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## **Re: Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2026-2028, Accelerating Action**

A chara,

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) welcomes the opportunity to present views on the draft Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy (hereafter the draft Strategy). The core roles of the EPA are as an environmental regulator, as a key source of trusted scientific evidence and knowledge, and as an effective voice for the environment through our leadership and working collaboratively with others. The EPA's statutory responsibilities include the following areas:

- Licensing of industrial, agricultural, water, waste and energy activities
- National Environmental Enforcement
- Climate Science & Climate Change
- Administering EU Emissions Trading System
- EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
- Circular Economy and Waste Management
- Water Management
- Environmental Monitoring & Assessment
- Chemicals in the Environment
- Environmental Research and Development and
- Radiological Protection

## **EPA Circular Economy Programme 2021 - 2027**

The EPA Circular Economy Programme is a statutory programme, incorporating the previous National Waste Prevention Programme, that provides circular economy leadership, supports, knowledge and opportunity to promote and amplify circularity in Ireland for business, industry, citizens and the public sector. The EPA is currently finalising a mid-term evaluation of this programme.

### **Current Context of the Circular Economy in Ireland**

The EPA's State of the Environment Report (EPA, 2024) calls out the urgent need for systemic change to accelerate the transition to an accessible, fair and affordable circular economy. This move to a more circular economy faces several challenges. Most immediately, our recycling rates are stagnating, key EU waste and recycling targets are at risk and waste generation continues to increase. Ireland also remains overly reliant on exporting waste due to a deficit in domestic infrastructure.

Effective regulation, targeted incentives and robust enforcement are required to drive the adoption of best practices in design, production, supply, purchasing, use and reuse of goods, products and services. Our current economic model is characterised by overconsumption of materials and goods, growing volumes of waste and supply chain emissions, biodiversity loss and water stress. The latest data from the EPA highlights the need to implement a range of effective measures now. Key statutory targets for reporting year 2025 will almost certainly be missed. A summary of the current position is as follows:

- Ireland's municipal recycling rate is 42 per cent, significantly below the 55 per cent target
- Ireland's packaging waste recycling rate is 59 per cent with the 65 per cent target at risk.
- Ireland's plastic packaging recycling rate is 30 per cent, significantly off the 50 per cent target.
- Ireland is overly reliant on export markets for the treatment of residual and recyclable waste with 1.2 million tonnes of municipal waste exported in 2023.

### **Recommendations**

The following are key Agency recommendations for action through the Strategy:

- **Infrastructure:** The Agency recommends the urgent delivery of national waste

treatment infrastructure capacity to treat residual and recyclable non-hazardous and hazardous wastes is prioritised nationally removing the over-reliance on other Member States to manage our wastes.

- **Licensing:** The Agency recommends the timely enactment of legislation in particular Miscellaneous Provisions Bill which includes provisions such as limited licence reviews to help speed up the throughput time of licensing decisions.
- **Procurement:** The Agency recommends that binding targets are introduced to mandate green public procurement for works, services and goods across all public sector purchasing where green criteria are available including a requirement for public organisations to report annually on implementation.
- **Construction:** The Agency recommends that Resource and Waste Management Plans are made mandatory for project developers as part of the planning permission process, including a requirement to complete pre-demolition audits of existing buildings on site.
- **Packaging:** The Agency recommends that the national producer responsibility organisation for packaging, currently Repak, include performance targets for packaging and packaging waste reduction and recycling.
- **Food:** The Agency recommends that Government Departments, public agencies and bodies with responsibility for the delivery of food related policy measures are mandated to reduced food waste in line with the UN SDG Goals and consider the national Food Waste Charter as a supporting enabler.
- **Bioeconomy:** To provide regulatory certainty to the bioeconomy sector, the Agency recommends that a dedicated statutory instrument for by-products is introduced establishing a clear legislative framework for the assessment and enforcement of national and single case decisions including provisions to allow for research and trialling of innovative solutions by product developers under specific circumstances.
- **Local Enterprise:** The Agency recommends the scaling of local place-based circular economy activities, such as repair enterprises, through the delivery of appropriate economic and legislative supports.
- **Producers:** The Agency recommends that national compliance scheme operators (currently Repak, WEEE Ireland, ERP, ELVES, IFFPG, RETURN etc) put in place a

service level agreement establishing requirements on providing timely and accurate data to the EPA as part of more timely national reporting.

