Bringing the consumer into the picture

Normalising the circular economy

December 2025

About us

We are an economics, data insights, policy and impact consultancy, but one that is a little different to many others. We draw on backgrounds in government and the private and charitable sectors to produce work designed to make a difference. We do not do research for research's sake. We are committed to ensuring that everything we do has an impact – which is part of the reason why we recently became a verified B Corporation.

Report authors:

Arushi Chitrao
Senior Consultant

Matthew Beebee
Senior Consultant

Laura Osborne
Managing Director

Contents

Foreword

Dr Adam Read MBE
Chief Sustainability and External Affairs Officer
SUEZ recycling and recovery UK

Although the first SUEZ report referencing the concept of the circular economy was published back in 2009, it's only in more recent times that the term has entered wider discourse, but do people know what it really means? And, more importantly, are they on board with the things they need to do to make the circular economy a reality? From SUEZ's more recent work, including the 2024 Keep Britain Tidy led project to re-imagine the waste hierarchy and our day to day experience running over 35 re-use shops around the UK, we sensed that as the sector pushes ahead on our journey to create a more resource efficient UK, we aren't bringing people along with us. Yet without public engagement and support, we cannot succeed.

I'm grateful to the team at WPI Economics for their work on this report, which considers the circular economy from a consumer perspective. Encouragingly, their research highlighted that people are already buying what we would consider to be circular products and services, and engaging in circular behaviours, they just don't view what they are doing through a circular lens.

The widespread change we will need to create a thriving circular economy can't happen in isolation, we need to consider real people, their busy lives, and design solutions that make sense to them, that are convenient, accessible, and cost effective. Rather than speaking about an economic concept many people struggle to engage with, instead we should focus on empowering people to take tangible actions that will help shift towards more circularity – whether that's mending instead of replacing a broken washing machine, an occasional cyclist hiring a bike rather than buying one, or a coffee drinker taking a reusable cup on their regular commute.

As evidenced by flatlining recycling rates and the muted response to the roll out of Simpler Recycling for most businesses, engagement suffers without investment in communication and behaviour change. It has been twenty years since WRAP's Saatchi produced Recycle Now campaign featuring Eddie Izzard and Matthew Pinsent, the likes of which haven't been seen since.

Shifting away from our consumer society to one where people are citizens first and foremost won't happen overnight, nor without a concerted effort to promote circular choices. This will require well researched, targeted behaviour change campaigns - for some the nudge will be protecting the environment, for others it will be convenience, fitting in with their peers, or saving money. And overarching people's personal motivations, messaging to highlight that circular choices are good for our natural environment, and for people's future prosperity and that of their family and friends.

The report's challenge to create a circular economy with the end-user in mind is perfectly timed and I look forward to discussing the findings with our customers, peers and policy makers.

Executive summary

SUEZ recycling and recovery UK (SUEZ) commissioned this WPI Economics research to explore how the circular economy could be better normalised for consumers. The starting point was to review the progress made to date towards a more circular economy[1] in the UK, identify opportunities to build on existing strengths and to highlight where the biggest barriers to progress are.

Much has been done over the last 10 years from a policy and industry perspective to bring the concept of the circular economy to the fore – but consumers have not yet been brought on this journey. In fact, the very term 'circular economy' has been found to directly deter consumers, which means this framing risks the success of the UK's transition to the more resource-efficient, circular economy, which is core to the Government's net zero ambitions.

At every other stage of the product life cycle and waste management value chain this framing has been effective, and there are several ongoing and planned initiatives to further close loops. These range from the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to buy-back schemes to designing products that are resource-efficient and/or use recovered materials. The UK Government's Circular Economy Taskforce is rightly looking at identifying mechanisms that can underpin the UK's Circular Economy Growth Plan to support economic growth and green jobs, resource efficiency, and accelerate the transition to net zero emissions. Devolved nations are also furthering the circular economy agenda. Scotland has developed a Circular Economy Strategy that is currently under consultation.[2] 'Beyond Recycling', the Welsh circular economy strategy, has already paved the way for Wales to get closer to its aim of becoming a zero-waste economy by 2050.[3] These strategies offer an opportunity to codify an action plan around what works. Producers are starting to take up more responsibility here – with several initiatives to try and close the loop, promote reuse and implement strategies to increase recyclability. These include Team Repair[4], which uses innovative toy repair kits to inspire more children to pursue a career in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and to tackle e-waste along the way, as well as platforms such as Vinted that encourage convenient textile reuse. This is a great start and can be accelerated by doing more to make consumer participation convenient and attractive.

However, to really drive a step change there is a need to refocus on what good looks like for the consumer. Research detailed in this report has repeatedly found that using technical terms like 'circular economy' and 'waste prevention' reduces engagement. The focus groups we convened told us something similar. Most people were not familiar with the term 'circular economy' – even the group that self-reported as having high levels of knowledge and engagement. Definitions varied from sustainability ideals to simply reusing materials. Most had heard of recycling, and some conflated this with 'circular economy'. We also found, given the different motivations for action, how we engage and motivate consumers cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. Getting the language right here is key.

Our research finds we are talking to two quite differently motivated groups of consumers or archetypes. The first is more proactive, driven by ethical factors and engagement with the bigger picture. This archetype is optimistic and takes more initiative. They see opportunities to revisit old good habits in embracing circular behaviours, and they want to play a part in improving current systems. The second consumer archetype is more pragmatic, convenience-led and driven by financial motivations. They are practical but sceptical about the consequences of their actions and their ability to drive change in the system. They are willing to participate if it is convenient and does not cost them anything, but they are otherwise disengaged. Across the population, consumers will be spread out between these two categories.

So, what needs to happen next? Firstly, circular economy policies across the UK need to set out action plans that maximise the success of what works already by:

1. taking a coordinating role to end fragmentation within existing policy and industry activities;
2. strengthening implementation at every level by ensuring availability of necessary resources, technical know-how and capacity;
3. exploring innovative and cost-neutral routes to funding the policies set out by the plan; and
4. clearly delineating stakeholders' roles and responsibilities so these can be more seamlessly delivered.

Secondly, these policies must go further in embedding a **stronger focus on consumers, and on establishing the systems that enable this**. 'Circular economy' is not how people understand what is happening now or what needs to happen. Changing this will require action on the following:

1. **Language:** Messaging and terminology are significant barriers. While some people already engage in activities such as repairing items, reusing clothing via various platforms, and opting for local alternatives instead of replacements, even those taking part do not associate this with the concept of a 'circular economy'.

2. **Motivation:** Identifying what drives distinct groups is crucial to promoting change. The Fogg Behaviour Model[5] highlights motivation as key to behavioural shifts, with interviewed experts noting social norms and peer influence affect recycling, while reuse is influenced by economic and environmental factors. Consumers need ways to turn their different motivations into action and to enable them to make circular choices. Interviewees also noted that rising living costs have increased acceptance of reused goods, reduced stigma around second-hand shopping, and attracted wider participation.

3. **Facilitation:** Making engagement with circular practices simple and convenient is crucial for ensuring a successful transition. Experts interviewed as part of this research emphasised that the convenience and user-friendliness of circular services are key to driving consumer adoption and increasing accessibility. Furthermore, concerns were raised regarding the limited visibility of initiatives such as deposit return schemes and

in-store recycling options for items such as batteries and vapes, indicating that current legislative frameworks may lack effective enforcement.

4. Delivery: This is the final step, requiring coordinated action to make circular practices accessible and consumer-focused. Our research found that fragmented efforts hinder progress, making a coordinated delivery approach essential for transitioning to circular behaviours. Both Government and industry are crucial in implementing effective, consumer-oriented measures.

The resource management industry is making real strides in moving the materials they handle up the waste hierarchy towards more effective resource recovery – but to drive this agenda further forward, it is vital that consumer-centric approaches are baked into future circular economy policies and implementation plans across the UK, which will guide how the sector and businesses more widely develop their thinking and actions. Without that shift, there is a real risk that progress will continue to plateau, and that consumers are left behind.
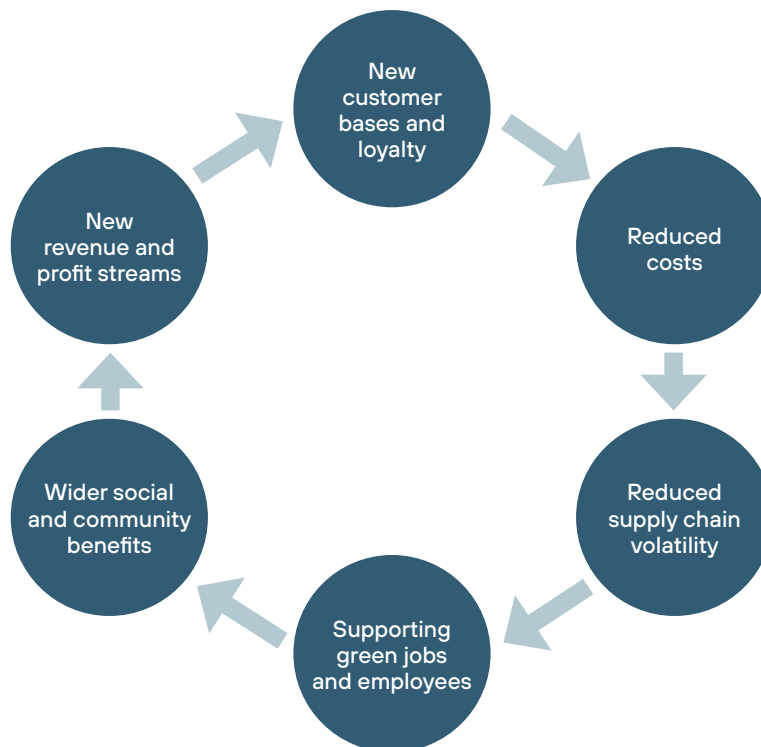
1. Putting the circular economy in context

