

Circular Economy

2025 Key Insights Report

 REDISCOVERY
CENTRE



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Foreword

This report is designed to support an evidenced-based approach to public engagement and communications for a circular economy. It integrates best practices, targeted market research, socio-demographic analyses and community initiatives to provide key insights and statistical evidence on the specific trends currently driving circular economy behaviour across all areas of Irish life.

This report aims to strengthen capacity for high-quality communications and public engagement to ensure that Ireland is informed, engaged and enabled to participate in, and benefit from, the circular transition.



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01

What we know

SYNTHESIS REPORT

Role of Synthesis Report in developing Insights

A major element of this insights report was the completion of the Synthesis Report, a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing literature on public attitudes and behaviours related to the circular economy and broader environmental issues in Ireland.

The main aim of the synthesis report was to **identify socio-demographic patterns and behavioural trends** that could help to inform the development of effective circular economy communication strategies.

The report focused on **mapping current attitudes, practices, and knowledge levels among various population segments to identify variations in engagement with circular economy principles**, such as reuse and repair, across socio-demographic groups.

The findings of the study are structured into two key areas: The first covers an exploration of behaviours and attitudes directly related to the circular economy. The second provides a broader examination of awareness, knowledge, and values of wider environmental topics, offering transferable insights for circular economy communicators

To support the report, nationally representative market surveys were carried out in 2021, 2023 and 2024.

Through the synthesis of available research, the report contributes to the wider objectives of the National Circular Economy Communications Project. This includes building capacity for excellence in communications and public engagement in support of a just and inclusive transition to a circular economy, where no one is left behind.

Additionally, the findings highlight research gaps and proposes areas for further investigation to strengthen evidence-based circular economy communication in Ireland.



Methodology

The study included a targeted comprehensive review of existing research carried out in an Irish context.

A thematic literature review of 159 studies explored behavioural tendencies, capacities, and awareness of the circular economy.

A subsequent detailed analysis and comparison of 23 Irish-specific studies determined variations across socio-demographic groups such as age, gender, and economic status. Findings extracted from the relevant studies were collated in a single document.

The criteria for inclusion of an individual data point were as follows:

- Relevant to the core themes of the report (e.g., reuse, repair etc.)
- Identified socio-demographic differences with significant variance
- Potential value for circular economy communicators

In addition, an expert stakeholder workshop was held with contributions providing valuable input and validation of emerging insights for the report. Subject matter experts were also engaged to review the report with feedback directly informing the conclusions and recommendations.

Themes Covered

Circular Economy:

- ✓ Renting/Sharing/ Take-back Scheme
- ✓ Repair
- ✓ Waste and Waste Management
- ✓ Reuse
- ✓ Consumption and Reduction

Other Environmental Issues:

- ✓ Engagement
- ✓ Level of Knowledge/ Awareness
- ✓ Motivations/Barriers & Enablers
- ✓ Transport
- ✓ Level of Concern/Worry

SYNTHESIS REPORT

Key demographic variations



Gender

Significant differences exist, especially regarding clothing consumption, repair and reuse behaviours, attitudes to sharing/renting, and degree of environmental concern.



Age

The youngest and oldest cohorts express the greatest environmental concern (U-shaped relationship). Differences are also seen in relation to trusted sources of information and engagement with sharing/renting practices.



Urban vs. Rural

Differences are seen in relation to trusted sources of information, attitudes to climate, and repair behaviours.



Social Grade

People in lower social grades report lower familiarity with the circular economy, and are more likely to cite cost and accessibility as barriers.



Education

People with lower educational attainment are less likely to hear about climate change in the media they consume, and less likely to trust information on climate change coming from NGOs, scientists, politicians, community leaders and educators.

