FABIAN SOCIETY

REPAIR, REUSE, RECYCLE:

MAKING THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN ENGLAND WORK AT SCALE

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SUMMARY

The UK currently consumes resources at a level around triple the amount deemed sustainable by the UN.[1] We also generate 191m tonnes of waste a year. England, as home to most of the UK's population, is responsible for 163m tonnes of this total.[2]

Restructuring the economy could help to address both these problems simultaneously. The 'circular economy' describes a system where materials are kept in circulation for as long as possible, through measures such as reducing initial material use, increasing product durability, and repairing, reusing, or recycling products at the end of their life. But several factors have held back progression to a more circular economy, including a lack of political prioritisation by successive governments, a lack of clear targets, and a lack of financial incentives. The UK's material footprint in 2022, when the data was last recorded, was the highest since 2008. At 20.1 tonnes per capita, this represented a 15 per cent increase on the previous year.

With political ambition and practical policy action, there is scope for this government to do better than the last. Steve Reed MP is the first ever secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs to declare the circular economy to be one of his key priorities. With the support of an independent taskforce, the UK government is also expected to deliver a circular economy strategy for England this autumn.

There are several practical steps to deliver a circular economy that should be included in the strategy. We recommend a series of policy options to government to reduce waste overall, and in the key industries of construction, automotives, and food and drink. The government could:

1. Introduce a target for England to reduce raw material use to under 8 tonnes per person by 2050.
2. Introduce a cap on repair prices to create a true 'right to repair' for consumers.

3. Abolish VAT for building refurbishments and repairs to level the playing field with new builds.
4. Ensure the National Wealth Fund invests in infrastructure for large scale critical mineral recycling, stimulating further private sector investment.
5. Mandate all 600 large food businesses to commit to the food waste reduction roadmap, rather than relying on voluntary commitments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Like most developed countries, the UK produces millions of tonnes of unnecessary waste each year. In 2020, the last year data was recorded, we produced 191m tonnes of total waste, with England responsible for 163m tonnes of this total.[3]

This level of waste is a result of how our economy has evolved. We currently operate as a 'linear economy', sometimes referred to by environmental campaigners as a 'take, make, waste' economy'. This means we collect raw materials, transform them into products, and then throw them away once they've been used.[4] By contrast, a circular economy is a system where materials are kept in use for as long as possible. This can be done in a number of ways, including sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling.[5]

The government is currently developing a circular economy strategy and has set up a taskforce to focus on delivering it. The principles of the circular economy are already embedded in many other governments' policies, across different continents and levels of government, from the EU to California.

This policy briefing sets out how government policy can upscale the circular economy. We first set out the key features of the circular economy in England, before identifying practical steps to reduce unnecessary waste and upscale the circular economy in three key sectors: construction, automotives, and food and drink. Waste policy is devolved, so this briefing focuses primarily on England, but we hope it will prove useful for policymakers across the UK.

2. THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

This section introduces the circular economy and looks at how government policy has made use of its concepts in recent years.