- **Governance:** The Agency recommends setting up a high-level cross-governmental group consisting of senior representatives from all relevant government departments with a clear remit to embed and deliver circular economy measures across related policy areas.

In **Appendix 1**, additional comments are provided on specific sections in the strategy including sectors, governance, monitoring, hazardous waste, financial and communications. The EPA looks forward to continued collaboration with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment to progress the circular economy in Ireland.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Flynn', is placed over a small, light-grey rectangular box.

David Flynn, Director  
Office of Environmental Sustainability

## APPENDIX 1

### Infrastructure and Licensing

A key message from the EPA State of the Environment Report (2024) states, *Ireland's capacity to collect and treat waste is vulnerable and underperforming, with an over-reliance on other countries to treat our recycling materials, general municipal and hazardous wastes.*

Ireland has limited resilience in the system to deal with market shocks or unforeseen events that give rise to additional quantities of waste. Improving Ireland's self-sufficiency in treating our waste and expanding domestic residual and recycling capacity is of utmost importance in terms of building resilience and a national circular economy.

In the 2024 semester report for Ireland, the Commission identified investment gaps in relation to the circular economy, noting that more investment is required in areas such as eco-design, repair, reuse and remanufacturing and in infrastructure for separating waste collection, treatment and recycling facilities.

The EPA's licensing activities include the most significant circular economy and waste facilities in Ireland including recycling and processing, anaerobic digestion and composting, energy recovery and disposal infrastructure. The timely transposition of legislation, such as the Industrial Emissions Directive, provides an opportunity to embed circularity as part of future conditions. The timely delivery of this legislation and others (such waste management (facility permit and registration) regulations) is needed to support innovation and greater resource efficiency at facilities.

- *The Agency recommends the urgent delivery of national waste treatment infrastructure capacity to treat residual and recyclable non-hazardous and hazardous wastes is prioritised nationally removing the over-reliance on other Member States to manage our wastes.*
- *The Agency recommends the timely enactment of legislation, in particular Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which includes provisions such as limited licence reviews to help minimise the throughput time of licensing decisions.*
- *The Agency also recommends the timely delivery of legislation,(such as the transposition of the Industrial Emissions Directive and the updated Waste management (facility permit and registration) regulations) to enable and regulate waste and circular economy activities.*

## **Construction (The Built Environment, reference Section 4.1)**

The construction sector is of key importance as Ireland's economy grows and population increases. Large scale investment to deliver critical services, such as housing and infrastructure is planned and are key Government priorities.

Construction puts pressure on our natural resources, biodiversity, water resources and results in waste generation. The sector accounts for about 50% of domestic natural resource extraction and is a large emitter of greenhouse gases, estimated to be 37% of total emissions

In Ireland, construction and demolition waste has consistently been the largest waste stream with an estimated 9 million tonnes generated in 2023, increasing from 6.2 million tonnes in 2020. To reduce the volume of waste and emissions generated from construction activities requires early intervention at the design stage, more efficient construction techniques, as well adapting building standards to allow greater use of secondary products. We need to keep construction materials in use for longer, preserving embodied carbon, as well as incentivising renovation rather than building new.

- *The Agency recommends that the preparation of Resource and Waste Management Plans are made mandatory for project developers as part of the planning permission process, including the requirement to complete pre-demolition audits of existing buildings on site.*
- *The Agency recommends the use of green criteria on all publicly funded works projects including the specification of low carbon cement wherever practicable.*
- *The Agency recommends that relevant national standards for construction products, including aggregates, are updated to specify for the greater use of secondary recycled materials.*

## **Packaging - Section 4.4**

Current data shows that Ireland consistently generates approximately 1.2 million tonnes of packaging waste annually. Packaging waste has increased by almost 20% since 2016, while in the same period packaging recycling has increased by just 5%. In 2023 Irelands overall packaging waste recycling rate was 59%, placing Ireland at significant risk of not meeting the 2025 target of 65%. The recycling of plastic packaging waste is currently 30%, significantly below the 2025 target of 50% and it is highly unlikely it will be achieved.

The new Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulations introduced binding reduction targets

for packaging waste requiring Member States to achieve a 5% reduction by 2030. To meet future targets, the current scale of packaging in business to business and business to consumer supply chains cannot continue. Packaging producers and the national producer responsibility organisation, currently Repak, have significant responsibilities to ensure packaging is reduced, the use of reusable products increased, and single use products significantly discouraged.