RECOGNITION

Recognition of the circular economy is growing

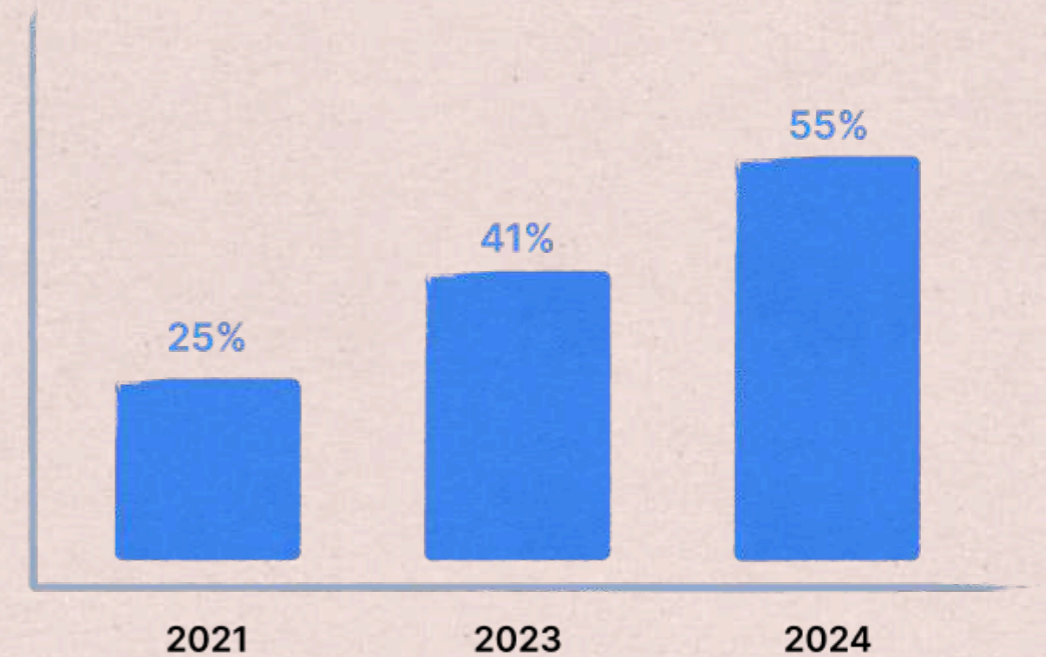
In 2021, when we first investigated awareness levels, just 25% of people in Ireland had heard of the term 'circular economy'. In 2023 this rose to 41%, before reaching 55% in 2024.

Research also shows that the percentage increase in recognition of the term 'circular economy' significantly outperformed other common environmental terms including sustainability, greenhouse gas and biodiversity.



+30%

Increase of population who have heard the term 'circular economy' before, between 2021 and 2024.