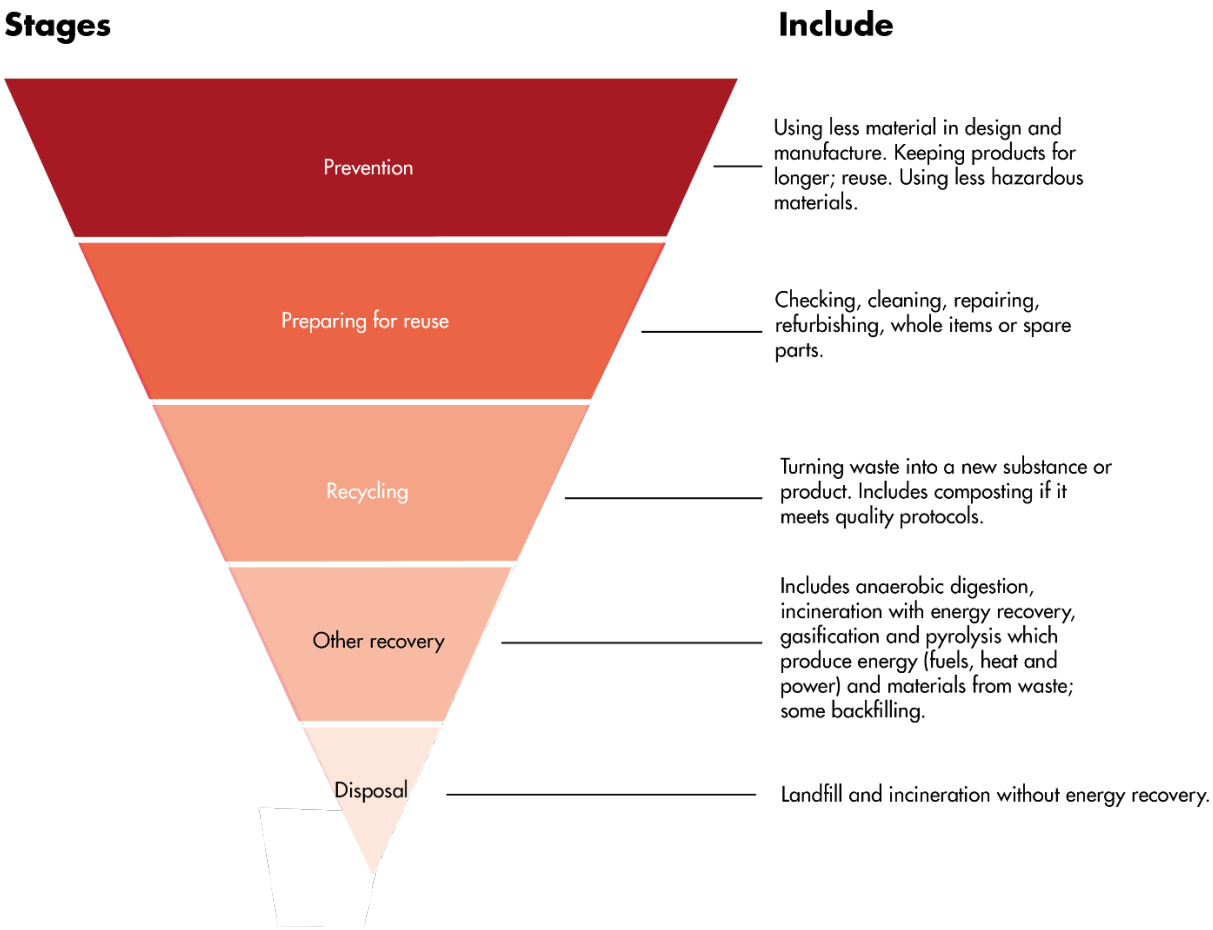
The circular economy focuses on reducing waste

There are four key ways to reduce waste in the economy:

1. **Preventing waste from the outset** by designing products to use less material and be durable.
2. **Reusing products where possible** by upcycling and refurbishing or by separating and preserving working parts from a faulty item.
3. **Recycling** by composting natural products or turning waste into new products (eg melting recycled plastic to form new items).
4. **Using other recovery processes** – for example, using anaerobic digestion or other chemical processes to produce energy or materials from waste.

The UK government categorises these processes according to their environmental impact in its 'waste hierarchy', presented in figure 1 below.[6] This illustrates that disposal is worst-case outcome, and actions further up the hierarchy should be prioritised where possible.

FIGURE 1: THE UK GOVERNMENT'S WASTE HIERARCHY[7]



Developing a circular economy has numerous benefits

Widespread usage of circular methods for production and consumption would have several benefits for the UK and England. These include:

- **Improved supply chain transparency.** Virgin materials rely on international supply chains, including those connected to human rights abuses and environmental destruction. The supply chains for critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements are particularly problematic.[8] Increasing the reuse of these materials domestically would reduce our demand for virgin materials and in turn our reliance on these supply chains.
- **Greater resource security.** Keeping materials in circulation for longer increases resource security by reducing reliance on finite virgin materials. Prices of virgin materials are often volatile and subject to

sharp increases when there are supply constraints or demand increases. Having alternatives to these materials protects us from such price shocks. Additionally, in an increasingly fractured and unpredictable geopolitical environment, being less reliant on international supply chains could help bolster national security. This is particularly true with regard to the critical minerals used in renewable energy generation, transmission and storage, since the UK economy will become increasingly reliant on these materials as it transitions to net zero.[9]