- *The Agency recommends that the national producer responsibility organisation for packaging, currently Repak, include targets for packaging and packaging waste reduction and recycling.*
- *The Agency recommends that market and waste data compiled and reported by Repak is audited by an external body annually to ensure reporting obligations set out in the national approval are met.*
- *The Agency recommends that packaging producers are obligated to reduce quantities of packaging products and waste through better product design and more reusable packaging solutions.*

#### **Food and Food Waste – Ref: Section 4.2**

Ireland is currently wasting too much food with over 800,000 tonnes of waste generated each year. EPA data shows that approximately 70% of Ireland's food waste is generated from non-household sources, such as manufacturing, food service and retail. Wasted food is an avoidable contribution of up to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The European Commission has approved amendments to the Waste Framework Directive introducing binding food waste reduction targets from manufacturing & processing, retail, restaurants, food services and households.

- *The Agency recommends that waste industry comply fully with the current food waste regulations (for households and businesses) and local authorities rigorously enforce requirements to provide separate bins for the collection of food waste from businesses, industry and householders, including apartment/multi-storey residential buildings.*
- *The Agency recommends that Government Departments, public agencies and bodies with responsibility for the delivery of food related policy measures are mandated to reduce food waste supported by the national Food Waste Charter as an enabler of implementation.*

#### **Bioeconomy (Ref: Section 4.2)**

A circular bioeconomy can benefit the sector environmentally and economically both by

optimising land use, reducing environmental pressures, diversifying revenue and supporting employment opportunities in rural areas. The use of the by-product regulation to avoid materials becoming waste has grown across many sectors, including the bioeconomy, and provides an opportunity for greater levels of resource efficiency. The absence of a specific by-product statutory instrument better defining process and compliance requirements is a legislative gap which needs to be addressed.

- *The Agency recommends that a dedicated statutory instrument for by-products is introduced establishing a clear legislative framework for the assessment and enforcement of national and single case decisions including provisions to allow for research and trialling of innovative solutions by developers under specific circumstances.*

#### **Textiles - Section 4.5**

The rate of clothing consumption in Ireland is among the highest across the EU, with EPA research finding 46% of people surveyed buying clothes monthly or more frequently. Ireland discards an estimated 110,000 tonnes of textile waste annually. The textile Industry must act as leaders in implementing the waste hierarchy in the sector, including reducing the consumption of virgin materials and designing for durability, repairability and recyclability.

- *The Agency recommends that the future approval of a national compliance scheme operator for textiles includes waste reduction and recycling performance targets as well as the financing of increased separate collection, reuse, repair and recycling activities in the sector.*
- *The Agency recommends the scaling of local place-based circular economy activities, such as repair enterprises, through the delivery of appropriate economic and legislative supports.*

#### **Electrical and Electronic Equipment – Section 4.6**

WEEE has become one of the fastest growing waste streams increasing by 2% annually. The current high levels of production, consumption and waste in the sector is of concern. The sector is heavily reliant on the extraction of finite critical resources, and the hazardous nature of WEEE if not managed appropriately can cause environmental and health issues.

In 2023, Ireland achieved a WEEE collection rate of 44%, failing to meet the 65% EU target as set out in the WEEE Directive. This is a decrease from a collection rate of 51% in 2022. The current data shows that the collection of WEEE is in decline due to high rates of

consumption coupled with improvements in the durability of products which is extending their life span.

- *The Agency recommends that the national approval for producer responsibility organisations for WEEE, currently WEEE Ireland and ERP, include targets to help scale the reuse, remanufacturing, repair and recycling of electrical and electronic products in the sector.*
- *The Agency recommends that new central public procurement frameworks for the purchasing of remanufactured and refurbished electrical and electronic products (similar to the current model for remanufactured laptops) are established by the OGP.*
- *The Agency recommends that RepairMyStuff.ie is developed as a national repository of information for repair enterprises.*

## **Public Procurement**

The scale of public procurement across the public sector including central and local government positions it as a powerful demand side lever to grow demand for goods and services aligned with the circular economy. Implementation of greener procurement criteria in sectors such as ICT products, textiles, and furniture can facilitate and accelerate the growth of a more circular economy. The development of green criteria for various sectors coupled with annual monitoring and reporting of Government bodies has led to a rise in the implementation of green purchasing.