RECOGNITION

Comparison of urban and rural communities

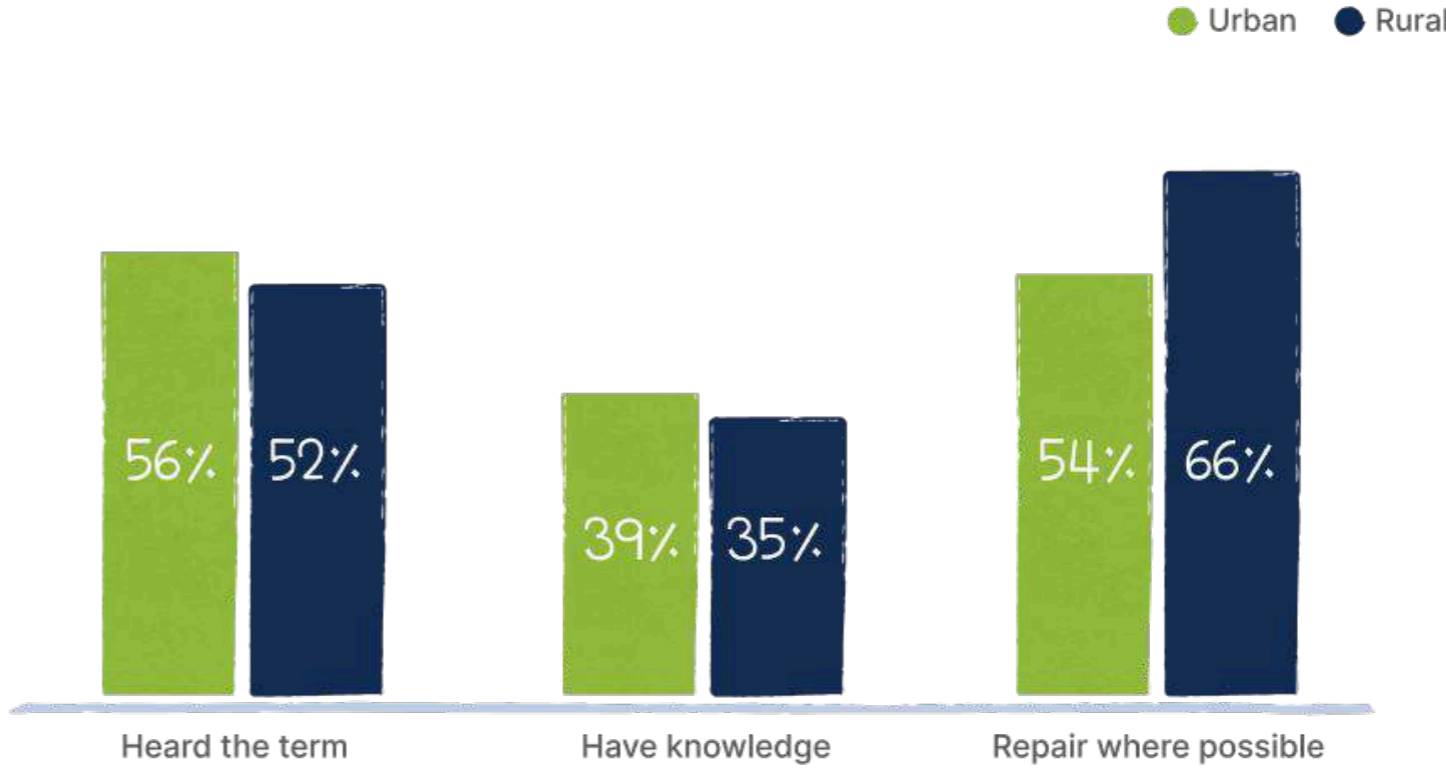
Market research carried out in 2021, 2023 & 2024 show increasing recognition of the term circular economy and in levels of understanding and repair behaviours across both rural and urban populations.

Across the study period urban respondents show slightly higher levels of recognition and understanding of the circular economy than their rural equivalents.

However, the most recent market research in 2024 highlights that circular behaviours, for example those related to repair and lending practices are higher in rural populations.



Comparative market research 2024



KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

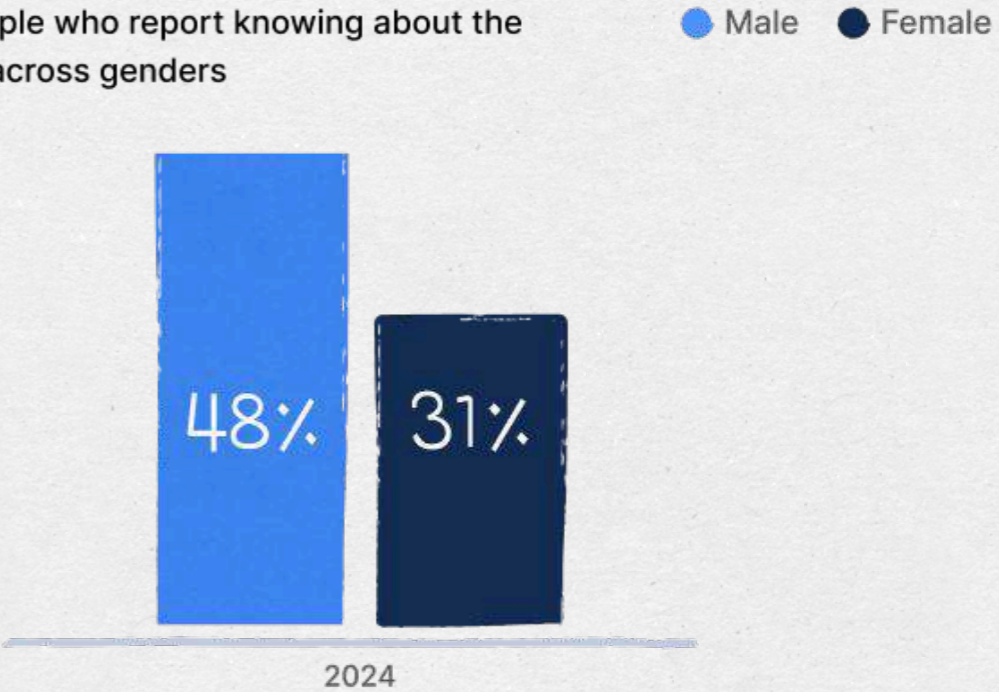
On average more than 60% of the population report to having low levels of understanding of the circular economy