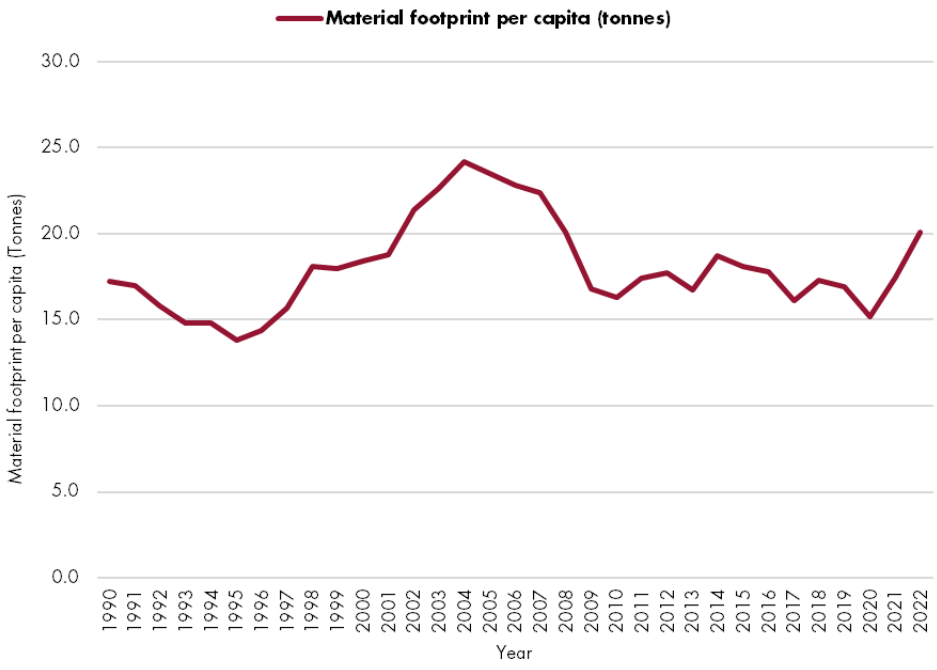
- **Reduced CO_2 emissions**. Production of goods is often carbon-intensive, especially in high-emissions sectors such as construction or heavy industry. Use of secondary materials helps to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions generated when making new products. One report finds that upscaling the circular economy across six key areas could cut the UK's carbon emissions by 43 per cent.[10]
- **Economic opportunities**. Moving towards a more circular economy could create new jobs in sectors such as material recycling or home retrofit. Research finds that expanding the circular economy in the UK could create 450,000 new jobs by 2035 across a wide range of skill levels and regions.[11]
- **Consumer benefits.** Designing products to make them more durable saves consumers money and stress by saving them from 'buying twice' because of poor quality, easily breakable items. The development of sharing platforms for tools, clothes and other items can also benefit consumers by allowing them to borrow products for a short time at a lower cost, instead of buying new.

Previous government policy on waste reduction has been generally ineffective

Progress to a more circular economy has been slow, and resource use remains consistent. The UK consumed 20.1 tonnes of raw materials per person in 2022.[12] This is around triple the UN's suggested range of 6 to 8 tonnes.[13] England, as home to most of the UK's population, produces 163m tonnes of waste a year.[14]

There has been a distinct lack of progress on reducing material use in the last few decades. Apart from a peak in 2004, it has remained relatively consistent or even increased slightly from the late 1990s. There has however been a recent increase - in 2022 (the last year for which data was published), the UK's material footprint per capita increased by 15 per cent, from 17.5 tonnes in 2021 to 20.1 tonnes in 2022.[15] This means raw material consumption in 2022 was the highest it had been since 2008.[16] And this is 17 per cent higher than when data was first recorded in 1990.[17]

FIGURE 2: MATERIAL USE HAS STAYED RELATIVELY CONSISTENT EXCEPT FOR A PEAK IN 2004



Source: Fabian Society analysis of Office for National Statistics data, Material Footprint in the UK, 8 May 2025

While recycling is relatively well-established in England, other key features of the circular economy such as more durable design, repurposing products, and sharing products are less common.

