Community Resources Network Ireland (CRNI) / Northern Ireland Resources Network (NIRN) Joint Response to Consultation on Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities

Shared island approach to reuse and repair

We are pleased to provide a joint response to this Shared Island consultation. Our two networks - Community Resources Network Ireland (CRNI) and Northern Ireland Resources Network (NIRN) - work in close collaboration to support reuse and repair across our shared island.

In this response, we will demonstrate how this collaboration helps to underpin climate action, local wealth building, resilience and a just transition in cities and rural areas. We will show why, of the five areas identified in the consultation, climate action and a just transition should be prioritised for more detailed consideration in a shared island context. Specifically, we believe there is significant scope for exploring opportunities in the circular economy on a shared island basis, as part of the climate and biodiversity agenda.

Community Resources Network Ireland (CRNI)'s vision is an Ireland where the word waste doesn't exist and the entire community benefits from the environmental, social and economic benefits of reuse. We work towards this vision by supporting our members and mainstreaming community resources and are funded by the EPA under the National Waste Prevention Programme.

Northern Ireland Resources Network (NIRN) was formed in 2020 to promote sustainable reuse and repair as a practical and effective way of tackling Northern Ireland's waste generation and supporting the development of the circular economy. It is currently in pilot phase, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and coordinated by CRNI.

Together our networks represent 50 community based reuse, repair and recycling members. Members represented by this submission are included in Annex A. These organisations are leaders and innovators in the circular economy. They are often the primary or only organisations handling certain goods or materials, diverting them from incineration or landfill through repair or reuse while providing quality training and job opportunities. They also help to support communities by providing low-cost goods to families in need or by helping to address the digital divide.

Climate Change and Circular Economy

The circular economy is based on the principles of designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems[1].

A 2020 report by Circularity Gap Reporting Initiative highlights that switching to a circular economy could **reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by 39%**[2]. These savings relate to avoided emissions associated with upstream material extraction, manufacturing, transport and end of life management. More specifically, the European RREUSE[3] network estimates that reuse or preparation for reuse of just 2% of additional waste currently generated in the European Union (EU) could help reduce CO2 emissions by 5% while supporting around 400 000 jobs[4]. A WRAP UK study has also shown that by increasing the reuse of key household products such as textiles, appliances and electrical equipment, UK GHG emissions could be reduced 4 million tonnes CO2 eq per annum between 2009 and 2020[5].

A pathway to developing a more circular economy is set out in the EU Circular Economy Action Plan 2.0 (CEAP 2.0), adopted as one of the main blocks of the European Green Deal as Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth.

Policies across both Ireland and Northern Ireland go some way to support this move towards a more circular economy. Northern Ireland's *Waste Prevention Programme 2019: Stopping Waste in its Tracks* sets out objectives for prevention and reuse, though further developments will be required to align with the CEAP 2.0. Ireland's Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC)'s *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* identified circularity as being central to the Green Deal, delivering on environmental aspirations, opening up opportunities for job creation and helping us progress towards our climate targets. It includes ambition to set targets for a range of reuse and repair activities that could have a significant positive impact on the sector, amongst other measures.

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[1] https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-economy/what-is-the-circular-economy

[2] https://www.circularity-gap.world/2020

[3] CRNI is a member of RREUSE, an international network representing social enterprises active in re-use, repair and recycling. RREUSE members divert approx 1 million tonnes of goods and materials annually from landfill through re-use, repair and recycling, generating a combined turnover of 1,2 billion EUR .

[4] See https://www.rreuse.org/10-priorities-to-transform-eu-waste-policy/

[5] WRAP, *Meeting the UK climate change challenge: The contribution of resource efficiency*, 2009, https://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/AC_Exec_Summary_WEB_2.pdf

Jobs, Skills and the Circular Economy

There are widespread benefits to directing policy and funding to build a circular economy. In addition to delivering on emissions reduction targets, it will unlock billions of pounds / euros worth of value from materials. Supply risks, as experienced during the current pandemic, highlight the increasingly competitive global economy and the need to use resources better. Greater economic stability can be achieved by increasing resource security and creating new business and employment opportunities.

According to the European Commission, by 2030 the circular economy will create between 200,000 and 500,000 gross jobs and **reduce unemployment by between 54,000 to 102,000**. It is estimated that more than 13,000 jobs could be created if Northern Ireland moved to a circular economy[6]. While similar figures do not exist for Ireland, a survey of CRNI members indicates the social reuse and repair sector already employs over 700 people, supports 2,200 trainees or work integration positions and works with over 7,200 volunteers.

Social enterprises are ideally positioned to deliver these jobs because of the level of manual labour and the diversity of skills types and levels involved in recovering products and materials and returning them to the economy. This ranges from trade and craft skills to industry, retail and business skills. Many of these skills are associated with sectors that have gone into decline, as is reflected in the *Labour Shortages and Surplus* report (2019) from the European Commission, which states 'the highest number of top shortage occupations were among the craft group of occupations'[7]. Due to the variety of activities involved, these jobs are likely to be distributed **across rural, urban and manufacturing landscapes**[8].

