

Moving Towards the Circular Economy Workshop

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The Circular Economy – Policy Context in Ireland

Matt Collins, Assistant Secretary

Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment

Today, I will talk about 5 issues:

1. our new Department structure;
2. the nature of the circular economy challenge;
3. our national waste policy;
4. the new circular economy package; and,
5. two priority areas that we are currently focusing on.

DCCAE:

As a newly configured department, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment has a broad-ranging and highly diverse portfolio. Encompassing a suite of varied and some might say conflicting policy objectives, the department is charged with presenting a national position and driving change on issues such as climate change, energy, communications, and geological, mineral & petroleum development, at the same time. This creates a natural tension and forces a tendency to have to address, reconcile or integrate this issues. It is a bit early at this stage to say how successful we are. Still, I think that embracing these issues might actually improve our policy making by giving us insights into the price and value that society places on our resources and environment.

In any event, the Government has endorsed an inclusive approach to sustainable development. That is the litmus test for our policy making – regardless of the subject matter. The circular economy gives us new opportunities to reconcile what we previously understood to be opposite forces – the economy and the environment.

Nature of the Circular Challenge:

I have a few thoughts on the nature of the challenge of the circular economy. What is the future for Ireland's economy and society if we continue with our existing linear system of using our resources. When the children in the school next door retire, they may be already

experiencing ice-free Arctic summers. Before then, when they are raising their own families, there could be more plastic in the oceans than fish. Even today, it is estimated that 190,000 plastic bags are used in Europe every minute.

All this can be changed. But it requires a truly transformational change from a linear to a circular economy. Remember: once we disposed of all aluminium containers; now we do not. However, creating value in 'trash' involves a managerial and organisational challenge, a technological challenge, and a financial challenge. All levels of governance will be affected. In the public space, local and national governments must act. In the private sector, shareholder value and incentivisation will need to be redefined. Ultimately, all stakeholders - social, environmental, economic, and political - must play a role.

There is a question of whether that transformational change can be achieved. We will need more than just facts, good ideas and a rational debate. In the 21st century, it is necessary to show the opportunities, benefits and gains that are available if we are to convince our citizens to act to reduce resource inefficiency.

National Waste Policy:

Now, I turn to my third issue - our national waste policy. In Ireland, people will be familiar with our existing policy – A Resource Opportunity – from 2012. With the waste hierarchy at its core, that policy remains entirely relevant to the circular economy. While some aspects are and will be in need of updating, the fundamental direction of travel remains sound.

We anticipate however that, when we know the outcome of the revised waste legislation now under negotiation, the policy document would benefit from a review. With new and more ambitious targets likely, we will need to reflect on the fitness of the policy to help us deliver what is required.

I personally think that credit is due to the authors of “A Resource Opportunity”.

Implementing that policy has ensured Ireland has performed well in delivering on our EU waste targets – to date we have met them 100%. But the policy is also ensuring we have laid good foundations for future and higher targets.

Regional waste planning and enforcement:

We have introduced new structures for regional waste management planning and waste enforcement in partnership with the local government authorities. These resources are ensuring we have practical, on the ground follow-through on our national waste policy. The regional waste management plans developed in 2014 set out the policies and plans to help achieve a transition to a circular economy and more sustainable society in Ireland. Our enforcement resource is working to ensure not just the protection of our environment and that polluters pay but that waste operators can enjoy a fair and equitable playing field that gives them investment security and operational certainty.

National Waste Prevention Programme:

The National Waste Prevention Programme, established in 2004, is managed by the EPA and funded by the department via the Environment Fund. It is safe to say the programme was ahead of its time. Often cited in Brussels as delivering ‘best in class’ performance, the programme has supported many of Ireland’s Circular Economy front runners.

The Circular Economy Package:

That brings me to my fourth issue: the Circular Economy Package and some thoughts on its national implementation.

First, the legislative package involves revision of a number of waste-related directives. When agreed, these new requirements will underpin the step change required of Member States performance in waste prevention, recycling and disposal to support the transition to a circular economy. The targets and other measures are intended to force more sustainable production and consumption patterns of behaviour. We know the new measures will focus on reuse, extended producer responsibility, more and better recycling, increased diversion from landfill.

What we don’t know yet are the specific targets that will be ultimately agreed. At this stage, negotiations at Council level are drawing to a close. Unsurprisingly, MSs have sought some easing of the ambition proposed by the Commission. On the other side of the legislative equation, the Parliament has proposed increasing that ambition. The negotiation between the EU institutions, or trilogue as it is known, is likely to kick off in the next couple of months. These will be difficult negotiations. My impression is that agreement before the end of the

year is less likely than more likely. If the directives are settled at the start of 2018, MSs will have 2 years to transpose the directives into domestic legislation and begin implementation.