Levels of understanding remain low even when the circular economy is explained as follows: an economy that keeps products in use for as long as possible and avoids waste generation.

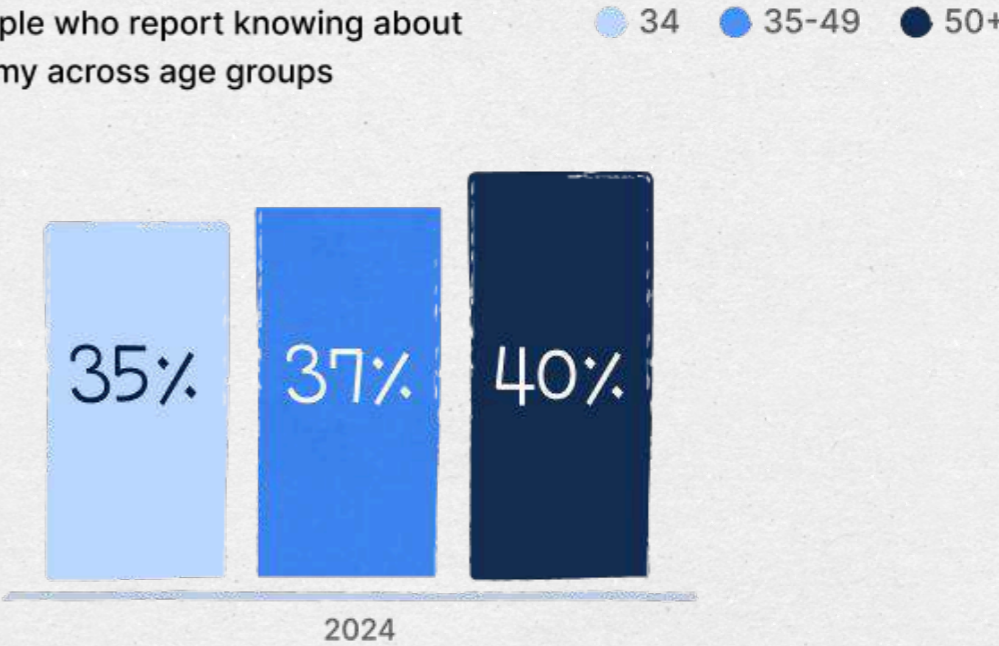
Describing the circular economy in these common terms does not result in a significant increase in the levels of understanding within the general population.

New ways of communicating the circular economy and bringing it to life in a way that is relevant, easily understandable and resonant with the public are needed to effect real change.