The economic, social and environmental benefits of transitioning to a circular economy are clear. By 2035, it is estimated that transitioning to a more circular economy in the UK could:

Create 470,000 jobs[6]

Boost GDP by £25 bn[7]

Reduce carbon emissions by 11%[8]

In addition, Figure 1 shows that where circular practices can be adopted by businesses, there are significant wider advantages including greater resilience, reduced inefficiencies, and better support for job creation, local economies and communities.[9]

Figure 1: Business benefits of transitioning to a circular economy

New customer bases and loyalty

Reduced costs

Reduced supply chain volatility

Supporting green jobs and employees

Wider social and community benefits

New revenue and profit streams

However, despite the clear benefits of transitioning to a circular economy – and the action already being taken by industry and policymakers – there remains much work to be done to make this transition a success. 2023 research by Deloitte and Circle Economy found that only 7.5% of materials are circled back into the UK economy after use.[10]

Driving this percentage up will require significant additional action from industry, Government at all levels, and consumers themselves. Today, several challenges and barriers to the UK's transition to a circular economy persist and must be tackled. These include:[11]

- business challenges related to supply chain complexity and in effectively integrating and innovating towards the advanced production methods needed;
- developing the knowledge and skills required to support the transition to a circular economy, while being mindful of delivering a just transition;
- the changing political and regulatory frameworks needed to support the transition and the importance of supporting public infrastructure to support the circular economy; and
- **the low level of consumer awareness and the friction created by existing embedded consumer behaviours and tastes, which act as a barrier to change.**

The last of these is where the bulk of this report focuses. This is in part because, while business and Government are creating a road map to develop the circular economy through various strategies and innovative business models, detailed in the next chapter, the approach being taken is not currently reaching consumers. This was underlined in interviews with experts from the sector, which highlighted challenges such as the following:

- The difficulty in promoting recycling, and more specifically waste prevention, in a consumer-driven society: advertising for fast fashion and online retailers is prevalent and can drown out environmental messaging.[12]
- Terms such as 'circular economy' and 'waste prevention' are not part of everyday language, leading to confusion and reduced engagement, and the public often equates 'reducing waste' with recycling rather than buying less. This was also borne out in focus group research, which is detailed further in section three of this report.
- Campaigns to change consumer behaviours on recycling and reuse have increased public action,[13, 14] but inconsistent market conditions and operational constraints have sometimes led to conflicting messages and undermining of trust and confidence in the system.
- Engagement with recycling has plateaued at around 42%–44% since 2022,[15] consistently failing to meet the 50%[16] target for household waste recycling by 2020 that was set by the Government's Resources and Waste Strategy in 2018.
- Significant barriers to repair – including high costs, a lack of convenient options, and time delays – are currently discouraging consumers from choosing repair over replacement, especially when new products are easily and cheaply available.

This report focuses on tackling these consumer-centric challenges, with an emphasis on those related to drivers of consumer motivations, awareness, and behaviour. The analysis draws on three sectoral deep-dives – batteries, large electricals*, and textiles – to explore specific issues encountered in each, and to identify differences in the barriers and potential solutions. A three-part qualitative research methodology underpins this work, comprising a review of existing evidence, interviews with subject matter experts, and two focus groups with participants with various levels of knowledge and experience of the circular economy.

* Typically washing machines, dishwashers, ovens or fridge-freezers.

2. Policy context and emerging delivery gaps

The concept of the circular economy has evolved since its origins in the 1960s and 1970s,[17] moving from initial theory to formalisation, and now into a well-developed field firmly rooted in current policy and in business and industry frameworks. The shift towards a circular economy is crucial as it facilitates progress towards a more sustainable future by minimising consumption and enabling the recovery of value from materials traditionally classified as waste. Over recent decades, the UK has made substantial advancements in shifting from a linear 'take-make-waste' model to a more circular model.

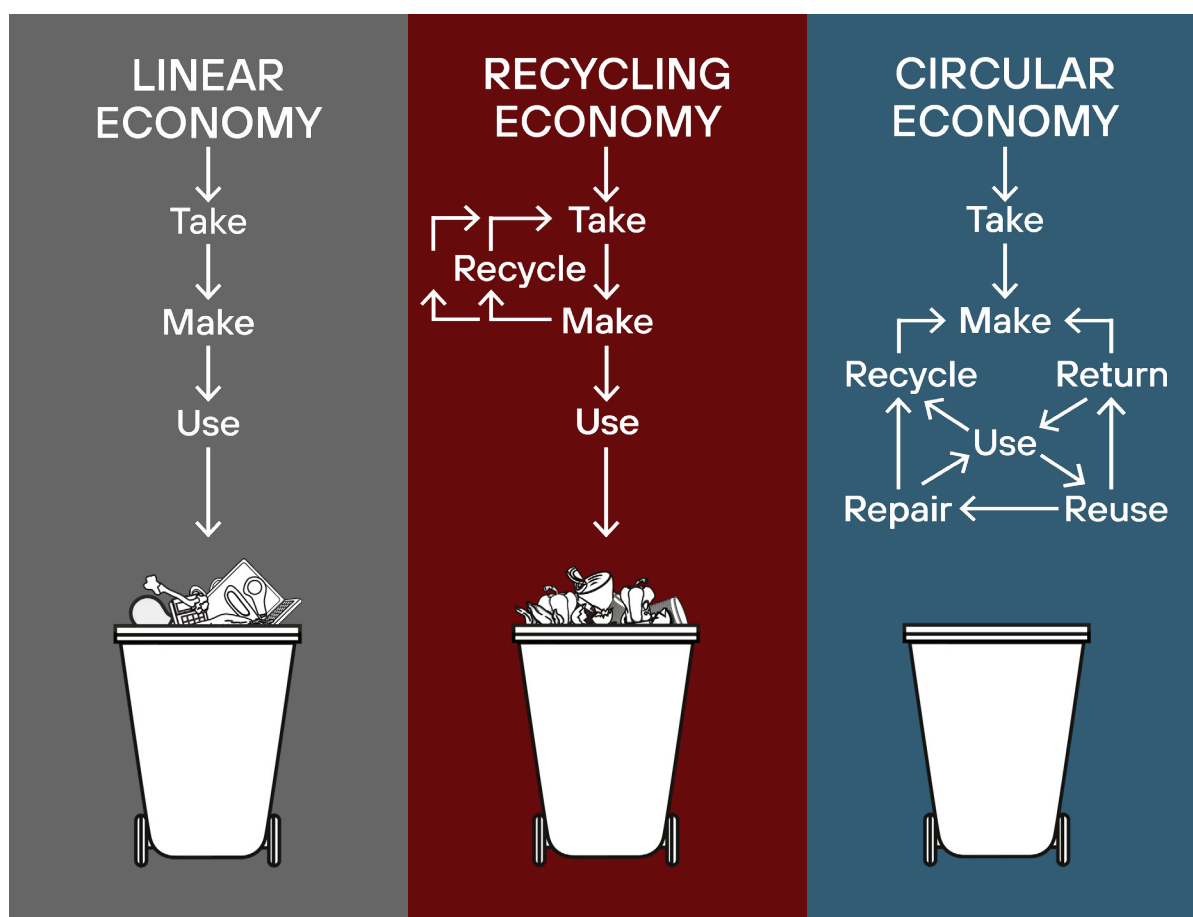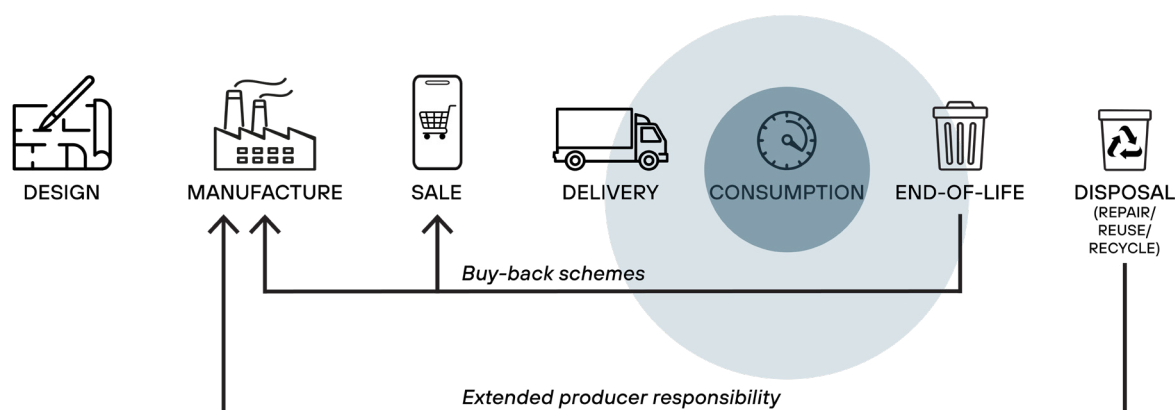**Figure 2: Linear economy versus circular economy[18]**

Figure 3: Gaps in the circular economy loop

Significant efforts have been undertaken by several stakeholders in the system to start to achieve more circularity in different components of the waste value chain. These include, for example, designing products for extended lifecycles, installing recycling and sorting infrastructure, and developing innovative business models aimed at minimising waste generation and maximising resource recovery. Numerous ongoing and planned initiatives seek to 'close the loop', such as the planned 'Deposit Return Scheme'[19] and the ongoing UK Plastics Pact.[20] From a policy perspective, the UK Government's upcoming Circular Economy Growth Plan, Scottish Circular Economy Strategy and Welsh 'Beyond Recycling' serve as key frameworks intended to integrate these efforts and facilitate a cohesive transition towards a more circular economy.