The previous government's resources and waste strategy in 2018 had impressive ambitions, but the policies promised were delayed and most key milestones were missed. Both the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Office for Environmental Protection have issued scathing assessments of its progress to date.[18] There are three reasons that could explain why waste reduction has not yet been effectively tackled.

1. **Lack of political prioritisation.** Waste reduction sits within the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but the issue has typically not been a political priority for governments. When waste has been prioritised, most of the focus has been on issues that already have high levels of public awareness, such as recycling or plastic pollution, rather than tackling the structure of the economy to design out waste.[19] Policies designed to move industries towards a more circular approach, such as a deposit return scheme for drinks containers, have been repeatedly delayed. The government abandoned plans to set a resource efficiency target under the 2021 Environment Act, saying that 'complexity' meant more time was needed to develop evidence and assess policies.[20]
2. **Lack of targets.** There are currently no statutory targets for resource reduction in England, meaning there are few incentives for government or businesses to prioritise reducing material use. Several European countries do have resource reduction targets, including Austria, Belgium, Finland, Spain, and the Netherlands.[21]
3. **Lack of financial incentives.** There are limited financial incentives to repurpose old items into new ones. While upcycled items that will be used for the same purpose are zero-rated for VAT, repurposed items are not. For example, a business would not have to charge VAT for a repainted wardrobe, but they would for an old t-shirt repurposed into a cushion cover.[22] This reduces incentives to repurpose items, an action that the government's own waste hierarchy says should be prioritised.

The UK is falling behind other countries. The EU has made significant progress on the circular economy in the last few years with the development of their circular economy action plan, which will be fully launched in 2026,

and several pieces of related legislation that have already come into force. But the UK is no longer subject to the EU's environmental strategy or regulations, and because waste policy has not been a UK government priority in recent years, our laws on resource use have fallen behind that of our neighbours.

For example, the EU has introduced 'right to repair' legislation which mandates manufacturers to repair a product for a reasonable price and within a reasonable timeframe.[23] But no such law exists in the UK. While regulations introduced in 2021 do mean that manufacturers now have to make spare parts for repairs available for minimum periods of between seven and ten years, this law has several limitations.[24]

The most notable of these is that there is no cap on the price of repairs.[25] This means the financial incentives to repair instead of replacing new items remains limited. There are several other ways the UK's law is weaker than the EU law: the regulations only apply to a few products, and excludes other repairable goods such as laptops and smartphones; components can be 'bundled' together so consumers have to pay for all of them, even if only one is broken; and companies can choose to only supply repair parts and manuals to professional repair services, furthering increasing costs for consumers.[26]

Progress is now being made, but must continue at pace

Recent positive developments have demonstrated that change is possible. A ban on the supply and sale of disposable vapes, passed by the previous government, came into force at the beginning of June.[27] And earlier this year, the Labour government finally enacted regulations to introduce a deposit return scheme. The scheme will allow customers to claim money back if containers are returned to a collection point. The scheme is set to launch across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland in 2027.[28]

Over the next couple of years, we could see further progress in waste reduction and more efficient use of resources. The current secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, Steve Reed MP, was the first to declare the circular economy as one of his key priorities.[29] The first ever circular economy strategy for England is expected in autumn this year. This will be co-designed with the government's new circular economy taskforce, consisting of leading figures in business, academia, and the third sector. It focuses on five priority sectors: textiles, transport, construction, agrifood and chemicals and plastic. The taskforce is currently working with business to create a series of specific roadmaps to improve resource efficiency in these sectors.

However, at a time where living standards are stagnating, the government must ensure that measures to reduce waste and promote the circular economy do not leave people feeling worse off. Instead, measures to promote the circular economy need to ensure consumers feel they have better quality, more durable products at an affordable price – and with less unnecessary waste. Workers must also feel that the circular economy benefits them, with new jobs across the country. Both of these aims are possible with effective policy.

3. PRACTICAL STEPS FOR A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Construction, automotives, and food produce a significant amount of unnecessary waste. They also have significant implications for resource security. These industries will rightly be included within the key sectors the circular economy strategy will focus on.[30] In this section, we look at the overarching barriers to delivering a more circular economy before exploring each of these sectors in turn.

Overarching barriers

As noted above, there are several key barriers to upscaling the circular economy in England, including a lack of targets and financial incentives. Government policy can help overcome these barriers. Many other countries and bodies, such as the EU, have shown how.