Supporting Local through the Circular Economy

By sourcing products from and returning them to local communities, reuse helps retain value locally and therefore contributes to the local economy. Retaining products and materials locally supports **local jobs and competitiveness** by protecting businesses against scarcity of resources and volatile commodity prices and provides an opportunity for community engagement, regeneration and enhancing civic pride[9].

Reuse and repair provide new business opportunities and opportunities for increased competitiveness through innovative, more efficient ways of producing and consuming and accessing new markets. For example, Ireland's Regional Waste Management Plans[10] estimate that the potential resalable volume of electrical and electronic equipment in Ireland could be 10,000 tonnes with an approximate value of €15 million per annum nationally after accounting

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6 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284187066_Job_Creation_in_the_Circular_Economy_-_Increasing_Resource_Efficiency_in_Northern_Ireland

7 Report prepared by the European Commission, *Analysis of shortage and surplus occupations based on National and Eurostat Labour Force survey data*, 2019, available https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8269&type=2&furtherPubs=no

8 See Green Alliance presentation to CRNI "Future Jobs and Skills for a Circular Economy" event at crni.ie/presentations

9 Prepared for the EPA by Miller, S. et al, *Material Reuse Good Practice Guide*, Ref: 2014-RE-DS-4, download from http://www.rediscoverycentre.ie/research/

10 For example, see http://emwr.ie/emwr-plan/

for purchasing and repair costs. It also supports businesses by providing a means to reduce waste management costs.

For these reasons, circular economy activities are an ideal fit for the Just Transition, building local wealth and building resilience in both urban and rural communities.

Circular Economy and Biodiversity

While biodiversity protection is rarely mentioned in circular economy theory and policy, the resource-related impacts on water stress and biodiversity loss due to land use are significant. According to the Global Resources Forum, material extraction and production accounts for over 90 per cent of global impacts[11].

Through prevention, reuse and repair, or 'preserving the value of what is already there'[12] (one of the core principles of a circular economy), pressure on resource extraction and production is significantly reduced. Preserving biodiversity is therefore another significant benefit of delivering a more circular economy.

Opportunities for collaboration

As highlighted in the consultation paper, the North South Ministerial Council in the Environment Joint Communique (October 2020) flagged opportunities for cooperation in relation to the promotion of a circular economy.

In our view, this opportunity is particularly significant for reuse and repair (the top tier of the waste hierarchy - see Annex B) since these activities:

- tend to involve local recirculation,
- are only carried out at small scale Ireland and Northern Ireland but have considerable potential to grow and
- tend to be labour intensive, small scale and disperse

As such there is significant value in 1. sharing best practices and collaboration, 2. policy alignment and 3. infrastructure development (outlined below).

1. Sharing best practices and collaboration

CRNI and NIRN held a joint meeting in February 2021 to connect members from both networks and facilitate sharing of best practices. Due to the diverse nature of membership in both networks, these connections helped participants to identify new business opportunities with at least 30 introductions facilitated.

For example, our joint meeting led directly to CRNI member Tech2Students connecting NIRN member 4Rs Reuse Workshop with a UK/Ireland-wide company wishing to donate used laptops to support their refurbishment programme. A number of members carrying out reuse activities or

[11] Global Resources Outlook 2019 available at https://www.resourcepanel.org/reports/global-resources-outlook
[12] See https://www.circle-economy.com/blogs/a-circular-world-is-biodiverse-but-does-biodiversity-need-the-circular-economy

research unique to either network were able to share knowledge and stimulate cross border collaboration. Some examples include NIRN members Belfast Repair Cafe (repair cafes), Belfast Tool Library (tool lending) and Derry & Strabane Council (the first Zero Waste area, with a Zero Waste Strategy and a Circular Economy strategy), as well as CRNI members the Rediscovery Centre (National Centre for a Circular Economy, paint reuse scheme), Roscommon Women's Network (CycleUp project) and An Mheitheal Rothar (bicycle refurbishment). Due to the significant potential in these shared island collaborations, CRNI and NIRN plan to deliver more meetings throughout 2021 and beyond.

Other areas for potential sharing of best practices and collaboration include green and social public procurement (where Northern Ireland has developed strong social drivers), building skills and training for a circular economy and national promotions and awareness campaigns.

2. Policy Alignment

As highlighted in the consultation paper, our geography and status as a small island on the edge of Europe will continue to require us to consider the "shared" nature of our environment. Overlaying this, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that shares a land boundary with the EU and therefore consideration needs to be given to transboundary issues. As our environmental and social policies begin to diverge between the EU and the UK, cross border collaboration on policy matters and shared island approaches to policy will become more important than ever.