Government action

The UK Government's Circular Economy Growth Plan will build on previous approaches to set meaningful goals that will support the UK in its circular economy transition. In 2018, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published the Resources and Waste Strategy for England[21] as a policy blueprint for managing waste and resources. This set out a series of goals over a 25-year period that include doubling resource productivity and eliminating avoidable waste of all kinds. Invoking the 'polluter pays' principle and harnessing extended producer responsibility are central tenets of the strategy. It placed a heavy emphasis on eliminating plastic pollution and increasing plastic recycling. Two key policies – Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for packaging and the Plastic Packaging Tax (PPT) – stemmed from the strategy. Wales and Scotland have also made progress when it comes to furthering the circular economy, having launched circular economy strategies in 2021 and 2025 respectively.

Additionally, devolved nations have demonstrated significant progress in waste management. Wales, for instance, maintains one of the highest recycling rates globally, recycling 59%[22] of its waste. Scotland is set to implement the United Kingdom's first ban on sending biodegradable

waste to landfill from January 2028. The Scottish Government is also developing an updated Circular Economy Strategy, which is currently under consultation.[23] Due to its smaller geographic size, Northern Ireland can efficiently achieve consensus on waste services at a devolved level. These developments suggest that devolution has contributed positively to the advancement of waste management across the UK's constituent nations.[24] There is ongoing progress in this area within England too. ReLondon – a partnership between the Mayor of London and the city's boroughs – works to improve waste and resource management in London, while the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) manages waste for its region. Nonetheless, a significant obstacle to enhanced local autonomy is the close interconnection between policies specific to England and broader UK-wide legislation. This linkage can make it challenging to develop and implement initiatives tailored solely for England.[25]

The UK Government has identified 'a zero-waste economy' as a key priority. In March 2024, it was reported that the Labour Party would aim to achieve a zero-waste economy by 2050, with the then-Shadow Environment Secretary Steve Reed arguing that this would save billions of pounds and that 'regulation would give businesses the confidence to invest in their facilities and they can be reusing materials'.[26] The Circular Economy Taskforce, established in 2024, 'aims to position the UK as an international leader in circular design, technology and industry.'[27] It is this taskforce which is developing the UK's Circular Economy Growth Plan, which is expected to be published in 2026.[28]

Case study 1: Initiatives to further circular economy research in the UK

From a research and innovation standpoint, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), under the previous Government, supported the National Interdisciplinary Circular Economy Research (NICER) programme in 2021 with £30 million in funding. This investment supported the establishment of a Circular Economy Hub, five national circular economy centres,[29] and collaborative research and development competitions. The allocation of funds through these centres also facilitated the participation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).[30] More recently, initiatives such as the Digital Innovation and Circular Economy Network Plus (DICE Network+) have been launched. DICE Network+ is a new UKRI-funded project aimed at examining how digital technologies - including artificial intelligence (AI) - can accelerate the transition to a circular economy. Led by the University of Exeter, this network comprises eight UK universities and industry partners, including the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, Arup, and SAP. The network focuses on two primary challenges: integrating circular design principles into digital innovation and leveraging digital tools to enable large-scale adoption of circular business models.[31]

Industry action

From an industry perspective, change is well under way – with businesses creating and implementing solutions to tackle various aspects of the circular economy across different sectors. The product-as-a-service model, extended product lifecycle management*, efficient resource recovery, and developing skills needed to embrace circularity are a few ways businesses have started making the shift.[32] One such example of this is **Team Repair – inspiring skills and reducing e-waste**:[33]

- This is a startup founded by a team of design engineers from Imperial College London, which uses innovative toy repair kits to inspire more children to pursue a career in STEM and to tackle the e-waste crisis along the way by teaching children how to fix broken electronic gadgets.

- It is a circular monthly subscription programme, aimed at teaching children aged 10–14 about science, technology and the life skill of repair. It works by sending monthly boxes of electronic gadgets – such as retro game consoles or remote-control cars – with deliberately designed faults and all the necessary tools to fix them. By disassembling these devices, children gain valuable repair skills and develop an understanding of the scientific principles underlying the operation of various gadgets and their components. This process fosters interest in potential careers within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

- In addition to this, Team Repair is committed to eliminating the 500,000kg of electronic waste produced in London daily, driven by a zero-waste, circular business model. After each repair kit is finished, it is sent back using the included return label. As a result, both the gadget and its packaging can be reused many times. Founded in December 2021, Team Repair is supported by organisations like the Mayor of London and the Institution of Engineering and Technology. It is on a mission to tackle the e-waste crisis and increase diversity in STEM uptake.[34]

- Team Repair fills a genuine gap in the market. A project funded by Somerset Council and SUEZ to get Somerset's young people learning repair skills has shown that 40% of the young people said they were more likely to repair something in the future. Team Repair delivered this 12-week programme to more than 150 children across five schools and one youth group in Somerset and it resulted in:[35]

  – 300 gadgets being repaired;

  – 40% of students reporting being more likely to repair in the future;

  – 37% showing increased interest in science or tech careers;

  – 35% expressing greater interest in environmentally friendly jobs;

  – 38% of students experiencing their first-ever repair activity.

---

* This strategy focuses on maximising product usability through design for repairability, upgradability, remanufacturing, reconditioning, reuse and exchange programmes, and comprehensive recycling programmes. (https://www.britsafe.org/safety-management/2025/how-to-build-circular-economy-business-models)

In addition to specific activities, there is an increasing degree of older models being re-embedded in current lifestyles such as milk delivery services that reuse bottles, offered by companies across London and the UK. Other initiatives that promote reuse of hard-to-recycle products such as textiles and electronics, including Vinted and Back Market, have now achieved market scale and are widely accepted by consumers. Various coffee shops promote reuse by offering incentives for bringing reusable cups. Several rental models have been established for transport, home white goods, and electronics. Nevertheless, innovative solutions such as these currently remain limited in scope and have yet to achieve widespread adoption. As demonstrated in the case study on the next page, successful innovation requires scalable strategies that can engage consumers throughout the process, as well as supportive regulatory and legal frameworks.

Governments and industry are taking welcome steps in the right direction but will only be successful if they can drive action at every level, using existing knowledge on what works and plugging gaps to drive a shift forward. The action that is needed in the future should be codified in upcoming circular economy policies, strategy and legislation across the UK. To build on previous policy and business approaches, this should include:

1. taking a coordinating role to end fragmentation within existing policy and industry activities;

2. strengthening implementation at every level by ensuring availability of necessary resources, technical know-how and capacity;

3. exploring innovative and cost-neutral routes to funding the policies set out by the strategy; and

4. clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders so these can be more seamlessly delivered.

However, as noted above, this will not be enough. The approach also requires a **stronger consumer focus and must be centred more clearly on establishing the systems and frameworks that will enable this shift**. This report investigates how this can be achieved in practice and extended beyond the pockets of action where it is already working.

Case study 2: Waste reduction and reuse through Loop by TerraCycle x Tesco

Loop launched in 2019 to provide a global platform where manufacturers could offer reusable versions of their products through major retailers.[36] In the UK, Tesco ran an online pilot with Loop from July 2020 to June 2021, enabling customers to order 150 grocery items in reusable packaging for home delivery. From September 2021 to June 2022, a prefill in-store pilot allowed shoppers at 10 Tesco stores in the Midlands and the East of England to buy 53 branded and 35 own-brand goods in reusable packaging, with no need to bring containers. Customers paid a refundable deposit on each package, returned them via courier or in-store drop-off, and received a full refund through the Loop app. Returned packaging was cleaned and refilled for reuse; Loop managed collection and cleaning, and brands handled product replenishment.[37]

Key learnings from the pilot included:[38]

- Strong customer interest in reusable packaging, evident from high participation and more than 80,000 products bought in two years.

- High engagement from retailers and suppliers, with 25 major brands joining and suppliers viewing the Tesco/Loop prefill model as the most effective UK reuse initiative to date. Prefill offers suppliers a way to stand out and showcase product features.

- Store colleagues were crucial in encouraging participation by explaining the environmental benefits and ease of use; two thirds of customers found the process simple, and many customers said they took part following their interaction.

Despite the positive feedback and the success of the pilot, the initiative failed to scale up. In fact, apart from in France, Loop's pilots were not successful in scaling in all other countries they were tested – the UK, USA, Canada, and Japan. According to TerraCycle founder Tom Szaky, the business case was clear, and consumers were interested. The differentiating factor that made the pilot a success in France was a 2020 law that mandated 10% of supermarket shelf space should be dedicated to reusable packaging by 2027.[39] In addition to this, in France, part of the EPR fees paid by producers are allocated for reuse through the so-called Solidarity Re-Use Fund. This fund receives 5% of the total fees collected by the EPR schemes for various product and waste streams, and this is earmarked for financing actors involved in reuse and the social economy,[40] such as Loop.