Policy options

The government could:

- Introduce zero-rate VAT on repurposed items.
- Introduce a target for England to reduce per capita raw material use to below 8 tonnes by 2050, in line with the UN's suggested sustainable resource use and other European countries who have similar targets.[31] The government should include this target in the upcoming circular economy strategy, alongside binding interim targets for key sectors, and a plan to ensure waste reduction results in either no change or a net gain in jobs.
- Create a true 'right to repair' by introducing a cap on repair price, to ensure sufficient financial incentives for consumers to repair goods instead of replacing them, following the example of the EU.

Construction

Construction, demolition and excavation generated around three-fifths (61 per cent) of the UK's total waste in tonnes in 2020.[32] The production and use of construction materials makes up 10 per cent of the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions, more than our aviation and shipping emissions combined.[33] These emissions are referred to as 'embodied' carbon emissions. Reducing resource use in construction would both cut waste and move the UK closer to achieving the goal of net zero by 2050.

Reducing resource use is financially beneficial for construction companies. Research into five circular construction business models found that they all offered increased profitability. [34] Elsewhere, one company that used retrofit and repair for a development, instead of knocking the existing building down and replacing it, found it took 30 per cent less time and cost less.[35] Repairing buildings is also more labour-intensive than new-build, so this could create more jobs while costing firms less overall.[36]

Circular construction policies such as durable and adaptable design are becoming increasingly important in the face of global heating. The UK is already experiencing more frequent flooding as the result of climate change.[37] In 2023 alone, flooding accounted for damage costing £263m.[38] Ensuring buildings are durable and adaptable to risks such as flooding or subsidence minimises the quantity of resources required to rebuild if disaster does strike. It also reduces costs for occupants: having property flood resilience measures installed in your home can reduce repair costs by 70 per cent.[39] And, of course, less damage to homes reduces disruption to occupants.[40]

Current policy and challenges

However, reducing resource use in construction is not currently seen as a priority. In the National Infrastructure Strategy, the previous government committed to increasing sustainability in the sector. But there has been little progress on either resource use or emissions.[41] There are three reasons for this:

- **Tax incentives encourage excess waste.** Since the introduction of VAT, the costs of constructing a new building have been exempt, but the costs of refurbishing an existing building are subject to the tax. This skews incentives towards the more resource and carbon-intensive practice of demolition and new-build over the less resource-intensive practices of repair or retrofit. A 2016 report by a House of Lords committee argued that tax difference between retrofit and new-build 'provides a perverse disincentive to the retention,

restoration and revitalisation of historic buildings, and works to prevent owners from looking after them properly'.[42] The 'Retrofirst' campaign calls for the VAT rate to be cut on refurbishment, repair and maintenance from 20 per cent to 5 per cent or below.[43] Several organisations, including the Consumer Protection Association and the MCS Foundation, have called for it to be abolished completely.[44]

- **Resource use and embodied carbon in the construction sector are unregulated.** There are currently no targets or regulations on resource use or carbon emissions generated during the construction process itself. There are regulations on embodied carbon in several European countries, as well as the state of California.[45] Some experts have called for the introduction of legal limits on upfront embodied carbon by 2028, or the introduction of new clauses in planning guidance and building regulations to reduce waste and resource use.[46]
- **Public procurement is not leading the way.** There are currently no incentives for companies bidding for public contracts to use retrofit solutions or circular methods in construction**.** The RetroFirst campaign recommends that government stimulate the circular economy by insisting that all publicly funded projects look to retrofit solutions first.[47]

Policy options

If we continue with current 'linear' methods of construction, the government's 1.5m new homes target will result in increased resource use and embodied carbon emissions. But if the government double down on their aims to move to a more circular economy, it could be a perfect opportunity to change how we build and encourage more circular techniques. Policy changes will have to play a major role in this. The government could:

- Introduce statutory targets on waste reduction and/or embodied carbon emissions in construction.[48]
- Abolish VAT for building refurbishments and repairs to level the playing field with new-builds.[49]
- Require all companies in receipt of government contracts relating to construction to identify retrofit solutions first. Where this is not possible, the government should consider requiring other circular methods, such as a minimum percentage of recycled or reused materials, or increased durability, replaceability, adaptability, or disassembly standards.[50]

