

The future of the NI Environmental Benchmarking Survey

After the results launch event for the Northern Ireland Environmental Benchmarking Survey in November, a short workshop was held to explore the Survey's future direction in the context of a changing sustainability landscape, and in particular the circular economy becoming an increasingly prevalent concept.

The session was facilitated by Glynn Roberts and Rosie Towe from Carnstone Partners LLP, our Benchmarking Survey verification partners.

The aims of the session were to:

- Gain an understanding of Survey respondent's knowledge of the circular economy, and how it can be applied to their organisations
- Improve understanding of the circular economy
- Better understand how we can integrate circular economy content into the NI Environmental Benchmarking Survey going forward

Glynn gave a presentation which introduced the concept of the circular economy as an alternative to a traditional linear economy (take, make, use, dispose) in which we keep resources in use for as long as possible, extract the maximum value from them whilst in use, then recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of each service life. A mind-set change eliminating the concept of waste is needed to enable the new designs, innovations, business models, reverse logistics, and system changes that are required to unlock the full opportunities of the circular economy.

Key messages from group discussions

Participants were split into two groups to identify examples from their own organisations of existing circular economy business practices, what the future opportunities are, and the challenges in achieving a circular economy.

Three examples of business initiatives were provided:



Solving big, smelly problems

200,000 of poultry litter produced each year in Northern Ireland. Traditionally used as agricultural fertiliser but this is polluting waterways, making compliance with EU water quality standards difficult.

Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) launched a project to drive innovative solutions to generate biogas that in turn will generate renewable electricity. The phosphate - rich liquid digestate can then be applied as a valuable crop nutrient.



Waste as a valuable resource

Before the two organisations merged to form Huhtamaki Foodservice Delta, Delta Packaging and Huhtamaki joined forces to develop an innovative way to minimise waste. Both produced high volumes of containers for a global quick service restaurant chain so developed a shared 'closed loop,' a traceable and cost effective solution.

Huhtamaki took the unavoidable trimmings from the manufacture of the restaurant chain's carton packaging to produce sustainable product using locally sourced, 100% recycled material, completely removing the need to landfill. This also reduced waste kilometres by up to 20,000 per year!



New ways of doing business

The Pay Per Lux concept is a new business model that enables organisations to take advantage of LED lighting and be able to minimise their energy costs, well into the future, without a major capital outlay.

It includes an element of future-proofing, as any replacements during the life of the contract will make use of the latest LED lighting technologies.

Clients pay for energy consumed through a quarterly fee, including service costs and warranty.

What organisations are already doing?

- Waste streams, that organisations previously paid to dispose of, are now sold as a resource
- Food waste segregation
- Manufacturing companies providing service kits to extend the life of their products rather than manufacturing and selling new replacement products; this is an economically beneficial initiative

- Are there opportunities for organisations to influence the media in order to change the consumer culture which is a barrier to the circular economy
- Can participants utilise their own channels to help increase awareness of the circular economy?
- Share examples of best practice innovation to build upon progress

Opportunities for organisations to move towards a circular economy

- Partnership working is already quite well established in Northern Ireland and can be used to achieve collaboration on circular economy initiatives
- It is essential to pursue different business models
- As part of the [Rockefeller Foundation 100 Resilient Cities Network](#), Belfast will need to consider not only climate change resilience, but also how to become sustainable at a transformational level which will have implications for the rest of Northern Ireland

What are the challenges in achieving a circular economy?

- Issues around the physical space needed to segregate waste
- It may be more difficult for certain industries, e.g. service industry, to become circular
- Using Anaerobic Digestion as a method of gaining value from biodegradable waste to create fertiliser poses a significant problem to the environment, due to the pollution that fertilisers can cause
- Innovation can be intimidating, especially in times of economic uncertainty
- Need to be able to demonstrate the business case for investing in new business models

How can the circular economy be integrated into the Survey?

