

Cross-Party Group on the Circular Economy

13th May 2025, 6:00-8:00 pm, Scottish Parliament and online via Microsoft Teams

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Maurice Golden MSP, Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP

Invited Guests

Ellena Andrews (Food and Drink Federation), Stephen Freeland (Scottish Environmental Services Association), Stephen Cameron (Change Waste Recycling)

Non-MSP Group Members and Guests

Sarah Bronsdon, Martin Cracknell, Catherine Gemmell (Marine Conservation Society), Katherine Gill, Barry Fisher, Daniel Hale (Marine Conservation Society), Jeff Hoagland, Juli Huang, Ifeyinwa Kanu (IntelliDigest), Matt Lewis, Melissa Marques-McEwan, Iain McDonald, Mary Michel, Kirsty Tinsdale, Luiza Toma, Paul Smith

Apologies

James Trolland, Lynn Wilson

Welcome

- Group convener Maurice Golden MSP welcomed everyone and introduced the topic for the meeting as building a circular

economy and maximising participation in household recycling collections.

- Maurice Golden proposed that Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP be admitted to the group as a member with Paul Smith seconding.
- Minutes from the previous meeting were proposed by Maurice Golden and seconded by Paul Smith.

Presentations

Ellena Andrews (Food and Drink Federation) – What Extended Producer Responsibility Means for Recycling Rates

- Ellena began her presentation by speaking about the packaging reforms that were first introduced from 2018 onwards. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is central to these reforms and has a proven track record worldwide.
- The challenge over recent years has been how this would work in practice. EPR in its current form looks like a straight-up tax on packaging – even the Office for Budget Responsibility has categorised it as such.
- Ellena posed the question of what a good EPR looks like. Every other EPR scheme is producer-run, and the Food and Drink Federation have been calling for this to be the case in the UK with a suggested model of a not-for-profit taking control of the operational functions of the scheme and collaborating with producers.
- The Producer Responsibility Organisation (PRO) acts in the interest of all producers and incentivises innovation with packaging design. This would create long-term certainty for investors and stimulate new investments in recycling at scale. Ellena highlighted that there is £10 billion of investment in recycling infrastructure waiting to be unlocked across the UK.
- Ellena discussed how statutory recycling targets for local authorities would be another key part of a successful EPR scheme, along with citizen buy-in to the intentions of the scheme.

Stephen Freeland (Environmental Services Association) – Current Household Recycling Performance and Maximising Carbon Reductions

- Stephen thanked the CPG for the opportunity to present at this meeting and began his presentation by discussing the challenges affecting household recycling rates and why recycling rates are plateauing.
- Some of the key questions on this issue: Why are recycling rates plateauing? Are we targeting the right materials? Can we get plastics out of residual waste? Can households do more from their perspective?
- Stephen noted that recycling rates had increased significantly compared with twenty five years ago. The period 2000 – 2005 saw a significant increase in recycling with a 20% increase in this timeframe. But in the twenty years since that increase has barely been matched. This was despite the context of a lot of waste policy interventions in the meantime.
- Stephen noted some of the key reasons why recycling rates haven't been increasing increasing:
- Materials and waste becoming more complicated to recycle. Much of what is easy to recycle is already being recycled and a lot of the remainder is quite difficult.
- Up to now there has been no incentive on producers to design easily recyclable packaging.
- Households are not getting the right messages around recycling and are not fully understanding the impact of contamination of household recycling.
- Therefore, Stephen argued, a new approach is needed to recycling. He noted the Scottish Government was alive to this and that we had seen initiatives like the circular economy route map and the Circular Economy Act 2024, though it was pointed out that there was uncertainty on what future statutory recycling targets for local authorities would look like.
- Households would have to play a key part in the recycling agenda. When SLR were asked to look into recycling, it was discovered that there were several items regularly being put into residual waste which didn't need to be there – this was a missed opportunity.

- As such, significant gains could be realised without further legislation or investment – the potential being there already.
- It was noted that as more and more people recycle, there was a need to simplify recycling. This would include consistent labelling of products to make it clear where and how something could be recycled. The challenge around infrastructure was also highlighted – that much of the current infrastructure was coming to the end of its life and in any case would need to be improved.
- Looking through a carbon lens, the biggest benefit would be through a reduction of consumption generally. But there would be significant gains to be had also through recycling – particularly through plastics. Food waste was one area where there would be less potential benefit in terms of carbon, but it would still be important in other metrics.
- Stephen went on to say the emissions trading scheme (ETS) would be launching in 2026 and would apply a carbon price to every tonne of fossil carbon. Suggestions were that £100 per tonne would be a realistic price.
- SLR had modelled that local authorities could face a cost of £80 million on this basis. Primarily this would be solved by removing plastic from residual waste.
- Maurice Golden thanked Stephen for the presentation and commented that it was interesting that the focus was shifting to producers instead of local authorities, as it has always tended to be in the past.

Stephen Cameron (Change Waste Recycling) – Maximising Collection of High Quality Recyclables

- Stephen began by providing an overview of his company, which is a small company with around sixty-five staff and three thousand customers, mainly based across Glasgow and Edinburgh. This includes businesses from hospitality and retail. Each had their own requirements for waste and recycling and were treated on an individual basis. In the current climate, businesses were expected to demonstrate their corporate waste responsibility and Change Waste Recycling helped them to do this through, for example, Carbon Reporting.

