

RELEASE



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WHY IS THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY SO IMPORTANT?

The BPF Pipes Group continues with its second WWT article around the circular economy.

We described what the circular economy is in our previous article in WWT: we defined it in terms of keeping materials in use or re-use for as long as possible and regenerating them into other viable items, thereby reducing or even eliminating waste. We now answer the question of why the circular economy is so important.

Waste in nature does not exist as everything is in effect an input to another process. It is our activities and interference that throw nature's system out of balance and it is therefore vital that we try to address this and put things right for the planet's benefit. Ideally, by keeping materials within the cycle of use for as long as possible and then turning them into something equally useful, we can in effect mirror nature and close the loop.

Why does the circular economy matter?

As the world's population increases, so too does the demand for raw materials. Extracting and using them has a major impact on the environment, as does disposing of the resulting waste. Reducing raw materials has economic as well as environmental benefits, as does keeping materials in circulation for longer. These approaches also have significant benefits for our health and wellbeing as pollution and climate change become the defining challenges of our time.

There are three main drivers for the circular economy: political, social and economic.

Politically, the UK Government has committed to eradicating all avoidable waste by 2050 and all avoidable plastic waste by 2042 (in its 2018 25-year Environment Plan to efficiently use resources and reduce waste), stating that it wants to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than what was inherited. There are also regulatory drivers like the Circular Economy Package Policy Statement of July 2020. See

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/circular-economy-package-policy-statement/circular-economy-package-policy-statement>

As of now there are few specifics applying to construction, utilities and waste, apart from the Construction Leadership Council's recently launched *ConstructZero* programme, an initiative aimed at driving carbon out of all parts of the construction sector, from manufacturing and design to construction and operation of assets. Through cross-industry collective action it is hoped that the construction sector can contribute significantly towards achieving net zero by 2050.

Socially, public attitudes are changing both in the workplace and the home and we are all becoming increasingly aware of the price the planet is paying for our activities. Every day there are reports of companies – many of those in WWT – taking active steps towards reducing waste as part of their corporate social responsibilities. Lobby and environment groups are also having an impact as well as media exposure to the problems of excess waste and its impact on the environment. None of us want to see the damage caused to wildlife and to humans both on land and sea, and there is an increasing recognition that our activities have impacts for the whole planet.

By considering our entire environmental footprint, not just the front end point of sale or subsequent recyclability, but further down the value chain, we have the opportunity to rethink current processes and evolve systems to achieve zero waste. To do this we need to engage people across the full supply chain along with customers to end-users and beyond to adopt a mindset around the causes and solutions of environmental impact. If we truly believe that we want to create an environmentally sustainable economy then we'll all need to play our part equally in achieving it.

Economically, a company operating responsibly with appropriate environment, social and governance (ESG) programmes should have a positive impact on society and the environment. This certainly applies to a growing number of organisations within the utility sector. Many companies have already taken first steps into these areas, establishing their own recycling plants, ensuring their end-of-use products are segregated and wherever possible reused, minimising waste during processing and manufacturing. People vote with their feet and more are actively selecting suppliers who demonstrate active care for the planet. Further down the

line towards manufacturers who supply the water industry, the cost of raw materials continues to rise and so reducing the consumption of these is of significant economic benefit as well.

Ultimately, by working collaboratively and in partnerships, more can be achieved in transitioning to a circular economy. With practical examples, the principle can be explained better and goals such as improved biodiversity, carbon reduction and even wealth distribution can be achieved.

How long is the journey?

Is seeking a circular economy an endless journey? Are there always better ways of making, processing and reusing things? What are the biggest issues facing those embarking on this journey, apart from the pandemic effects? There are many challenges and opportunities ahead, there is no doubt, but by helping to unlock the resource revolution – creating resource security and prosperity for future generations via policy regulation and individual efforts – that journey can be started and then refined. The UK hosts the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021 so the journey is well and truly underway. It would be helpful to see circularity in action through successful examples and we must all do what we can to encourage these. Everyone needs to take more care and concern about what happens to materials and resources beyond the boundary of their immediate operations; the key to moving from a linear mindset to a circular one.

Our next article will focus on how the plastics pipe industry's journey towards a circular economy is progressing, in terms of the four key areas in a product's lifecycle where manufacturers can make positive contributions. These include optimising materials use and minimising environmental impact, optimising product use during installation with offsite efficiencies, maximising the lifespan of systems and closing the loop with recycling at the end of life.