- *The Agency recommends that binding national targets are introduced to mandate green public procurement (GPP) for works, services and goods across the public sector where green criteria are available.*
- *The Agency recommends that reporting of GPP is mandatory for all public bodies and a consistent tracking and reporting systems are employed to monitor implementation.*

## **Governance – Section 11**

Progressing the development and implementation of the Circular Economy in Ireland requires robust governance arrangements addressing the interconnected, complex challenge of promoting and supporting both the circular economy and bioeconomy. As highlighted in the EPA funded IPA research, the current structure of governance in this area results in inefficient engagement between those actively engaged in cross-government work (see Figure in **Appendix 2**).

Achieving a circular economy requires policy objectives, actions and targets which is

congruent with cross-government environment, housing, enterprise, finance, digitalisation, social enterprise, energy and agriculture policy.

The inclusion of clearly defined and delineated roles and responsibilities assigned to each action in the Strategy is required. The current lack of assignment of a lead governmental department, or organisation responsible for achieving the actions set out in the Strategy will contribute to ambiguity of responsibility. Identifying priority actions in terms of impact is also recommended.

- *The Agency recommends the setting up a high-level cross-governmental group consisting of senior representatives from all relevant government departments.*
- *The Agency recommends the ongoing role of groups contributing to the governance of the circular economy are clearly defined and all groups established include relevant stakeholders.*

## **Monitoring and Data Compilation**

Appropriately scaled monitoring of the entire value chain of the circular economy, from an environmental, material, economic and employment perspective, to track progress and highlight linear/sluggish sectors is required. Effective monitoring tools should not rely on one single indictor, such as the Circular Material Use Rate as a measure of progress to a more circular Ireland.

Research funded by the EPA has found that the calculation of CMUR metric has a disproportionately negative impact on Ireland. The most significant limitation for Ireland's CMUR, relates to the use of the Domestic Material Consumption (DMC) metric. DMC measures material consumption, but not the total material footprint of that consumption. Raw material consumption (RMC) is an alternative metric to DMC which is a more accurate representation of the material footprint of consumption. RMC records a consumption value for Ireland that is consistently 50% lower than its DMC and if used in an Irish context the CMUR would be almost double. The EPA also believes there is inconsistency in the interpretation of definitions across the EU relating to specific material recycling or recovery (i.e. backfilling) which impacts negatively on Ireland's reporting.

The provision of timely data is critical to track progress towards a circular economy and there are many stakeholders who are key to providing accurate data as part of national statutory reporting. The importance of delivering quality data in a timely manner is a responsibility which producers and industry need to recognise and improve their efforts and meet their obligations.

- *The Agency recommends that a national framework is established to monitor and track the*

*development of a low carbon circular economy in Ireland. The CSO will be key stakeholder in providing resource and economic data. This will ensure a full picture of the circular economy transition is captured and reported.*

- *The Agency recommends engaging with relevant European bodies on the CMUR is undertaken to highlight the limitations in the current methodology.*
- *The Agency recommends that national compliance scheme operators (currently Repak, WEEE Ireland, ERP, ELVES, IFFPG, RETURN etc) put in place a service level agreement establishing requirements on providing timely and accurate data with the EPA as part of national reporting.*

## **Chemicals and Hazardous Waste**

The EPA State of the Environment Report (SOER) 2024 states that we must rigorously implement existing environmental plans and programmes to achieve the benefits that they were developed to deliver. The use of chemicals and the generation of hazardous waste is generated by many sectors including pharmachem, agriculture, and construction.

The EPA published the National Hazardous Waste Management Plan 2021 – 2027, the fourth such Plan. The purpose of the Plan is to protect the environment and human health in Ireland through best-practice management of hazardous wastes. In 2023, Ireland generated just over 381,000 tonnes of hazardous waste. This was approximately 8,000 tonnes less hazardous waste generated than in 2022. This decrease was largely due to less hazardous soil and stones being generated. Overall, the trend is showing a peak in 2019 with year-on-year reductions since then.

