



AN MHEITHEAL ROTHAR

GALWAY'S COMMUNITY BIKE WORKSHOP

An Mheitheal Rothar Public Consultation Submission on: Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy

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About An Mheitheal Rothar

An Mheitheal Rothar is a social-sustainable enterprise based in Galway City focused on promoting sustainable, active mobility and addressing circular economy challenges. Our mission is to encourage and nurture a culture of cycling in Galway city, by establishing a practical, ethically motivated facility and social hub, which encourages a strong community and promotes the health and environmental benefits of cycling.

Our free DIY workshops provide skills training for people to maintain and repair their own bikes with the help of our volunteer mechanics. We also offer paid repairs and services, as well as a community space for community groups such as Zero Waste Galway to meet and run events.

About ReCycle Your Cycle

Our award winning circular economy initiative, ReCycle Your Cycle, takes bikes sent for scrap from council waste depots and uses them to train long term unemployed people in cycle mechanic skills via the Tús scheme.

In 2019 ReCycle Your Cycle won the Social Entrepreneurs Ireland Academy top prize for the Connacht region. We have also received a €35,000 loan from the Western Development Commission in January 2020 and €15,000 from the Small Capital Grants Scheme for Social Enterprises, also in January 2020.

Each bicycle we divert from the waste stream via ReCycle Your Cycle contains approximately 12 kilograms of metal alloys, along with variable amounts of various plastics, and other materials such as leather bike seats.

Although these discarded bikes have some value as scrap metal, this is generally shipped out of Ireland for recycling. By taking the bikes directly from the waste facility we are diverting them from this carbon intensive process which takes place offshore. Instead, they are creating a training opportunity, teaching valuable skills to our trainee cycle mechanics on the Tús scheme for long term unemployed people. The finished bikes are then sold to the public at low cost (around half the cost of a new bike), providing an affordable, fossil fuel free means of active transport.

ReCycle Your Cycle thus helps to strengthen the circular economy in the Connacht-Ulster Waste Region region, via creating process and building skills to divert material out of waste streams and back into everyday use.

1. Circular economy

Circular economy: What measures are required to increase understanding of Circular Economy principles and their uptake by relevant actors?

We need more awareness of and value placed on circular economy skills, by industry and local authorities. At our workshop we make discarded bikes functional again. This requires a very different skill set from that employed by standard cycle mechanics (repairing high end bikes or constructing bikes out of a box). Circular economy skills are about closing waste loops and repairing would-be-wasted materials. This requires distinct skills in creatively looking at complex objects and working out what measures need to be taken for each individual item to return it to usefulness. In order to effectively scale up our existing initiatives, there is a crucial need for support the teaching of skills in repair and reuse is a must if we are to successfully transition to a circular economy. The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Regional Skills fora are two existing actors who could be supported and directed to this end.

Recommendation 1.1

Direct responsibility, funding and supports to the ETB's and Regional Skills Fora to establish training infrastructure for the circular economy.

Government at local and national level must also value social enterprise outputs as much as business outputs. Our enterprise isn't just about generating a financial surplus, it is about producing social good, such as teaching new skills, and promoting cycling, while achieving social inclusion and community outreach. In this respect, we seek to address both cultural and material dimensions of the circular economy transition, promoting new meanings and norms around waste while also upskilling in material practices of repair and mobility. However, our efforts are being impeded by limited and rigid definitions of "enterprise", for example from the Local Enterprise Office, focused narrowly on profits or on making new products for export. However, the circular economy demands new ways of doing business that depart from and challenge linear business models. These categories need to be broadened and greater support for alternative business models is needed if we are to truly embrace the potential of the circular economy. All relevant actors should be requested to assess their actions in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), notably SDG 12, responsible consumption and production.

Recommendation 1.2

Give the LEOs a responsibility for supporting local social and sustainable enterprises from start-up to scale up.

Recommendation 1.3

Give the LEOs responsibility for focusing their organisational operations to contributing to achieve relevant targets under the SDG's.

Recommendation 1.4

Require the LEOs to measure and check the environmental impacts of their supports and activities.

Circular economy: What might be a meaningful national waste reduction target and how could it be achieved?