The end result is going to be challenging for Ireland to deliver. However we have already come a very long way in the way we have transformed our waste performance in recent years.

- In 1992, Ireland recycled 7% of our waste. Today, we recycle 40%.
- We used to operate nearly 120 landfills. Today, we operate 6.
- In 1992, we had no composting or anaerobic digestion. Today, we have 34 commercial facilities.

And we remain on track. We continue to work towards improved segregation of waste by householders. That will deliver higher quantities and quality of recyclable waste. Education and awareness is critical to this. Many of you will have heard the 'Back to Basics' ad raising the profile of brown bin waste and its potential for reducing food waste. More effective and more extensive brown bin use will help us deliver on challenging landfill targets relating to biodegradable waste. We don't always and won't always enjoy a smooth path to success with these initiatives, but with the consultation and involvement of the right stakeholders we can increase our chances of success.

Secondly, the broader Action Plan has a number of initiatives of interest and relevance to Ireland. The Action Plan relates to policy areas across the spread of government – Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation; Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Housing, Planning and Local Government; and Public Expenditure and Reform - are just some of those with direct interests in the actions. One of the challenges for me is to develop a network and coalition of government departments and agencies to collaborate on circular economy issues to ensure that Ireland takes full advantage of the economic and environmental benefits to be had. In the same way that the CE package is a joint initiative of DGs ENV and GROW, Ireland should mirror that engagement across our public sector to ensure all resources are suitably primed. Events like today provide us with valuable opportunities to highlight the benefits to be had and to forge those links with a variety of stakeholders.

Priority Areas:

Finally, I would like to outline two initiatives of direct relevance to my department which are part of the circular economy package: food waste prevention and green public procurement.

Food Waste:

My Minister is charged with overseeing Ireland's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. With a keen personal interest, Minister Naughten has made food waste prevention and green public procurement priorities of his office.

In recent weeks, the Minister has supported the EPA's food waste initiatives:

1. He launched a national food waste charter and the 2nd Food Waste Forum.
2. An Action Group on Waste Food in the Retail Sector was established, which is made up of practically all the major national retailers. (They have agreed to come together to explore specific actions that can be taken within their business area to reduce Ireland's food waste.)
3. He endorsed engagement with DAFM and Bord Bia to pursue a higher focus on food waste prevention through the flagship Origin Green initiative.
4. And finally, he extended the financial support for the EPA's Stop Food Waste initiative, which works with families and communities to raise awareness and change behaviours.

Green Public Procurement:

In relation to Green Public Procurement, just this week, the Department has hosted a series of EU meetings on GPP. The Circular Economy package is critical to the momentum of GPP progress. From our discussions, it is clear that public procurement, some 12% of our GDP typically, has the potential to 'move the market'. This is a message that is repeated at every forum on the CE.

The EU is progressing its promise under the Action Plan to support and promote the adoption of GPP in MS. In 2016 alone, the CION has published new green criteria to support public procurers in the purchase of office space, roads and computers and monitors. Green criteria now cover a total of 21 categories of products and services. For example, computers and monitors can be designed so that they can be repaired with commonly available tools and batteries easily replaced. Public procurers can specify to these new criteria and help shape the future of the market.

But implementation is not a straightforward prospect. Although we have a national action plan (Green Tenders) since 2012 and despite the production of detailed guidance for procurers in 2014 by the EPA, adoption of GPP is slow in Ireland. However, it must be said that we are not very different to elsewhere. But we are working towards activation of GPP; concentrating on building networks of the right people at national, regional and local level. Having listened to many MSs over the last few days, it is clear that the human factor is key in the successful delivery of change in this space. And that takes time and resources. To help us towards achieving our goals, we have signed up as a partner to an Interreg Europe project GPP4Growth. We are hopeful that we can use this as a vehicle to achieve buy-in and mobilisation of GPP across our public procurement sector. Over the coming three years, we will be required to conduct a series of regional seminars for procurement practitioners to spread and embed the GPP message. However, our first task will involve compiling a list of stakeholders so if people here are interested in getting involved, do let us know.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to thank NESC for the opportunity to speak at today's workshop. It is particularly timely discussion and I hope it is informative for you. The fundamental nature of the change to a circular economy is truly striking. I believe that we have a good foundation to build on and that, by taking a cross-governmental approach and engaging stakeholders, we see the benefits of improved economic efficiency, employment gains, and sustainable development.