Three examples of the potential for a shared island approach to policy are provided below.

Quality Mark

In 2019 CRNI completed a pilot project to establish a quality mark "ReMark" through the EPA Green Enterprise programme. The aim of this mark was to address negative consumer perceptions about secondhand goods due to concerns about quality and safety. In addition to addressing consumer engagement, the quality mark delivers broad and positive impacts to reuse operators participating in the ReMark accreditation programme as summarised in the videos here.

The final research report recommended that ReMark be rolled out throughout Ireland and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's *Waste Prevention Programme 2019: Stopping Waste in its Tracks* commits in Action 16 to establishing a reuse quality mark. At this stage, there is no equivalent policy commitment in Ireland to rolling out a quality mark. Through policy alignment and a shared island approach, this mark could become a game changer as it has been for Scotland, underpinning Circular Procurement as well as consumer confidence in secondhand goods.

Targets for Reuse

Another example of potential for policy alignment is the development of reuse targets. Both CRNI and NIRN are seeking the introduction of such targets, which would provide greater focus on and support for the reuse and repair sector. The DECC's *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* commits to introducing targets for reuse before the European Commission and EPA-funded research is ongoing to underpin this with the development of a measurement methodology[13]. This methodology could equally support the development of targets in Northern Ireland and help support a shared island approach to driving reuse and repair.

Producer Responsibility Scheme for Mattresses

There are currently three social mattress recycling enterprises across the island, which are deconstructing mattresses so the components can be recycled. However a report prepared for the EPA found that a large proportion (>80%) of mattresses in Ireland are still going for disposal via energy-from-waste or landfill.

The report recommended introducing measures such as VAT exemptions for end-of-life mattress recycling schemes and a legislatively-backed system or an industry-led voluntary approach to EPR for end-of-life mattresses. The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy commits to examining the feasibility of introducing further EPR arrangements for mattresses. Furthermore, Scotland and England are in the process of introducing EPR schemes for mattresses.

Building on these experiences and objectives, a shared island approach to VAT exemptions and EPR schemes would help optimise recycling of this difficult bulky waste stream with the available infrastructure on the island.

3. Infrastructure Development

A report released February 2021 by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee[14] recommended that **investment should be front-loaded** in areas including the circular economy and climate adaptation, providing a green jobs boost and delivering economic recovery.

Examples of reuse and repair infrastructure are sorting centres, storage hubs, reuse parks, refill systems, reverse logistics systems, exchange platforms, redistribution centres, repair / upcycling workshops, surplus food transformation centres and retail spaces. Such infrastructure is currently underdeveloped or where it does exist, is under-resourced.

There is potential for a shared island approach to reuse and repair infrastructure storage, which would offer economies of scale and/or a buffer to localised capacity shortages. The small scale of the sector currently means this potential has yet to be widely realised. A shared island approach to mattress recycling infrastructure, including expanded deconstruction capacity and end markets for extracted components (that currently have to be shipped for recycling) would also provide cost efficiencies in recycling of this difficult waste stream.

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[13] http://www.rediscoverycentre.ie/research/q2reuse/

[14] https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/62/environmental-audit-committee/news/139275/eac-calls-for-climate-and-nature-investment-to-be-prioritised-in-the-economic-recovery/

Some recent examples of all island approaches to reuse or repair infrastructure are the expansion of a tap map network of free tap water refill stations by Refill Ireland and Refill Northern Ireland and the expansion of the digital marketplace thriftify from Ireland into Northern Ireland and from there into the rest of the UK.

The circular, low-carbon and biodiversity agendas are complementary and mutually supportive. By developing the circular economy, Ireland and Northern Ireland can take positive action on reducing emissions and impacts on biodiversity whilst also supporting waste reduction, economic growth, job creation and social good. With the increasing focus on environmental issues including climate change, limited and scarce virgin raw materials and disposal of waste, CRNI, NIRN and our members are driving awareness and action to combat these challenges.

We would welcome an opportunity to engage with and contribute our expertise to the next steps of this consultation process.

Annex A
Membership of NIRN represented

FareShare Northern Ireland

Fermanagh & Omagh District Council
Comhairle Ceantair Fhear Manach agus na hÓmaí

Derry City & Strabane District Council
Comhairle Chathair Dhoire & Cheantar an tSratha Báin
Derry Cittie & Stràbane Destrick Council

Belfast Tool Library

Repair Café Belfast

British Heart Foundation

restore
A PROJECT OF EAST BELFAST MISSION

Cloughmills
COMMUNITY ACTION TEAM

REUSE WORKSHOP

Refill NI

TOOLS FOR SOLIDARITY

Membership of CRNI

See also crni.ie/our-members

Annex B: Waste Hierarchy

See also here for Waste Framework Directive setting legal framework for this hierarchy