However, the interest it sparked among consumers and their ability to participate and change behaviours if provided with options and information is promising.

3. Bringing the consumer into the picture

Although much has been done to start the transition from a linear to a circular economy, the absence of the consumer from the centre of the discussion has meant that solutions have not always hit their targets. One key challenge in engaging with consumers is the language currently used: the concept of a 'circular economy' often appears abstract or irrelevant to the public, leading to limited interest and engagement. For example, evidence from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's (GMCA's) 'In the Loop' campaign (which promotes household recycling and participation in the circular economy) supports this. The GMCA's outreach initiative included a series of short educational videos to inform consumers about various aspects of the circular economy. Notably, they discovered that using technical language such as 'circular economy' and 'waste prevention' decreased viewer engagement, with many viewers stopping the video where they first encountered them. This trend persisted until the campaign revoiced the video content to remove this terminology, resulting in improved audience retention.

Existing research findings

Echoing this experience, one of the common findings across consumer polling on the circular economy is the lack of awareness and understanding of the term 'circular economy'. Previous UK polling has suggested that just under nine in 10 consumers are unaware of what the circular economy is.[41] Part of the issue is that the phrase 'circular economy' has low market recognition. Polling by the Consumer Council of Northern Ireland found that 'circular economy' was the least known of similar phrases: around nine in 10 (92%) of consumers in Northern Ireland stated that they were familiar with the term 'greenhouse gas emissions', 81% stated that they were familiar with the term 'net zero' whereas less than half (44%) of consumers stated that they were familiar with the term 'circular economy'.[42] However, when presented with an explanation, YouGov polling found that almost two thirds (73%) believed there was a positive impact to be had from circular economy activity.[43]

This is representative of a larger issue, as using language that resonates with consumers is essential to effective engagement. Failure to do so presents a considerable barrier which, in turn, negatively influences consumer awareness, behaviours, preferences, and motivations. For example, polling by Opinium for SUEZ in 2024 found that the most common barriers to circular behaviours were a lack of knowledge about where to recycle, the cost of repairing and a lack of motivation or willingness.[44] These factors collectively hinder progress towards a fuller transition in the future and hinder the current adoption of circular practices.

Even amongst the relatively small group that is aware of the circular economy, there remains an engagement gap. For example, GetApp UK polling found around two thirds (68%) did not consider circular economy practices in their consumer habits; however, of those just under half (45%) did have an interest in sustainable concepts.[45] This engagement gap is especially

pronounced within repair and reuse, with a lack of information as well as cost and time limitations amongst the key reasons preventing people from doing more to repair goods.[46]

Polling has also found that consumers have mixed views of why businesses take part in circular economy practices. Whilst 42% felt that companies' circular principles were built on sincere environmental or moral convictions, this was only the third most popular choice within the sample. The largest group felt the main driver was to make more money from sustainability (46%), closely followed by seeking a competitive advantage (45%).[47]

There is significant variation in circular economy practices across different types of products. Wider findings of the Opinium polling mentioned above include the following:[48]

- A third (43%) of respondents recycled small electrical items through a local recycling centre, but this dropped to just a quarter (24%) for large electrical appliances. Similarly, a quarter (25%) managed to sell or give away their large household items (such as a desk or wardrobe), but this falls to just 9% for large electrical goods.
- The process of responsibly disposing of items was often more challenging than they expected for some products. For example, more than two fifths (44%) simply threw away their small household items (such as crockery), whilst over a quarter (26%) have been forced to keep their portable electronics.
- 42% of people would not purchase secondhand goods, with a particularly strong reluctance to purchase secondhand items across all types of electrical appliances: small electrical appliances (64%), large electrical appliances (45%) and portable electronics (39%).

There are also important generational differences in circular economy practices. For example, research by the consultancy DNV found that:[49]

- Knowledge and engagement were higher among younger people (18–24), with more than 53% saying they actively participated in circular practices. Only 32% in the oldest grouping (55+) said the same.
- Those who were aged 55+ were more likely to do their own repairs compared with their younger counterparts. By contrast, younger respondents said they tended to buy more secondhand and rent instead of owning, hinting at different motivational drivers.

Focus group deep dives

Our own consumer research, which was carried out with two groups of consumers with different levels of self-assessed knowledge and engagement with circular economy practices, supports and furthers this existing understanding of consumer attitudes. Each group consisted of eight participants, and these were categorised according to questionnaire response scores that reflected their familiarity and involvement with the circular economy.

At the top level, our research found that there are two groups with different motivations, which split into two distinct archetypes. The first acts proactively and considers ethical factors as well as broader social and environmental implications. This archetype tends to view the adoption of circular behaviours as an opportunity to revisit previous good practices, and it wants to contribute to improving existing systems. The second is characterised by a pragmatic approach, prioritising convenience and financial considerations. These individuals are practical and display a degree of scepticism regarding the impact of their actions and their capacity to influence systemic change. They are willing to engage when it aligns with their convenience and incurs no additional cost; otherwise, they tend to remain disengaged.

Table 1: Summary of key differences between participants by archetypes

Theme	Archetype One	Archetype Two
Motivation	Mix of ethics, habits, and some cost savings. Altruism and 'doing the right thing' were strong drivers of behaviour.	Primarily driven by convenience and financial benefit; environmental concern less central as motivation.
Engagement level	Higher overall, with more examples of reusing, repairing, renting, and knowing local options.	Lower overall — more awareness gaps, fewer proactive behaviours, more reliance on default habits.
Trust in second-hand	Generally positive, with conditions (for example, hygiene, warranty).	More distrust of quality, safety, and cleanliness; brand trust important for acceptance.
Perception of barriers	Focus on systemic issues but also personal effort and time constraints.	Heavy focus on lack of infrastructure and the 'hassle factor'.
Attitude to manufacturers	Strong calls for accountability and design change.	Support for responsibility but more questions about feasibility and cost implications.
Tone	Optimistic about progress and the potential of education and community action.	More sceptical, pragmatic, and focused on practical obstacles.

Findings common to both groups

In keeping with polling evidence, our focus group research found that there was a low level of awareness and understanding of 'circular economy' amongst the majority of participants, regardless of the levels of knowledge and engagement they felt they had and which archetype they aligned with. Most were unfamiliar with the term 'circular economy' when asked. Definitions varied from sustainability ideals to simply reusing materials. Most had heard of recycling, and some conflated this with 'circular economy.'

Amongst participants, the circular economy behaviours that dominated were charity donations of clothes and reciprocal secondhand purchasing, mostly of clothes and furniture. This was a stronger behaviour amongst participants in the group that self-selected as having higher knowledge and engagement levels (Archetype One). Occasional repair of products and upcycling were common amongst both archetypes. The motivation for these repair-led

behaviours – for both archetypes – was from convenience, habit, or financial savings rather than a strong environmental commitment.

There were shared barriers to doing more across both groups. These included:

- a lack of knowledge about recycling rules and what happens after disposal;

- reports of inconsistent council services and accessibility issues (transport, location);

- the perception that repairing is more expensive than replacing;

- limited trust in secondhand/refurbished products, especially electronics and – to a lesser extent – clothing;

- a lack of storage space for keeping items and time constraints of circular behaviour;

- motivational barriers that were attributed to the lack of incentives (financial discounts, deposit return schemes, free repairs), convenience (doorstep collection, easy drop-off points) or clear, consistent information;

- a belief that while responsibility for action was shared between individuals, industries, and Government, it was businesses and Government who were better able to influence change through regulation, infrastructure, and product design. It was felt that consumers could only do so much and often had limited choice.

However, there were some notable differences that emerged based on self-selected existing knowledge and engagement levels.

Archetype one – ethical, proactive and engaged

Overall, **the group with high levels of self-selected knowledge and engagement** (Archetype one) was optimistic, solutions-oriented, and open to personal behaviour change if barriers were reduced. This group often drew on examples of past sustainable practices and community initiatives. Key behavioural tendencies of this group included the following:

- Higher prior engagement in circular behaviours. This was most evident with many participants already engaged in multiple circular practices (such as repair cafés, online resale, rental schemes, refill shops).

- Motivation that stemmed from ethics, environmental impact, and community benefit ('making a difference,' 'responsibility for the greater good,' and 'collective altruism'). Financial savings were a plus but not the primary driver.

- A greater emphasis on personal responsibility, community repair initiatives, and past practices ('revisiting history' such as milk bottle returns).

- Greater openness to making secondhand purchases across a range of categories — furniture, books, clothes, tech — if quality and warranty conditions were met. Positive framing as fun, thrifty, 'doing good' by buying used. Hygiene concerns existed but were not dominant

- Stronger focus on manufacturers' take-back schemes and ensuring products are designed for repair/recycling. Some optimism that consumer-led change is happening if awareness spreads.

"I do a lot of recycling. If I can repair something, I'll try. If I can't, then I give it up. I donate a lot to charity shops, for example, so that somebody else can get some use out of whatever I no longer want."
Sarah, 50, London

"Older secondhand items, especially furniture, can actually be better quality and you can upcycle it, paint it, or do something else to it."
Simon, 65, South East

"Clothes swaps are like a fun day out, you get rid of clothes you don't want and get some new clothes. Thrifting has been made into a hobby."
Chloe, 25, North West

Archetype two – pragmatic, convenience-led and financially driven

By contrast, the group with lower levels of self-selected knowledge and engagement (Archetype two) was pragmatic, sceptical, and more resigned to the reality of a 'throwaway society' unless there is a big systemic shift. These participants were overall less concerned about environmental outcomes and more focused on personal benefit and convenience. Key behavioural tendencies of this group included the following:

- Having a more transactional/financially focused lens, with behaviours often driven by cost savings rather than sustainability ethics. Willingness to participate was driven by clear and immediate personal benefit.