Automotives

Greater reuse, repair, and recycling of automotive parts is crucial for reducing waste and keeping materials in circulation for longer. Repairing damaged parts, or replacing them with recycled parts, instead of disposing of the vehicle entirely, cuts waste and dramatically lowers CO_2 emissions.[51] The use of green replacement parts in vehicle body repair has the potential to deliver annual carbon emission savings of more than 1bn kg carbon dioxide equivalent (CO_2e).[52] It is also becoming increasingly popular: research by Censuswide found that nearly three-fifths (58 per cent) of UK drivers would be likely to use a recycled car part, and almost half of motorists (47 per cent) say they are more likely to use a recycled part now compared to five years ago.[53]

With the transition to electric vehicles, increasing reuse and recycling is even more vital. In 2019, the UK fleet of electric cars and vans contained over 1,400 tonnes of lithium and 800 tonnes of cobalt. If recovered and recycled, this would be enough to make 220,000 battery electric cars, or 10 per cent of projected new sales in 2035.[54]

Instead, Britain is currently dependent on volatile international supply chains for virgin critical minerals. These resources are finite, and demand is rising, so we are likely to see rising volatility, and potentially large price increases, if demand outstrips supply. There is also mounting evidence of human rights abuses, corruption, environmental destruction, biodiversity loss, and health risks for indigenous communities within these supply chains.[55] Reducing the demand for virgin critical minerals, through greater reuse and recycling, would leave us less dependent on unstable supply chains which employ such practices.

Current policy and challenges

While the UK has some regulations in the sector, there is much more to be done to incentivise the circular economy in automotives.

- **There are few incentives to use recycled car body parts.** The End-of-Life Vehicles Regulations 2005, which were fully implemented in 2015, require 95 per cent of a vehicle's weight be reused, recycled, or recovered at the end of its life.[56] This means that a significant portion of car parts are currently repurposed – and diverted from landfill. But there are no regulations to incentivise the use of recycled or reused materials in the manufacture or repair of vehicles. Some garages and insurance companies do offer or even encourage the use of recycled parts when repairing vehicles, but there is no statutory requirement to do so. Other countries have developed such

requirements. For example, France passed a law in 2019 that makes it mandatory for garages to offer customers the option of using a recycled or used part, when repairing or replacing post-warranty vehicles.[57]

- **There is limited infrastructure to recover critical materials.** We will not be able to recover significant quantities of critical minerals without upscaling recycling infrastructure in England significantly. There are some individual projects across the country, such as the RECOVAS partnership in Coventry, which will create 550 new jobs.[58] However, we will need such infrastructure at a national scale if we are to substantially increase circularity, especially with more people transitioning to EVs. Investment in such infrastructure requires businesses to have certainty that recycled minerals will be in demand; effective regulation can help with this. New EU regulations require electric vehicle batteries to include minimum quantities of recycled cobalt and nickel by 2030, resulting in an estimated 1m new jobs and €200bn in new business.[59] But there is currently no such law in the UK.

Policy options

With increasing reliance on critical minerals, and consumers becoming more willing to choose recycled parts, there is a key opportunity to scale up the circular economy in automotives. To further encourage this, the government could:

- Introduce minimum critical mineral recycling requirements for new electric vehicles in the UK by 2030, following the example of the EU.
- Ensure the National Wealth Fund invests in infrastructure for large scale critical mineral recycling, stimulating further private sector investment.[60]
- Make it mandatory for garages to offer customers the option of using a recycled or used part in repairs, following the example of France.

Food and drink

Transitioning to a more circular food and drink sector could reduce resource use, improve food security and help tackle food poverty. Food and beverages made up the largest share of material extraction associated with household consumption in England in 2021, at 27 per cent.[61]

Approximately 58 per cent of overall food waste comes from households.[62] Over £17bn worth of edible food is wasted by households each year – equivalent to £250 per person.[63] At the same time, 7.5 million people (11 per cent of the UK populations) in households experiencing food poverty.[64] The

emissions benefit of reducing food waste could be up to 143m tonnes less CO_2 emitted by 2050 – equivalent to taking all of the UK's cars and taxis off the road for around two years.[65]

Food waste also leads to overuse of land and water – vital resources which could be used for other economic or social purposes.[66] One business that sells bags of leftover food from retailers has calculated that preventing just one bag from going to waste is equivalent to avoiding 2.7 kg of CO_2 emissions, saving 810 litres of water, and freeing up 2.8 m^2 of land.[67] Finally, in an uncertain geopolitical climate, maximising the UK's food security is vital – and reducing waste can help to do this.

