to inform the public about the new measures proposed in the Bill.

### **A careful balance will need to be struck between consistency and flexibility.**

Additional support may be needed for local authorities with higher levels of geographic isolation or deprivation. These aspects should be taken into account, to avoid consumers in vulnerable circumstances or local authorities with a more dispersed population base, or a high level of multiple ownership and mixed use buildings, being disproportionately impacted.

Where any new or increased financial penalties are put in place to deter unsustainable behaviour such as recycling contamination or litter and flytipping, it is important that **finances are used as a last resort and are preceded by targeted and consistent information and support to encourage consumer behaviour change.**

### **Measures to Reduce Single Use Plastics**

Consumer Scotland supports taking a **prioritised approach to the introduction of any environmental charges**, focussing initially on those products with the most problematic impacts.

Work must continue with manufacturers to progress the development of sustainable products, for example through more research into developing alternative materials which can replace single-use items, providing incentives to find solutions and exploring technological advances. This would remove the need for end consumers to choose more sustainable options, by simply removing less sustainable options from the supply chain.

Where charges for single-use items are introduced, it will be important to avoid potential harm to consumers who are on low incomes or in vulnerable circumstances. To mitigate against this, **there must be accessible and affordable sustainable alternatives available to consumers** that fit their needs. **Any charges should be accompanied by a range of interventions** to encourage behaviour change and make reusable products more appealing to increase the uptake of reusable products.

### **Conclusion**

Consumer Scotland is supportive of the measures contained within the Bill, however it would be strengthened by a greater focus on encouraging consumers to move **actions higher up the waste hierarchy and by making sure that consumers are provided with the full spectrum of support needed to enable them to make the changes required to their consumption habits.** Tackling overconsumption and production, mainstreaming reuse and repair and promoting and incentivising sustainable choices will be key to the transition to a circular economy.

In order to have the greatest impact in changing consumer behaviour, the Bill should keep consumers at the centre of the process, supporting them to make more sustainable choices. If the goals of the Circular Economy Bill are to be achieved, **attention must be given to ensuring the system properly supports consumers to make meaningful behaviour changes which move beyond the lower impact solutions such as recycling and towards a focus on reducing consumption and mainstreaming reuse.**