The Agency recently published the mid-term evaluation of the plan focusing on the four priority challenge areas in the Plan, providing commentary on progress made and identifying areas at risk of not delivering. Progressing the delivery of the priority areas has been mixed, with implementation building in some areas while for other areas it has been slow. Delivering of these priority areas will support the reduction and safer management of hazardous wastes.

- *The Agency recommends that the National Hazardous Waste Management Plan (NHWMP) is referenced in the Strategy along with other national strategies, plans and programmes. It is also recommended that the actions related to the four priority challenge areas (related to national treatment capacity for hazardous wastes, national collection of farm hazardous wastes, household hazardous wastes and, unused and*

*surplus medicines) identified in the NHWMP are referenced in the Strategy.*

### **Financial and Administrative Barriers**

Secondary materials produced by the circular economy face greater barriers in the market and circular economy activities such as maintenance and repair are often labour intensive. Long term commitment to policy objectives supported by fiscal measures will provide a level of certainty for businesses to transition from linear to circular activities. Government has powers to support specific sectors of the economy and there is a need for increased policy coherence to align fiscal decisions to circular economy, climate and biodiversity policies. The EPA recommends that secondary materials that displace virgin materials and circular economy labour services are financially incentivised by lower vat rates, levies or other fiscal measures.

### **Communications**

There are well-developed behavioural research programmes in climate policy area and given the close interlinkages between climate and circular economy actions and activities, there is scope to engage with and co-ordinate circular and climate behavioural research activities.

As part of their authorisations, producer responsibility organisations have a role in delivering national communication campaigns, which support circular economy ambitions, and which to date have primarily focussed on improving waste segregation. A co-ordinated approach at State level to circular economy communications has been developing, led by DCEE. There may be the potential to further strengthen a national calendar of communications including the compliance schemes and agreeing a number of key messages across priority sectors that are supported by all relevant organisations.

Waste collection operators are a largely untapped resource in terms of providing targeted messaging to their customers. A consistent approach for such messaging could be agreed and these communications required as part of waste collection authorisation requirements.

- *The Agency recommends the waste collection industry play an increasing role using data to communicate source separation messages to households with the aim of reducing contamination and increasing recycling rates.*

### **Research**

The EPA manages an environmental research programme that delivers essential scientific

support for policy development, implementation and broader decision making. EPA Research 2030 is a ten-year framework for the EPA's Research Programme (2021-2030). The framework is structured around four interconnected research hubs, one of which is 'Facilitating a Green and Circular Economy'. Research under this hub aims to contribute to the mainstreaming of sustainable management of natural resources and waste, unlocking the potential of the circular and bio-economies, and boosting competitiveness, through resource efficiency and deployment of innovative technologies and solutions. Since 2021, the EPA has granted over €12m of research funding under the Green and Circular Economy hub.

EPA Research 2030 is implemented through Thematic Research Priorities which are updated on a three-year cycle, with current relevant priorities focused on integrating circular economy, climate and biodiversity; enhancing assessment of products and value chains; supporting scale-up of the just transition of the circular economy; developing indicators and metrics; and material flow analysis. Updated priorities will be published in 2027 in consultation with stakeholders.

We welcome the references to EPA-funded research in the draft strategy and would note that there may be other relevant publications or ongoing projects, which may be relevant to the implementation of the strategy; for example, the projects "Mainstreaming Circular Economies Through Collaboration and Co-Creation" (Lisa O'Malley; University of Limerick), "Towards a bio-based all-island economy" (Vincent O'Flaherty; University of Galway), "Barriers and enablers to transition to Ireland's transition to the circular economy" (Jack McCarthy; Rediscovery Centre), "Artificial Intelligence as an Enabler of the Circular Economy" (Geraldine Brennan; Irish Manufacturing Research), amongst others.

### **Market Surveillance**

Market surveillance and its role in underpinning the integrity of the Circular Economy could be better reflected in the Strategy. The EPA is one of several [Market Surveillance authorities](#) in Ireland whose roles are to make sure that products on sale in the Irish market meet required standards across health, safety and potential impacts on the environment. Market surveillance regulations are also important tools in facilitating recycling, in particular through their objectives to prohibit, restrict and limit, as appropriate, the production, sale, disposal, recovery and/or remediation of certain harmful constituent elements. Action A23 could be adapted to reflect this broader Market Surveillance scope and its relevance to the Strategy.

## APPENDIX 2 CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN IRELAND GOVERNANCE MAP