Existing policy and challenges

Policies to reduce waste from food and drink tend to fall into three key areas: reducing edible household food waste, reducing waste from businesses, and facilitating food redistribution. Good progress has been made on all of these, but challenges remain.

- **There is a lack of public awareness and concern.** Most food waste is produced by households, but it can be difficult to tackle public behaviour directly because people do not view food waste as a top concern.[68] Indeed, as most food waste is produced by those who are better off and have less economic motivation to reduce it, it is hard to develop the necessary incentives to reduce waste from households.[69]
- **There are no binding food waste reduction targets.** Scotland and Wales have mandatory food waste reduction targets, and the EU has also recently agreed to require legally binding food waste reduction targets. But there are no such targets in England.[70] In 2018, the government said that it would "consult on seeking powers for mandatory food waste prevention targets for appropriate food businesses."[71] However, it has not yet done so. Instead, the government supports a voluntary scheme run by non-profit organisation WRAP called the Courtauld Commitment 2030. By the end of its fourth year, 300 of the largest UK food businesses had signed up to the commitment's food waste roadmap. Of these, 221 provided evidence of measuring and acting on food waste. The ambition was to have all 600 large food businesses doing so by 2026.[72] However, voluntary schemes run the risk that the businesses who do sign up are undercut by others who do not. Currently, WRAP's website says that over 400 businesses have signed up – which suggests there has been some good progress, but that at least a hundred businesses have not yet agreed to take action.[73]
- **Confusing date labels contribute to food waste.** Retailers are contributing to household food waste by providing confusing or

misleading date labelling. Many people in Britain do not fully understand date labels on food: one survey found that almost a third (28 per cent) incorrectly identified the meaning of best before dates, and almost half (46 per cent) incorrectly identified the meaning of use by dates.[74]

- **Food redistribution is important, but not the answer.** Food redistribution charities, such as Fareshare, take edible surplus food from businesses and redistribute it to vulnerable people via frontline charities. Almost 170,000 tonnes of surplus food was redistributed in 2022, an increase of 133 per cent from 2019.[75] This expansion has been supported by Defra providing grant funding, including £15m in 2024.[76] However, this may not be the best long-term solution, since it does not tackle the root causes of food waste and food poverty. Indeed, the Food Foundation suggests that while this can provide immediate relief to people experiencing food poverty, some companies use these practices to "demonstrate CSR [corporate social responsibility] while avoiding being held accountable for tackling the structural problems that cause food waste in first place."[77] While food redistribution efforts are an important short-term fix, more should be done to fix the root causes of food waste in tandem.

Policy options

Reducing food waste could help reduce food poverty, free up valuable land, and improve food security in uncertain times. The government could:

- Mandate all 600 large food businesses to commit to the food waste reduction roadmap, rather than relying on voluntary commitments.
- Introduce statutory targets for food waste and redistribution for large retailers, which gradually get more stringent over time.
- Establish an awareness campaign on food waste, led by businesses and charities, to improve knowledge surrounding best before and use by dates.
- Mandate retailers to remove best before dates on fresh produce to encourage customers to instead use their judgement.[78]

4. CONCLUSION

Reducing waste and promoting a more circular economy would deliver significant benefits, including cutting emissions and helping deliver on the government's net zero targets; improving resource security; producing higher quality products for consumers; and creating more jobs. But progress has been too slow, leaving the UK in general, and England in particular, at risk of falling behind.

The government's upcoming circular economy strategy must deliver practical policy solutions to reduce waste in England. In particular, it should aim to incentivise actions high up the waste hierarchy, such as the reuse of car parts and critical minerals, preventing food waste, and repairing buildings instead of demolishing and building new.

England must follow the example of governments around the world which have shown that it is possible to implement practical policies to reduce waste. This report sets out several workable policy options that could help achieve the circular economy at scale.

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