

Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill - MSP Briefing for Stage 1 Debate

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 Scottish Parliament will consider the general principles of the *Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill* on 21 March 2024. Consumer Scotland provided both [oral](#) and [written](#) evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee as part of their consideration of the Circular Economy Bill and we welcome the Committee's report.

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 which of their actions can have the most impact and to make more sustainable choices will be critical.

The Bill has the potential to have a significant positive impact on the way that resources are used and **Consumer Scotland supports the general principles of the Bill.**

There will be considerable challenges in implementing the Bill, including a need to shift the focus towards more upstream measures. Consumers and businesses must be informed about these new measures and supported to take action.

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 and make changes to the way in which they consume resources will be a key part in achieving our net zero targets. Tackling overconsumption and excess production by reducing use of raw materials and

resources, incentivising reuse and repair and promoting sustainable choices will be crucial to making a successful transition to a circular economy.

It is important that work 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.**

Supporting business and consumers

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

Consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of the products and services that they buy and look 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.

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. There is significant room to improve consumer understanding of decarbonisation and net zero policies and improve awareness of the role they have to play. 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.

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

Waste Management

Evidence to the Committee 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.

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 supports the general principles of the Bill, however **there is a need to focus on moving actions higher up the waste hierarchy to support consumers to make changes to the way they consume**. Tackling overconsumption and production, mainstreaming reuse and repair and promoting and incentivising sustainable choices will be key to the transition to a circular economy.

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**.