- Greater scepticism about the trustworthiness and quality of refurbished items. Cleanliness, safety, and uncertainty about longevity were common deterrents. Comfort levels were highest when buying from trusted brands with clear warranties, otherwise the preference was for new.

- More emphasis on convenience and habit, with some practices done without reflection on environmental impact. Stronger emphasis on consumer convenience as the priority for action (such as 'just call a number' / 'regular collections' / 'easy drop-off point').

- More frustration at the 'faff' of engaging in circular behaviours due to poor infrastructure, and views that this can only be done through industry and Government action.

"With white goods, I don't think I'd buy secondhand. There just seems to be something a little dodgy. I don't know if I trust it unless it was from a really reputable place. But if it's just some guy off Facebook or something like that, I'm not sure I trust those kind of people."
Susan, 42, London

"If getting rid of items is long-winded, I wouldn't bother. If it's 'Call this number, press option one, option two, speak to this person, we'll put you through to someone else', I haven't got the time for that."
Lisa, 50, East Midlands

"Bulky collections is really expensive where I live; £30-odd quid. I don't want to spend that. I can't' really afford to spend that. So, if you haven't got 20–30 quid, you're gonna go and dump it somewhere probably."
Anthony, 59, London

While the language and framing associated with the circular economy may pose initial barriers to entry, those already engaged at all levels face substantial challenges within the system. Leveraging existing consumer motivation and fostering its growth are essential for enhancing acceptance and engagement with circular economy practices. This is examined in greater detail in section four.

Sectoral deep dives

We also explored three specific sectors across the two sets of focus group participants – large electricals (such as washing machines or fridges), textiles, and batteries. This approach enabled us to analyse variations in motivation and the actions required to effect change, while highlighting the necessity for strategies that work for all consumer-facing sectors. The unique characteristics of each product category frequently influence consumer behaviour and decision-making in relation to waste disposal actions. We conducted an in-depth analysis of these three sectors to bring out the scope of the challenges involved, and the complexity needed for effective solutions. The findings of each are detailed below, but in summary:

- For **large electricals**, a common challenge identified by both archetypes was the difficulty associated with disposing of or repairing bulky goods, primarily due to limited transport options and a lack of conveniently located facilities. This barrier often discouraged Archetype One from recycling white goods, while Archetype Two tended to seek informal methods for disposal. Both groups highlighted the importance of financial incentives as a way to encourage consumer participation.

- **Textiles** demonstrated the biggest difference in motivations and behaviours between the two archetypes as compared to the other two sectors. Archetype One was more open to secondhand clothing and many participants already did this as a lifestyle choice. By contrast, Archetype Two was largely unsupportive and only did so for financial reasons.

- For **batteries**, a common barrier for both archetypes was the lack of convenient recycling facilities, with limited battery recycling opportunities identified by both groups. Archetype One tended to recycle batteries at designated facilities when feasible or use rechargeable batteries to minimise waste. In contrast, Archetype Two often disposed of batteries with household waste.

Sector in focus: Large electricals

Context: In the UK the current Electrical and Electronic Equipment (EEE) market is largely a linear one, with 55% of EEE items placed on the market being lost from alternative circular routes such as reuse, repair, remanufacture, or recycling, instead going to landfill, energy recovery or unauthorised disposal routes through criminal activity. At present, only one in four old and unwanted electrical appliances are taken away by the retailer on delivery of a new product to the consumer. For the remaining 75%, the journey through the waste stream for e-waste is uncertain. Fridges, for example, might find their way to local authority household waste recycling centres, while others can end up being stripped of their valuable compressors and fly-tipped. Some can end up in scrapyards where they are processed in ways which do not ensure the safe removal of hazardous materials, such as oils and refrigerants. According to The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), nearly 25% of waste EEE that is taken to recycling centres annually could be reused.

What we heard: Participants in both focus groups recognised the difficulty of disposal and repair, but they expressed their understanding of this in different ways.

Archetype One participants had experience of buying refurbished phones or laptops or using repair cafés. Participants tended to think about the environmental impact, and some were uneasy about what happened after they left items at recycling centres, asking whether the waste was really recycled, or simply shipped abroad. Some discussed how **transport barriers (such as lack of a suitable vehicle) prevent people from recycling white goods**. Data security was another concern, with worries about leaving personal information on old devices. Take-back schemes and better warranties on repaired goods were seen as important to overcome engagement barriers.

Archetype Two participants, on the other hand, emphasised cost and convenience. A few did buy refurbished phones or appliances, but again the main motivation was saving money, rather than extending product life for environmental reasons. Repairs were uncommon, with replacement the default behaviour unless there was a very cheap and easy fix. A significant barrier for participants was the **perception that white goods had built-in obsolescence, which made repairing or secondhand purchasing less attractive**. Disposal of bulky items came up repeatedly, with participants frustrated by the restrictive practices of council collections. This sometimes pushed people towards informal routes: leaving items for scrap men, posting them for free on Facebook, or, in some cases, fly-tipping. Trust was also a barrier: some were **sceptical of buying secondhand white goods or electronics unless they came from a reputable brand or retailer with a warranty**. For example, one participant who was a renter was considering

a repaired washing machine to replace their current broken one to minimise cost, but others were highly sceptical of this decision and said it would not be one they would make themselves.

Key takeaways: Both archetypes found it challenging to dispose of or repair large electrical items, mainly due to transport issues and a lack of conveniently located facilities. This deterred Archetype One from recycling and led Archetype Two to use informal disposal methods. Both agreed that financial incentives could boost consumer participation by increasing motivation.

Sector in focus: Textiles

Context: 350,000 tonnes of clothing waste is disposed of each year in the UK. British consumers are heavy spenders on new clothing, with an average expenditure of £980.50 per person annually. Each British person throws away 3.1kg of textiles each year on average: only 0.3kg are recycled and 0.4 kg are reused. In 2021, almost half (49%) of all used textiles in the UK were disposed of in general waste – representing 35 items per person per year on average. The average lifespan of a clothing item has decreased, with many items worn fewer than 10 times before being discarded. With 45 million tonnes of post-consumer textiles generated annually in the UK, there is substantial potential to develop a robust textile circular economy.

What we heard: Clothing was the area where the focus groups differed most clearly. For Archetype one, reusing and recycling clothing felt like second nature. Participants regularly donated to charity shops, sold items on platforms such as Vinted and eBay, or swapped clothes with friends. Some described it as **part of their lifestyle, even a hobby, with thrifting and clothing swaps framed as fun and social activities**. Renting clothes was seen as less relevant day-to-day but acceptable for special occasions. For many, motivations blended financial savings with a sense of environmental responsibility and habit learned from family.

Archetype two adopted a more sceptical and pragmatic, financially-driven approach. Some did buy secondhand, but mostly for cost reasons rather than sustainability. Others preferred new clothes if they could afford them, and a few admitted to throwing away items if they had no use for them anymore. Charity donations of clothing were common but there was **less enthusiasm for secondhand purchasing, mostly based on trust and hygiene**. Some did mention an awareness of retailer incentives, such as vouchers from H&M for returned textiles, but they often forgot to make use of them. While a few

participants mentioned repairing clothing, replacing was much more commonplace and this was largely a result of fashion being seen as 'throwaway' due to low quality, relatively cheap cost and changing trends. Underscoring the group's perspectives was a strong sense of convenience and scepticism shaping behaviour: donating or reselling was fine if easy, but otherwise clothes were binned and replaced.

Key takeaways: The greatest variation in motivations and behaviour was observed in this sector. Archetype One demonstrated a principled openness to purchasing and utilising secondhand clothing, whereas Archetype Two engaged in such behaviour for financial reasons. Understanding these different motivations and using language that engages each group successfully will be critical for the circular economy in future.

Sector in focus: Batteries

Context: In 2023/24, UK households disposed of 1.6 billion batteries, with most of these inside devices rather than in loose form. Of 40,000 tonnes of portable batteries sold annually, only 18,000 tonnes are collected for recycling. In part this is because only around a quarter of councils offer kerbside battery collection, resulting in widespread improper disposal. Fires caused by discarded batteries rose by 71% from 2022 costing at least £1 billion annually, with more than 1,200 incidents in waste facilities and vehicles in 2023. Implementing universal kerbside collection could save up to £6 billion over 10 years.

One increasing area of focus is EV batteries. EV battery retirements are currently low but will accelerate in the 2030s as early adopters reach end-of-life; current recycling relies heavily on overseas processing. By 2040, UK gigafactory and End of Life (EoL) battery waste is expected to yield **around 235,000 tonnes** of cathode active materials (CAM), enough for **60 GWh** of new batteries (around 100,000 EVs). This would reduce reliance on imports – with more than 90% of UK critical mineral demand met through imports.