In order for pressing environmental goals to be met, it is important to set concrete measurable targets that actually put a number on returning discarded items to useful life. This would mean quantifying how much is thrown away which could be returned to a useful life, and then aiming to increase the percentage. For example, in Galway City approximately 20 bikes per week end up scrapped in the Galway City Council waste amenity. Currently, we take around 25-30% of these and repair them for sale, but with more support that allowed us to tackle more degraded and difficult to repair bikes, we could increase this percentage.

Recommendation 1.5

Quantify and set targets around returning and repairing discarded items to use.

Circular economy: Have you any other comments or suggestions on how you would like to see Ireland transition to a more resource efficient and circular economy by improving our waste management practices?

We would like to see the carbon emissions of recycling processes factored into the waste plan, even if these processes do not take place in Ireland. For example, recycling scrap metal is highly carbon intensive¹, but generally takes place offshore². These negative externalities should be reflected in the national plan. Furthermore, we recommend incorporating the carbon savings of processes like ours and incentivising them via the waste plan.

Recommendation 1.6

Quantify and incentivise carbon emissions saved by repurposing waste in Ireland rather than exporting it.

Recommendation 1.7

Identify responsible actors and decision makers and entrust responsibility for specific waste circular economy targets with particular staff members in local authorities.

1

https://backend.orbit.dtu.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/119496311/2009_Damgaard_et_al_Metal_Recycling_article_PostPrint_Final.pdf

² <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/1991647-europe-looks-to-asia-africa-to-diversify-scrap-exports>

2. Waste management

Should one national waste management plan be produced in place of the 3 current plans?

Recommendation 2.1

No. We would be of the opinion that the plans would be better coordinated regionally.

Should the regional offices be set up on a statutory basis?

Recommendation 2.2

Yes. The Regional waste management offices should be “given teeth” to implement positive waste management actions and incentivise waste reduction, while also adding costs to wasteful practices.

Waste management: Should the State assist in funding the development of indigenous waste recycling facilities? If so, how should this be funded?

The need for new business models to drive the transition to a circular economy is now widely recognised in European policy and research. We believe this should be reflected within Ireland’s waste plan. Indeed, social enterprises like ourselves are leading the way in driving innovative initiatives in waste recycling on the ground. However, greater government recognition and support is needed to support these emerging innovations.

Our waste region is Connacht-Ulster, an area where creating regional employment can be challenging. Our bike recycling workshop has the effect of taking what would otherwise be scrap metal out of the waste stream, reducing the need to ship scrap metal offshore for recycling. But that is not all. We use the waste to gain hours of teaching time for unemployed people via the Tús scheme, thus providing valuable skills training and learning to support the circular economy transition. We have also created new jobs in the sector (four part time roles so far, including roles for an experienced bicycle mechanic, cycle mechanics teachers, and a workshop coordinator). These staff play a vital role in teaching repair skills to a wider public in Galway City.

This should be funded in two ways. Firstly, from the enterprise itself. An enterprise like ours, in striving to create a sustainable business model, produces repaired products that are saleable. Having mechanics doing this work also means we can take in other similar work such as traditional repairs and services of bikes, so it creates a hub for the skills of repairing and repurposing, essential for a circular economy approach. Both of these allow us to raise money for our nonprofit community work.

Secondly, via support for social enterprise. Driving these initiatives requires support, especially in the early stages of the business development. Such support could come in the form of grants

for social enterprises to help fund the work and support sustainable business development. For us these have come in the form of grants such as the Small Capital Grants Scheme for Social Enterprises, which allowed us to buy tools and equipment, but support targeted at supervising and training our trainees would be very helpful too.

Other forms of financial support are worth exploring too. For example, other countries use low or no-cost loans to fund social enterprise start ups (eg KfW bank in Germany).

What we need to do is value social enterprise beyond the euros raised via enterprise, not just as a business, but for the social good we provide. These include: employment, training, a reduction in waste and pollution, a model for the circular economy, encouraging active transport by making affordable bikes available, mental health benefits of cycling and of being involved in our workshop.

Recommendation 2.3

Support social enterprise with capital and other grants.

Recommendation 2.4

Consider other forms of support such as no-cost loans.

Recommendation 2.5

Value the social outcomes produced by social enterprise.