- It was explained that their vehicles were being switched to electric to help achieve Net Zero status. Most waste trucks were big compactor trucks, working out of small depots.
- Change Waste collected eighty thousand bags of waste across paper, cardboard and plastic. Their approach was very much one of '*separate bins for separate stuff*'. This allowed them to identify cross-contamination and improve best practice for their customers.
- Having loose bags allowed them to identify contamination quickly which meant they didn't have to spend money re-sorting recycling. It was explained that a MRF cannot separate waste easily, so separation at source was a far more effective way of doing things. Stephen made clear though that they had sympathy for those people who don't have space for multiple bins.
- One major issue identified was that most litter in a general waste bin should not be there. Much of the public were putting the wrong material in the wrong place, and the system needed to be made simpler. Segregation at source would be one way of doing this.
- Stephen observed not that society wasn't great at recycling. He explained that the real question was how to make it 'cool'. He gave the example of smokers quitting because society had made it annoying, expensive, and uncool. In terms of recycling, the challenge was how to make sustainability cool, and a practice that people don't even think about doing.

Maurice Golden thanked Stephen for his presentation and noted that a lot of the key policy drivers have historically come from Westminster.

Open Discussion

- Maurice Golden asked the presenters the following question: more generally, in terms of household recycling, what would you like to see from the Scottish Government in this space, given what we already know is going on in this space?
- Ellena responded that she wanted to see recognition that the UK was a single market – meaning consistency across the four nations. That was vital in her view. Maurice commented that that was an interesting point, as there wasn't even consistency of

collections in Scotland, and that there was greater efficiency in Wales where they did have that consistency.

- Stephen Freeland responded next to say that the big ask would be around greater certainty. Lots of policies had been introduced and then changed. It made it very difficult to get investment in the right services when there was a chance that it might be changed as the last minute. Once the government had made a decision it should be stuck to and then changed later over time if necessary.
- Maurice Golden commented that he would be surprised if the forthcoming deposit return scheme (DRS) would launch successfully in two years time.
- Stephen Cameron agreed it was important to stick with agreed policies, but that the bigger problem was government designing schemes which were not fit for purpose, which he said was primarily why the previous DRS ultimately failed. Stephen's view was that policy should be made collaboratively.
- Maurice then commented that a major problem was getting people to put things in the right bin. There was quite a focus on this historically but it had dried up over the last decade. People were getting confused and then things would end up in residual waste. He asked how we could improve communication on this issue and which actors needed to step up.
- Stephen Cameron responded that there was a need for more education, and that local authorities were best placed to tackle this in terms of household waste. But businesses weren't going to improve practices until there was a financial benefit from doing so.
- Stephen Freeland then invited his colleague Martin Cracknell to comment on this issue. Martin said that in the past, we had to recycle everything because there was an incentive to reuse things where possible. Bringing back this incentive could be one way of increasing recycling. He added that there was a general distrust of the waste industry and how they were currently carrying out recycling, but that we needed to use more consistent language when speaking about this. Martin suggested that we had to look at the global context of recycling and to ensure we were all talking in the same way about things. He went on to say that we should also take credit for the recycling system we already have, and that there were lots of

good things about Scotland's recycling system – the problem is that many people weren't using it correctly.

- Maurice Golden commented that in some council areas, you could be both a recycler and a contaminator. He then asked Ellena to outline what her members were saying about moving to a more reusable form of packaging and DRS (where applicable).
- Ellena observed that Maurice had hit the nail on the head in terms of the complexity of achieving all of this across a devolved policy area in a single, larger trading market. On EPR, producers didn't want to pay ETS fees and believed this should not be in the scope of EPR. She also highlighted that producers didn't want valuable material to end up in landfill. Ellena explained that EPR fees were effectively a transfer of who was paying the existing costs for recycling, and it was important these funds were ringfenced to reflect this. She commented that even though glass had been quite a heavy 'feed' in the process, that hadn't been recognised due to using a weight calculation instead of a per-unit calculation. Finally, Ellena added that DRS should be a real catalyst for change. The financial deposit value should implement that first seed of change and create a routine of returning items once they have been used. Overall litter rates had fallen significantly in countries where such schemes had been set up successfully.
- Maurice commented that there had been a lack of thought as to what the intended policy outcome was for each scheme – which he said was disappointing as this was the job of government. He added that on DRS, his position had always been that it was good for fast moving consumables, but that it was not achievable for all products. He then asked the speakers to give their thoughts on this issue.
- Stephen Cameron responded that, in theory, DRSs were great, but in order for them to work in the UK they had to be simplistic with over complication resulting in failure. He said we also had to ensure we got the existing schemes right before we started introducing new ones – there was too much coming down the line with EPR, ETS and DRS all being introduced when we were already not doing well enough with existing schemes.
- Stephen Freeland responded that DRS should have come in after EPR as DRS sweeps up everything left after EPR has already worked to improve the system. He added that on

household recycling, there had been a collective foot taken off the gas. This had not been helped by a failure to get the right message across. He noted that narratives of 'Bin Police' didn't the situation. Stephen argued there was a need to reset some of the expectations around what can and cannot be recycled. He concluded that it should only require a gentle nudge to get everyone moving in the right direction.

- Maurice Golden then thanked the speakers for their responses and closed the meeting.