What we heard: In the focus group, most people from Archetype One were already in the habit of recycling batteries and separating them from electrical goods, either through supermarket collection points or council services. Some relied on rechargeable batteries to reduce waste, and a few admitted to stockpiling dead batteries in bags at home until they could make the time to recycle them. What stood out was that **even those who were conscious recyclers were frustrated by the inconvenience: battery bins were not always in convenient locations**, and procedures differed depending on where people lived – with particular challenges raised for those living in rural areas or in

blocks of flats. There was also a sense that awareness of local schemes was patchy, with some not knowing, for instance, that collections were available from their council.

By contrast, Archetype Two showed much lower awareness. A small number admitted they **did not know batteries could be recycled until taking part in the session**. Several people admitted they simply threw batteries in the bin, either because they did not realise that they could be recycled or because of the hassle of seeking out recycling facilities. A few participants had seen supermarket collection points but importantly raised that they had not formed the habit of using them. Interestingly, this group more **openly raised the idea of incentives to encourage better battery recycling habits**. They thought people would be far more likely to recycle batteries if schemes resembled bottle deposit systems in Europe. This was consistent with wider views of this group around the importance of financial incentives to encourage behaviour change.

Key takeaways: A common barrier that was highlighted was the lack of convenient recycling facilities that prevented both archetypes from recycling batteries to a greater extent. Archetype One attempted to make an extra effort to recycle batteries at appropriate facilities wherever possible or use rechargeable batteries to reduce waste. Archetype Two, on the other hand, often disposed of them along with household waste. Tackling convenience here is key.

4. Language that works: harnessing the familiar

To 'normalise' the circular economy, it is important to rethink how consumers are engaged in it and the language that is used to engage them. To get that right, it is vital that the underlying motivations of consumers across the archetypes we identified can be tapped into to support the adoption of circular behaviours. There remains a need to go back to basics to engage and guide consumers effectively through the transition. This means findings ways to ensure that consumers are engaged in:

- minimising waste generation at the outset. For example, considering repair over replacing an item, buying refurbished or renting;
- ensuring that any waste produced is efficiently circulated back into the system. For example, through upcycling and reselling; and
- doing this in a way that aligns with their everyday lives so that they are more likely to change behaviours over time.

**Case study 3: Instigating behaviour change by increasing appeal: ReLondon's 'Love Not Landfill'**

LoveNotLandfill is a non-profit campaign launched in 2023 and run by ReLondon. The initiative aims to encourage individuals, particularly London residents aged 16–24, to consider secondhand clothing options, participate in clothing swaps, recycle textiles, repair garments, and donate rather than discard apparel. The campaign's main activities include hosting a Swap & Style event at a textile recycling facility, installing #LoveNotLandfill clothes recycling banks at strategic locations, and organising a pop-up shop on Brick Lane with curated secondhand collections from fashion influencers.

The campaign has received extensive media attention, with 75 representatives from the media, brands, influencers, and charities attending the pop-up launch. Over the four days of the campaign in 2023, more than 2,000 visitors attended the pop-up shop, resulting in approximately £15,000 in combined pre-owned clothing sales. The campaign has also led to collaborations with businesses such as Top Shop, ASOS, and Westfield. Initially planned as a one-year project, the campaign has continued into its third year due to ongoing funding. An independent evaluation one year after launch indicated that more than 60% of the target audience was aware of the campaign, with a majority reporting changes in their clothing-related behaviour.[50]

Key drivers of consumer action

There are four key drivers of consumer action, identified in interviews with experts and reinforced by focus group discussions. The language used around disseminating information of circular economy concepts represents both the greatest obstacle and the key enabler of change. Clear and accessible language provides the foundation for the other aspects that drive consumer action – facilitation, motivation, and delivery.

Figure 4: Four drivers of consumer action
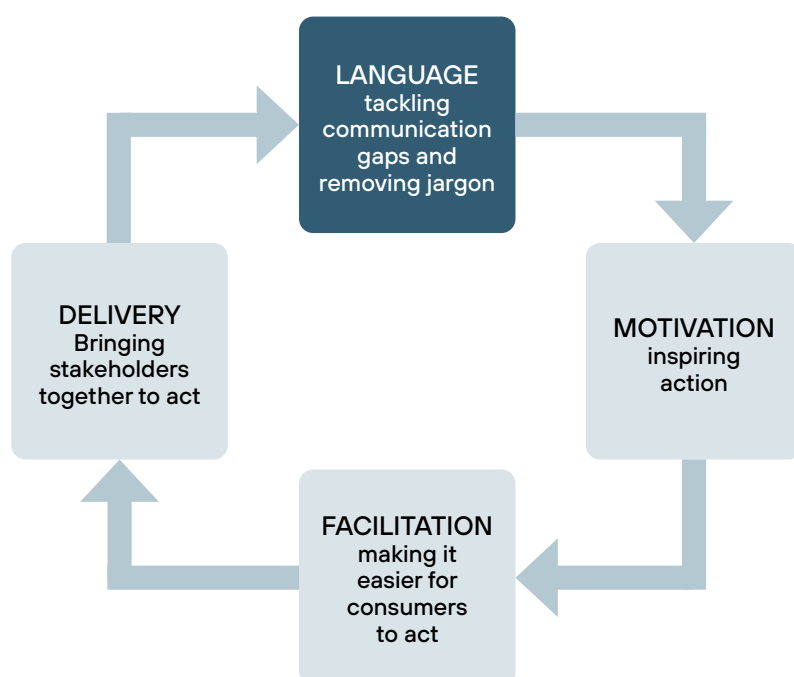
Language: Interviews with experts and focus group discussions consistently identified messaging and language as a central barrier. Our research found that many people already participate in practices such as repairing products, reusing items like clothing through different platforms, and seeking local alternatives to replacement, such as borrowing. However, they do not associate these actions with the term 'circular economy' and find it unrelatable. The experts interviewed recommended avoiding jargon and instead using clear communication. They provided examples where simplified language and tailored messaging led to greater engagement. One organisation applies the term 'recycling' broadly to include repair, reuse, and recycling when communicating with the public, emphasising the value of materials and practical benefits. Another organisation noted that technical concepts such as 'circular economy' are directed towards engaged or corporate audiences, while public campaigns use plain English to avoid alienation and encourage participation.

Numerous studies across the sector confirm these findings. In 2025, the GMCA's Renew Community Fund – which provides grants for initiatives that encourage residents to reuse

and repair household items rather than dispose of them or buy new ones[51] – updated its communication strategy to make the language more accessible and resonant. Rather than mentioning "reuse and repair", they adopted terms like fix, mend, share, and donate when describing projects eligible for funding. This shift resulted in 113 applications, marking a 61% increase from the previous year and attracting many new community groups they had not previously engaged with.[52]

As well as using simpler language for messaging and disseminating information, there is an urgent need to examine currently-used terminology and how that is perceived and used by consumers in their daily lives. Michelle Whitfield, Head of Communications and Behavioural Change at GMCA, notes that 'recycling' is commonly used as a broad term that covers many activities, including reuse and repair. Although it is one of the most familiar terms associated with the waste hierarchy, consumers often do not understand its significance or its connection to resource depletion and climate change. She also highlights the need to reconsider the waste hierarchy and suggests adopting simpler language to explain concepts such as reuse and waste prevention. There is also confusion about what waste prevention means and how it is discussed can affect how widely people adopt reuse and repair habits. For instance, in the GMCA study, when asked about reducing waste, a participant responded by saying they buy products with less packaging; however, within the waste industry, waste prevention refers to not purchasing the product at all.

This is also reflected in results from the 2024 Waste Prevention Tracker Survey by Keep Britain Tidy. According to the survey, 70% of people in the UK still think of waste as rubbish that goes straight into the bin or discarded items that are still usable, rather than considering what is produced or consumed in the first place. This understanding has not shifted since 2022, when the same percentage saw throwing away useable items as waste, and 64% considered non-recycled rubbish as waste.[53] It is crucial to simplify and streamline the language that surrounds the circular economy by moving away from technical terms and making language more relatable. The GMCA study shows that words like share, donate, and mend encourage a circular mindset even without mentioning the term circular economy. Repair and reuse efforts are usually thought of as exclusive to those with extra time, money, or a deep commitment to the environment – something that was reinforced in our focus group discussions. It is therefore important to promote them as practical, affordable and accessible to everyone. The study also found that maintaining consistent and clear language helps foster trust and credibility. When manufacturers use terms such as biodegradable or compostable, they are sometimes perceived as greenwashing, and this does not help build consumer understanding of what actually happens to materials after use.

Motivation: Understanding the drivers behind the behaviours of various groups or archetypes is essential for creating effective conditions for change. According to the Fogg Behaviour Model,[54] motivation is a pivotal factor in initiating behavioural shifts, as pointed out by experts

interviewed. The interviews also revealed that recycling behaviours are frequently influenced by social norms and peer influence, whereas less visible circular actions such as reuse tend to be motivated by economic considerations and environmental awareness. We need to tailor how we position circular products and services and give consumers ways to turn their different motivations into action and enable them to make circular choices. Furthermore, interviewees observed that the increased cost of living has fostered a greater acceptance of reused goods, reduced the stigma associated with secondhand shopping, and expanded participation beyond traditional demographics, creating an opportunity to capitalise on this momentum.

Facilitation: Ensuring that engagement with circular practices is straightforward and accessible is essential for a successful transition. Experts we interviewed highlighted that the ease and user-friendliness of circular services – such as the ability to purchase secondhand goods through digital platforms like Vinted and eBay – is a significant driver of consumer adoption, widening accessibility and appeal. Additionally, it was noted that insufficiently visible locations for initiatives such as deposit return schemes and in-store recycling for items like batteries and vapes remain a concern, highlighting that current legislative requirements are poorly implemented.