Waste management: Have you any other comments or suggestions on how you would like to see Ireland transition to a more resource efficient and circular economy by improving our waste management practices?

We would like to see waste quantified not just in terms of tonnes of this or that particular substance, but in terms of complexity, of the opportunity to add human capital and return it to use. The average bike has 12 kgs of metal in it³, but it is much more than the sum of these parts.

Shipping each discarded bike out of Europe for recycling is becoming less and less economically viable. Adding some time, parts and knowhow here in Ireland to return a bike to useful service doesn't just mean 12 kgs less metal shipped offshore. It means hours more training, the development of new skills in repair and a useful product here in Ireland. It would be great if such qualitative and social benefits were measured and accounted for in waste policy plans.

We would also like to calculate the carbon emissions of circular economy practices like ours. It's clear that repairing a bike here in Galway and selling it to a local person for a low cost uses less emissions than shipping it outside Europe for a carbon-intensive recycling process, but it would be good to quantify exactly how many.

³ <https://bicycleuniverse.com/how-much-does-bike-weigh/>

Recommendation 2.6

Provide new structures for linking academic research in circular economy economy, particularly in and in collaboration with communities, social and sustainable enterprises.

We would also like to see more options for governance models for social enterprises like our own. It is recognised that the transition toward a circular economy will require innovations in business models and practices. Organisations such as An Meitheal Rothar are forging new territory towards social enterprise models for addressing the needs of CE transitions. However, there is need for greater support for Social enterprises models in the wider governance landscape needs to be supported with different options for models. In the UK, Community Interest Companies are one model.

Recommendation 2.7

Replace the horrifically outdated Industrial and Provident Society Act 1893 with a completely new act for incorporating different forms of Cooperatives.

3. Research & innovation

Research & innovation: Have you any other comments or suggestions on how you would like to see Ireland transition to a more resource efficient and circular economy by improving our waste management practices?

We would like to see streamlined reporting requirements for social enterprises. It has been remarked that the charity reporting requirements are very challenging for small organisations⁴. As a not for profit enterprise we end up with two sets of rules to comply with, (the charity reporting SORP rules, and those governing co-operatives) adding further complexity and time to an already difficult process.

We'd also like more flexibility from unemployment schemes. We're currently limited to Tús scheme participants but this is a very rigid set of criteria⁵. Participants must be unemployed 12 months plus without a break. This fails to take into account the reality of employment in the West of Ireland. Many jobs here are tourism or hospitality based and are seasonal. Our efforts towards achieving goals relating to social and cultural change needed for the circular economy transition would be greatly enhanced if we could offer trainee opportunities to the larger pool of young people experiencing economic precarity and who sign on to social welfare periodically over the winter and teach them valuable circular economy skills during this period.

As robotics and AI increase their roles in manufacturing, the circular economy is one of the ways that employment will be found to replace those jobs that become obsolete. The skills required to take a scrapped bike and decide what repairs will make it safe and functional again are creative, human skills that cannot easily be done by a machine.

Recommendation 3.1

Streamline reporting requirements for social enterprises.

Recommendation 3.2

Extend existing unemployment schemes such as Tús, or create new schemes, to reflect the opportunity for seasonal or underemployed workers to learn circular economy skills in the low season.

⁴ <http://trap.ncirl.ie/4014/1/noeloconnor.pdf>

⁵

4. Household bulky waste

Household bulky waste: Are consumers willing to pay more to ensure appropriate end-of-life disposal for these products?

Sometimes indirectly, for example big companies or institutions might pay to have bikes removed that have been uncollected for a certain period of time, to free up the space

If end of life disposal costs with manufacturers and importers costs so that these costs are within the pricing by the time they come to retailers and retailers will have already incorporated them into prices. In this manner the costs will not be identified directly by consumers are targeting them, and instead as part of the costs for the products at industry level.

Recommendation 4.1

Incorporate end of life disposal costs as a cost for manufacturers and importers.

Have you any other comments or suggestions on how you would like to see Ireland transition to a more resource efficient and circular economy by improving our waste management practices?

Local authorities need to be less process driven and incentivised to engage with the circular economy. This could come via target-linked funding, or incentives under the waste or climate change plans.

Recommendation 4.2

Incentivise local authorities to engage with and support circular economy practices.