1) Raising awareness

- In the wider Northern Ireland business community outside of Survey participants there is very little understanding of circular economy, the Survey is an opportunity to raise awareness in participants and also through their supply chains
- Service-based and public facing organisations have a role in advocating a circular economy approach
- Circular economy language can be incorporated into the Survey to reinforce these ideas. For example, referring to resource effectiveness instead of efficiency. Can we eliminate use of the word 'waste' and instead talk about by-products?

2) Commitment to the concept

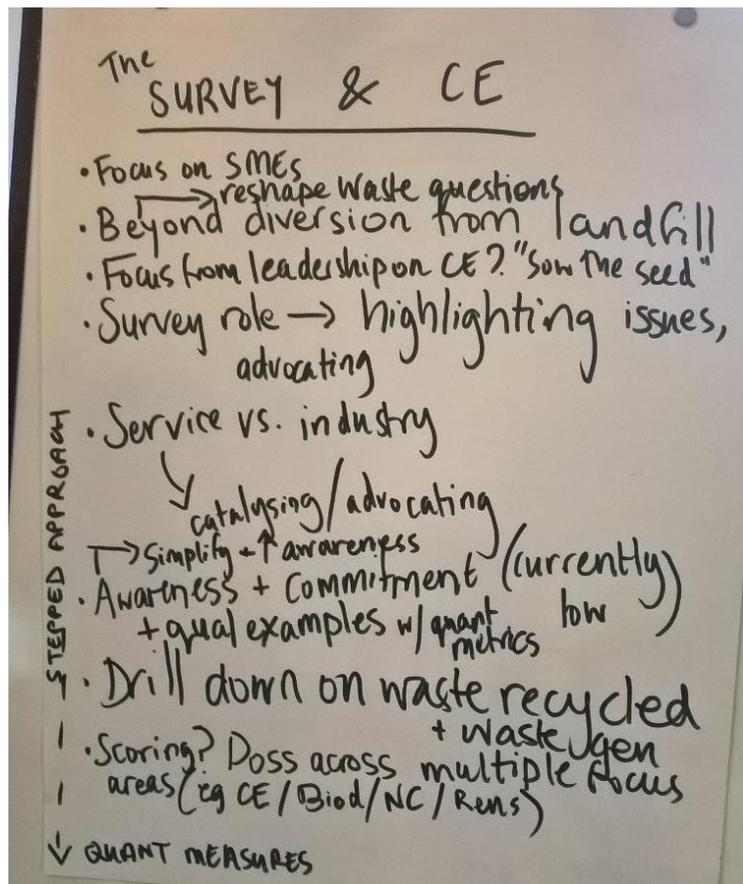
- Delegates voiced concern that a 'tick-box style' question asking if organisations are 'committed to the circular economy' would potentially water down the rigour of the Survey. It was agreed that there is a need for organisations to be able to show demonstrable examples
- There is potential for a specific question around implementing new business models
- The survey shouldn't be too focussed on promoting a 'hard' circular economy approach without giving credit for other ambitions approached such as natural capital accounting

3) Data

- Potential improvements due to implementing circular economy ideas can be estimated, but measuring actual data to show the impacts in terms of waste avoided is difficult or impossible
- At a basic level, the impacts will be reflected in a fall in the waste-to-landfill data already collected
- Potentially an opportunity to introduce more options in the waste questions, around re-use, recovery etc

4) Scoring

There were mixed views on whether circular economy questions should be scored. Even if we cannot score performance questions we would like to be able to collect data to be able to show year-on-year performance improvement going forward.



Next steps

The NI Environmental Benchmarking Survey will undergo a review process in early 2017. These findings will form the basis of this future workshop. There will be ongoing consultation with Survey participants throughout the process, beginning with an online questionnaire based on suggestions made during this workshop. This will be sent to all 2016 Survey participants to gauge receptiveness to the introduction of new questions about the circular economy.

As part of Business in the Community's wider circular economy programme, we are convening a Circular Economy Network for member companies which will be an opportunity to continue some of the conversations which were initiated in this workshop, learn from peers and guest speakers, share ideas, and inform our future work related to the circular economy. We welcome expressions of interest in joining this Network.

For further information, or to get involved in our programme, please contact p.ramsey@bitcni.org.uk