Delivery: The previous three elements for initiating action culminate in the essential task of delivery. At this stage, it is important to reconsider how various stakeholders can work together to ensure that implementation remains consumer-centric and prioritises the accessibility of circular practices for everyone. Our research identified numerous examples of fragmented stakeholder action, highlighting the necessity for a coordinated approach to delivery infrastructure to facilitate a smooth transition from current behaviours to desired circular practices. Furthermore, both Government and industry play a pivotal role in ensuring the effective delivery of measures that focus on consumers.

With delivery in mind, our focus group research and expert interviews identified five supporting principles which need to be incorporated into the offer to consumers so that these drivers can be activated successfully:

1. **Convenience** – it should be the easiest and most obvious choice.
2. **Trust** – more consumers will make circular choices if they are reliable and offer a guarantee on quality.
3. **Accessibility** – the circular economy should seamlessly integrate into everyday life and should be effortless rather than a chore.
4. **Cost-effectiveness** – the offer should incentivise consumers to make circular choices by giving them a stake in the system.
5. **Choice** – equip consumers to make an informed choice by increasing motivation, and not via compulsion.

Other research underlines the importance of these principles. The Keep Britain Tidy Waste Prevention Tracker Survey Report 2024 highlighted convenience and accessibility in particular, with only 49% of those surveyed saying there are enough resources for repairing clothing or electronics, 31% saying the same about opportunities to refill reusable containers in shops, and just 20% for clothing rental services, suggesting services may be lacking, unknown, or inaccessible. When it comes to choice and cost-effectiveness, in the same survey 26% said they did not know how to access waste reduction products or services, 45% found them too expensive, and 29% considered them too time-consuming. This emphasises that, alongside improved language, the principles of convenience, trust, accessibility, cost effectiveness and choice are critical to motivating consumers and empowering them to choose more circular products and services. Simple nudges to direct consumers, while simultaneously streamlining the process towards the desired behaviour, can result in significant positive change, as demonstrated by the following case study.

Case study 4: Effecting behaviour change through simple nudges – the case of Lime Bike

Lime Bike has introduced innovative technologies aimed at enhancing parking practices among its riders. The most recent involves a pilot with an in-app incentive feature. Highlighted by a purple diamond icon in the app, this rewards users with complimentary minutes when they initiate a ride on a bike that is either improperly parked or located within an overcrowded parking area. This innovation helps to improve parking infrastructure and reduce obstructive bikes, a key part of Lime's £20 million investment in London.[55]

This is a good example of behavioural nudges to guide change. The Lime Bike approach ticks all the principles discussed in the section above. It is convenient – solves a business and consumer problem with minimal deviation from 'business as usual' and is accessible – all that is needed is an app. It builds trust by offering a reward for being helpful, it has an incentive in that it is free for 15 minutes and it offers a choice – the customer may or may not do it and that will not hinder the core feature offered by Lime. As well as all this, opting for Lime Bikes is in and of itself a circular option as, for some, the leasing model can replace owning a bike.

Securing consumer participation

To harness the four key drivers (language, motivation, facilitation and delivery), it is vital that future circular economy policies make concrete strides towards better engaging consumers in more accessible services, otherwise the recommendations for industry and Government will not lead to significant enough shifts in behaviour to drive real change. The table below

sets out five key actions which, taken together, could make the circular economy more convenient and accessible to consumers as well as making it cost-effective, trustworthy and, most importantly, inspiring action.

Table 2: Five actions to increase acceptance and engagement with the circular economy

Action area	What needs to happen	Who can support this
Language	***Accessibility and supporting choice:*** Information dissemination and awareness campaigns should minimise the use of jargon or technical terminology, and instead use accessible language and emphasising what consumers already know and practice. For example, language such as: – *'Throwaway society'* for linear economy – *'Share', 'donate'*, and *'mend'* for circular economy Then, it will be possible to identify opportunities to build on existing behaviours for greater impact, such as when it comes to reduction in use.	Government for a nationally-led campaign. Local government to align with local contexts. Industry Research and advocacy groups
Motivation	***Increasing choice and trust:*** Labelling products clearly to: – increase awareness of circular options, such as indicating material composition, the percentage of virgin versus recycled materials, similar to the EU Digital Product Passport.[56] – nudge consumers at trigger points for repair and educating on the impacts of use beyond warranty to encourage consideration of reuse or repair instead of replacement. This could be done by marking information on reused components and on expected product lifespan, similar to the French Repairability Index.[57] ***Making it cost-effective:*** Strengthening current financial initiatives like deposit return programmes, and discounts on return of old items.	Government Industry
Facilitation	***Improve choice, trust, and accessibility:*** Make available improved information on local reuse, repair, and recycling resources and develop accreditation schemes for repair technicians and engineers.	Government for playing a coordinating role and potentially developing a national searchable register. Local government for collecting and collating information, making it available and maintaining it. Industry Research and advocacy groups
Delivery	Using existing infrastructure and networks to ***increase accessibility and convenience***: – ***Drop-offs*** – charities, grocery stores, and libraries - to make it *easier for consumers to identify drop-offs* related to recycling (such as batteries), reuse (such as clothing), and repair (such as smaller electronics). – ***Pick-ups*** – using existing logistics networks for *convenient pick-ups*: › Empty delivery vehicles after product delivery may be used for collecting large goods. › Collaborating with product and food delivery companies as well as ride-sharing companies to use return journeys to take small items such as used batteries to the nearest recycling centre.	Government for playing a policy guidance role at national level. Local government to facilitate coordination at local level. Industry Third sector Delivery operators

5. Conclusion

The benefits and opportunities presented by the circular economy — from promoting a sustainable future to fostering economic growth — are well established. There is now an urgent need to harness these opportunities and advocate for circularity to fully reap these benefits. The UK Government's forthcoming Circular Economy Growth Plan, the revised Scottish Circular Economy Strategy, and other future policies in the devolved nations provide a pivotal chance to advance proven approaches and address persistent gaps that are impeding progress. Notably, a significant gap in the current circular economy discourse and action is the absence of consumer-focused solutions that place consumers as equal stakeholders alongside Government and industry.

A call to action: Delivering this shift in practice hinges on action from policymakers in government at all levels, businesses and the waste industry. While real strides are being made, it is critical to embed consumer-centric approaches in forthcoming circular economy plans and policies. There is a need to ensure that future policies can function as a guide for prioritising action at every level, using existing knowledge on what works and plugging gaps to drive a shift forward – and one which engages consumers effectively. With that in mind, the growth plan should work towards:

- improving stakeholder coordination to reduce fragmentation;
- enhancing implementation by providing adequate resources and expertise;
- seeking innovative and cost-neutral solutions;
- clearly defining stakeholder roles; and
- prioritising the next generation of consumer-centric systems by undertaking widespread consumer research to understand effective messaging on motivating to engage different types of consumers.

As the figure below illustrates, this is about each stakeholder pulling on the levers they can control to deliver a meaningful shift:

Central to this call to action is that the core principles of the circular economy can be embedded within consumers' daily experiences in language that resonates with them and that encourages action. Without achieving this foundational objective, subsequent initiatives – however impactful – may not yield the intended results.

Government action is needed to level the playing field for circular businesses through widespread consumer research on messaging, tax and funding reforms, investment, and a clear long-term strategy to prioritise and support circular business models.

Enhanced devolution should be embraced to support a greater role for local councils and to give them the means to make it feasible. Additionally, targets should be set for reuse and repair for local authorities to ensure effective implementation.

Businesses should make circular services central to their business models rather than using them as add-ons or tools to drive new product sales.

Environmental and circular economy initiatives should be embedded within broader economic and industrial strategies, rather than treated as separate or niche concerns.

Endnotes

1   This is defined as: "An economy in which stuff is kept in use for as long as possible, delivering the highest value it can, for as long as it can. So rather than making, using and then throwing stuff away (a linear system), a circular economy means looking at each of those stages for new ways of cycling materials and value back into the system – using materials and products again and again, in many different forms.", accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/circular-economy-strategy-summary-moj/circular-economy-strategy-summary

2   Scottish Government (2025), Draft circular economy strategy: consultation. Accessed at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/draft-circular-economy-strategy-scotland/

3   Natural Resources Wales (n.d.), Area statements and the waste industry. Accessed at: https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/what-we-do/strategies-plans-and-policies/area-statements/sector-specific-information/area-statements-and-the-waste-industry/?lang=en

4   Team Repair (n.d.), Accessed at: https://www.team.repair/

5   Behaviour Model (n.d.), Fogg Behaviour Model. Accessed at: https://www.behaviormodel.org

6   Green Alliance (2021), Levelling up through circular economy jobs. Accessed at: https://green-alliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Levelling_up_through_circular_economy_jobs.pdf

7   Green Alliance (2023), Profit without loss: how conserving resources benefits the economy, businesses and consumers. Accessed at: https://green-alliance.org.uk/publication/profit-without-loss/

8   Green Alliance (2025), In the loop: Stories of businesses delivering the circular economy. Accessed at: https://green-alliance.org.uk/publication/in-the-loop-stories-of-businesses-delivering-the-circular-economy

