



Statement of Mindy O'Brien, Chief Executive
Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Circular Economy Bill
14th October 2021

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Mindy O'Brien and I am the Chief Executive of the environmental charity VOICE. We are one of the leading national environmental charities advocating for waste prevention through reuse, repair, repurpose and reimagining. We have many campaigns including the Conscious Cup Campaign, We Choose Reuse and Sick of Plastic campaigns, our Return For Change initiative and Picker Pals. We are also very active in the development of policy both on a national and EU level.

I'd like to give you our impression of the current Circular Economy Bill Heads. While there are many good provisions, we would like to see more ambition to embrace new business models and way of consumption, moving away from our current disposable economy.

We can no longer rely on industry to do the right thing. Over the past three years we have seen our packaging waste exceed 1 million tonnes and growing each year. Current stats do not even reflect our on-line shopping habits since COVID and I anticipate that packaging waste is heading in only one direction. We cannot recycle our way out of this mountain of waste and this bill can provide the direction we need to change how we consume. As many of you expressed at the last session, producers must take responsibility in designing out waste in products and packaging. They must also invest in new service models.

We cannot be content with supermarkets offering new compostable shopping bags or bags made from recycled plastic. Some in the

industry tell me that they are only responding to what their customers want and they want convenience, which means more prepared meals and more packaging. But which came first? Supermarkets ensuring that all their products are perfect and rejecting too small or too large produce from the farmers or the consumers demanding that everything needs to be perfect. I believe that supermarkets have conditioned us to choose pre-packaged items in a pre-determined amount.

Shoppers oftentimes don't have the ability to select the quantity they need, forced to buy bags of carrots that they may never use. If they are able to buy loose fruit or veg, it is normally much more expensive per kilo to have the privilege of buying only what you want. Current practices increase our household food and packaging waste. Aren't we all sick of seeing all our food wrapped in plastic and I know from speaking to people of all walks of life, they wish they had less packaging to deal with.

Businesses will not change unless our politicians are brave enough to demand new systems. I worked on Capitol Hill for several years in the 1990s and I can't tell you how many times businesses would tell me that the legislation we were proposing would put them out of business. Needless to say, they found a way to change their systems for the better and comply with the law. It is hard to change, but we must do it. Extracting resources, making and disposing of stuff takes up nearly 50% of our carbon budget and contributes to over 90% of our biodiversity loss.

My mantra is 'buy the product, not the packaging.' Consumers should have the choice when shopping to bring their own container/bag, rent or borrow one or pay for a disposable one. The last option will be achieved through the proposed levies. However, we need retail to change its infrastructure to offer reuse/refill opportunities. This is being done in zero waste shops around the country, but as Senator Reilly mentioned, we shouldn't have to go to

many shops just to reduce our waste. By making refill/reuse mainstream, we make it much easier for the consumer to shop more sustainably.

France has mandated that all supermarkets larger than 400 sq. metres must allocate 20% of the floor space to reuse/refillables. Such items that can be refilled include cleaning products, dry goods, oils/vinegars, nuts, spices, etc. Catering also must do its part. The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy (WAPCE) calls for a ban of the unnecessary use of disposables in eat-in restaurants as well in closed-loop large scale events. This mandate should be in the bill or included in subsequent regulations. As of 2024, Portugal will require the use of reusables for in-house consumption in restaurants. I have witnessed first-hand a food hall in Lisbon where all the plates, cups, glasses, cutlery are all reusable and collected to be washed and used again.

We also need to tackle take-aways and meal deliveries. Other countries have piloted reusable containers where the container has a deposit that is returned once the container is returned. The container is then washed and redistributed to the business to be used again. Standardised containers, pooling arrangements, reverse logistics and industrial washing facilities infrastructure can be developed throughout the country. However, to achieve economies of scale and to create a level playing field, all take-aways and delivery services must comply so we don't have any freeloaders. Developing such a system creates local jobs (delivery, washing, logistics), instead of buying cheap packaging from abroad.

We agree with Deputy Bruton that sectoral roadmaps, for packaging, textiles, food waste, electronic waste and others must be developed with strong reuse, repair and waste prevention targets. Additionally, here are some further demands from the environmental community:

- 1) Make it mandatory for the Minister to set reuse/repair targets, set bans and impose levies instead of 'may'.
- 2) Impose a tax on Virgin plastic to boost viability and take-up of recycled plastic resins (like Italy). The Circular Economy Report for the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, written by Richard Bruton TD as Rapporteur, supports equalising measures to boost viability of recycled material. On the other side of the coin, we call for zero VAT for repaired or reused items as VAT has already been paid when they were first sold.
- 3) Truth in labelling: The statute must declare that containers that claim to be compostable / biodegradable / degradable must use one label, 'compostable', that must meet the EN13432 standard, which means that the product breaks down to its original constituents with 12 weeks in an industrial composting facility. Right now there are a plethora of labels which is very confusing to the consumer.
- 4) Ban the use of PFAS (forever chemicals) in food contact materials, including food packaging. In a report done by ChemTrust in the UK, many plant fibre 'compostable' food packaging contains PFAS to create a waterproof/greaseproof barrier. VOICE has just conducted a test of 11 brands of compostable or paper-based packaging commonly used in Ireland and all of them exceeded the limits for allowable PFAS amounts. This bowl, which is used in the Dail canteen, contains 1,200 milligrams per 1 kilogram dry weight of total flourine content (an accepted test for PFAS), one of the highest tested. The sad thing is that this bowl advertises that it is fully compostable and meets the EN13432 standard. Not only is it touching the food we eat, but it may also go to composting facilities and remain in compost that is later spread on farmers' fields. I'd like our PFAS report entered into the record.

Denmark and California have both banned PFAS in food contact material and we call for a similar ban in Ireland.

- 5) Demand that supermarkets larger than 400 sq metres devote 20% of their shopping areas towards primary refill and reuse packaging (consumer-facing packaging).
- 6) Demand that in-house consumption of food and drink as well as large closed-loop events, such as concerts, festivals or sports venues provide reuseable cutlery, cups and delft.
- 7) Require take-aways and food delivery services offer reuse options and where reuse is not offered, the consumer can either bring their own container or purchase a disposable one.
- 8) Provide liability relief for repaired and reused items to encourage the repair and sharing economy. Some initiatives such as the repair cafes and Clonbike, a bike sharing scheme, have had to discontinue due to the inability to secure insurance. At least, allow individuals to bring their own containers and if they do, create a personal acceptance of liability should they get sick from the reusable containers.
- 9) We also call for the more frequent review of the Food Loss Prevention Roadmap to determine whether interventions are effective and for interim annual targets to ensure that we meet the 50% reduction in food waste by 2030.
- 10) Call on government entities to ban the purchase and use of any disposable single-use cup, plate, cutlery (plastic, recyclable or compostable). Reusable options must be provided. Thus the government will lead by example and create the momentum for the reuse infrastructure to be established.

These are just some of the suggestions that we propose and I look forward to working with you as this bill progresses. I am open to any questions you might have.