9   British Chambers of Commerce (n.d.), Beyond Linear: Moving Towards a Circular Economy, Accessed at: https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Beyond-Linear-Moving-Towards-a-Circular-Economy-FINAL.pdf & Green Alliance (2025), In the loop: Stories of businesses delivering the circular economy. Accessed at: https://green-alliance.org.uk/publication/in-the-loop-stories-of-businesses-delivering-the-circular-economy

10 Deloitte (2023), The UK Circularity Gap report. Accessed at: https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/services/consulting-risk/research/uk-circularity-gap.html

11 UK Parliament (2025), The circular economy and sustainable manufacturing. Accessed at: https://post.parliament.uk/the-circular-economy-and-sustainable-manufacturing/

12 UK Parliament (2019), Government rejects recommendations to force fashion industry pay to clean up its act. Accessed at: https://committees.parliament.uk/work/2596/sustainability-of-the-fashion-industry-inquiry/news/100390/government-rejects-recommendations-to-force-fashion-industry-pay-to-clean-up-its-act/

13 Moss & Moss Consulting (n.d.), Reducing Plastic Pollution: Campaigns That Work. Accessed at: https://www.campaignsthatwork.org/

14 World Economic Forum (2022), 3 ways to improve recycling behaviour and boost the circular economy. Accessed at: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/08/3-ways-improve-recycling-behaviour-boost-circular-economy/

15 DEFRA (2023), Consultation outcome: Government response. Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consistency-in-household-and-business-recycling-in-england/outcome/government-response

16 DEFRA (2018), Our Waste, Our Resources: A Strategy for England. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.
    service.gov.uk/media/5c18f11740f0b60bbee0d827/resources-waste-strategy-dec-2018.pdf

17 Andrade, C., Selosse, S., Maïzi, N. (2022), Thirty years since the circular economy concept emerged: has it
    reached a consensus, HAL Open Science. Accessed at: https://hal.science/hal-03512799v1/document

18 IEEE TECHNOLOGY CENTER for Climate (2024), A circular economy: Moving from supply and value
    chains to network. Accessed at: https://itcc.ieee.org/blog/a-circular-economy-moving-from-supply-and-
    value-chains-to-networks/

19 DEFRA (2025), Deposit Return Scheme: drinks producer and retailer responsibilities. Accessed at:
    https://www.gov.uk/guidance/deposit-return-scheme-drinks-producer-and-retailer-responsibilities

20 WRAP (n.d.), THE UK PLASTICS PACT. Accessed at: https://www.wrap.ngo/take-action/the-uk-plastics-pact

21 DEFRA (2018), Our Waste, Our Resources: A Strategy for England. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.
    service.gov.uk/media/5c18f11740f0b60bbee0d827/resources-waste-strategy-dec-2018.pdf

22 BBC News (2024), Wales second in the world for recycling rates. Accessed at:
    https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c511344v959o

23 Scottish Government (2025), Draft circular economy strategy: consultation. Accessed at:
    https://www.gov.scot/publications/draft-circular-economy-strategy-scotland/

24 Circular (2024), The theory of devolution: UK nations' different waste strategies. Accessed at: https://
    www.circularonline.co.uk/features/the-theory-of-devolution-uk-nations-different-waste-strategies/

25 Circular (2024), The theory of devolution: UK nations' different waste strategies. Accessed at: https://
    www.circularonline.co.uk/features/the-theory-of-devolution-uk-nations-different-waste-strategies/

26 British Chambers of Commerce (n.d.), Beyond Linear: Moving Towards a Circular Economy. Accessed at:
    https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Beyond-Linear-Moving-Towards-a-
    Circular-Economy-FINAL.pdf

27 Hardman, S., Harris, M. (2025), JNCC Report 789. Sustainable Consumption: A review of Circular Economy
    policies in principle and practice, JNCC. Accessed at: https://data.jncc.gov.uk/data/76b03636-8275-
    4be9-b90a-7c623f50fbfb/jncc-report-789.pdf

28 Let's Recycle (2025), Circular Economy Strategy now expected in 2026. Accessed at: https://www.
    letsrecycle.com/news/circular-economy-strategy-now-expected-in-2026/

29 UK Research and Innovation (2025), UKRI National Interdisciplinary Circular Economy Research (NICER)
    Programme: Final Report 2025. Accessed at: https://ce-hub.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/NICER-
    Programme-Final-Report-2025-compressed.pdf

30 British Chambers of Commerce (n.d.), Beyond Linear: Moving Towards a Circular Economy. Accessed at:
    https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Beyond-Linear-Moving-Towards-a-
    Circular-Economy-FINAL.pdf

31 University of Exeter (2025), UK can use digital revolution to adopt a circular economy, say experts.
    Accessed at: https://news.exeter.ac.uk/faculty-of-environment-science-and-economy/uk-can-use-
    digital-revolution-to-adopt-a-circular-economy-say-experts/

32 University of the Built Environment (2024), 5 circular business models (and how they can give you
    a competitive advantage). Accessed at: https://www.ube.ac.uk/whats-happening/articles/circular-
    business-model/

33 Team Repair (n.d.). Accessed at: https://www.team.repair/

34 Team Repair (2023), London Repair Week 2023 press release. Accessed at: https://www.team.repair/press

35 Somerset Council (n.d.), Team Repair workshops empower over 150 Somerset students with green skills. Accessed at: https://www.somerset.gov.uk/news/celebrating-success-team-repair-workshops-empower-over-150-somerset-students-with-green-skills/

36 TerraCycle (n.d.), Reuse/Loop. Accessed at: https://www.terracycle.com/en-US/about-terracycle/history/reuse_loop

37 Tesco (2022), Use. Reuse. Repeat. Sharing Learnings on Reuse Packaging: Tesco Reuse Report 2022. Accessed at: https://www.tescoplc.com/media/759307/tesco-reuse-report.pdf

38 Tesco (2022), Use. Reuse. Repeat. Sharing Learnings on Reuse Packaging: Tesco Reuse Report 2022, Accessed at: https://www.tescoplc.com/media/759307/tesco-reuse-report.pdf

39 Reusable Packaging News (2025), Loop Proves Reuse Can Work, But Only Where the Rules Do. Accessed at: https://packagingrevolution.net/loop-proves-reuse-can-work-with-rules/

40 European Environmental Bureau (2021), Extended Producer Responsibility and Ecomodulation of Fees. Accessed at: https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Extended-Producer-Responsibility-and-ecomodulation-of-fees-web.pdf

41 Circular (2022) Almost 9 in 10 UK adults don't know what the circular economy is. Accessed at: https://www.circularonline.co.uk/news/survey-almost-9-in-10-uk-adults-dont-know-what-the-circular-economy-is & GetApp UK (2022) Circular economy: UK Consumers doubt environmental motives. Accessed at: https://www.getapp.co.uk/blog/3078/public-doubts-companies-investment-anti-waste

42 Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (2024) Consumer attitudes to the circular economy. Accessed at: https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-07/Consumer_attitudes_to_the_circular_economy.pdf

43 Circular (2022) Almost 9 in 10 UK adults don't know what the circular economy is. Accessed at: https://www.circularonline.co.uk/news/survey-almost-9-in-10-uk-adults-dont-know-what-the-circular-economy-is

44 Opinium polling carried out for Suez, 7–10 June 2024.

45 GetApp UK (2022) Circular economy: UK Consumers doubt environmental motives. Accessed at: https://www.getapp.co.uk/blog/3078/public-doubts-companies-investment-anti-waste

46 Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (2024) Consumer attitudes to the circular economy. Accessed at: https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-07/Consumer_attitudes_to_the_circular_economy.pdf

47 GetApp UK (2022) Circular economy: UK Consumers doubt environmental motives. Accessed at: https://www.getapp.co.uk/blog/3078/public-doubts-companies-investment-anti-waste

48 Opinium polling carried out for Suez, 7–10 June 2024.

49 DNV (2023) What matters to consumers in the circular transition? Accessed at: https://www.dnv.com/assurance/viewpoint/viewpoint-surveys/2022q1/summary/

50 Fara Charity (2023), FARA Charity Shops at Love not Landfills. Accessed at: https://www.faracharity.org/news/fara-charity-shops-at-love-not-landfill/

51 Suez UK (2025), Renew Community Fund is now open! Accessed at: https://www.suez.co.uk/en-gb/news/press-releases/250425-renew-community-fund-is-now-open

52 Circular (2025), The language of waste: How to make circular thinking accessible. Accessed at: https://www.circularonline.co.uk/insight/the-language-of-waste-how-to-make-circular-thinking-accessible/

53 Keep Britain Tidy (2024), Waste Prevention Tracker Survey Report 2024. Accessed at: https://www.keepbritaintidy.org/sites/default/files/resources/Waste_Prevention_Tracker_Report_2024.pdf

54 Behaviour Model (n.d.), Fogg Behaviour Model, Accessed at: https://www.behaviormodel.org

55 Micromobility Bliz (2025), Lime boosts e-bike parking with over 930 new bays as it delivers London Action Plan. Accessed at: https://micromobilitybiz.com/lime-boosts-e-bike-parking-with-over-930-new-bays-as-it-delivers-london-action-plan/

56 European Union (2024), EU's Digital Product Passport: Advancing transparency and sustainability. Accessed at: https://data.europa.eu/en/news-events/news/eus-digital-product-passport-advancing-transparency-and-sustainability

57 Right to Repair Europe (2020), French repairability index: what to expect in January? Accessed at: https://repair.eu/news/french-repairability-index-what-to-expect-in-january/

WPI | ECONOMICS