Percentage of people who report knowing about the circular economy across genders

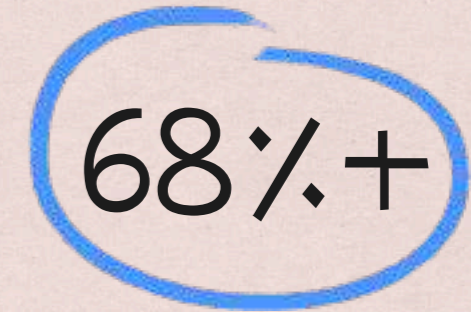
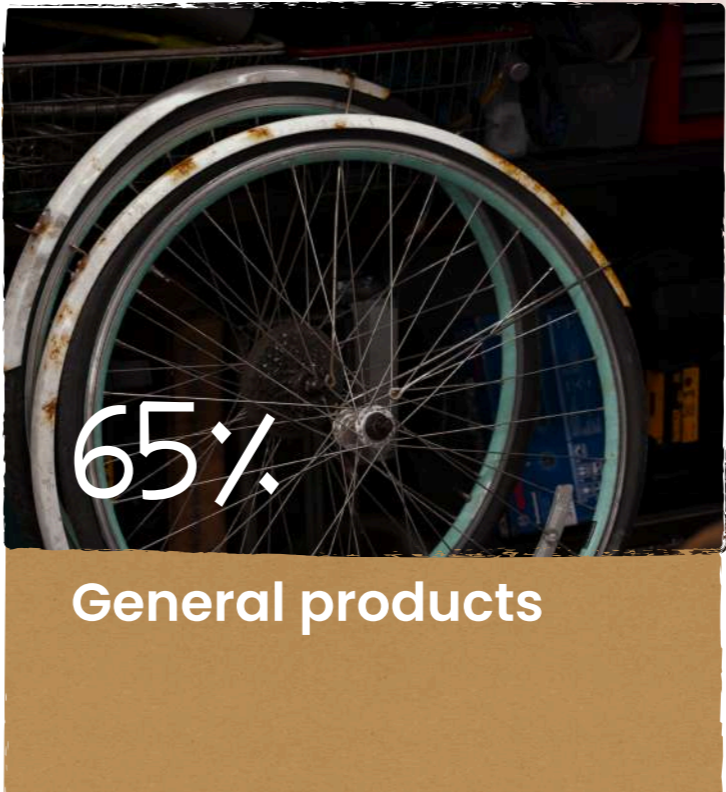


Percentage of people who report knowing about the circular economy across age groups



CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS A PRIORITY

The majority of people in Ireland think the circular economy is a good idea, and most would like to see it applied to three key sectors:



of people in Ireland think that moving to a circular economy should be prioritised by government and businesses.



SYNTHESIS REPORT

Behavioural Patterns & Considerations:

The Intention-Behaviour Gap remains an important consideration, with a diverse range of barriers preventing people from acting on their pro-environmental motivation. Increasing awareness of the circular economy will not automatically increase engagement with circular behaviours.

Preserving trust in communications is vitally important. 'Inoculating' people against greenwashing can inadvertently reduce trust in genuine claims, also.

Baselines should not be interpreted in isolation. For example, people of higher social grades may be more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviour. However, due to their higher levels of consumption, there is greater opportunity to reduce their impact and still end up with a higher footprint overall.

Further work is needed to better understand baseline consumption patterns between socio-demographic cohorts.

02

Community action



WHERE THEY ARE

Connecting circular economy initiatives across the country

Small community and voluntary-based organisations and individuals are uniquely positioned to enable the circular economy in Ireland.

Local leaders are driving circularity within their communities, often through voluntary charities or social enterprises. This presents a significant opportunity to accelerate the circular economy while strengthening community development in rural and urban communities. By partnering with local organisations, public engagement services can build capacity for meaningful citizen engagement.

Working with communities across Ireland, the Rediscovery Centre is mapping locally based circular economy initiatives. The work is not only highlighting tangible circular economy solutions and connecting activities at a local level, but is also providing a thorough understanding of current practice in circular economy communications and public engagement.

Specifically the mapping is identifying:

- What circular activities groups are engaged in
- How they communicate their work
- What they need to improve reach and visibility



WHAT THEY DO

Circular economy communities

The circular economy applies to almost all sectors and connects deeply with social systems. It is focused on designing out waste, keeping materials in use, and regenerating natural systems.

This review highlights a rich and varied landscape of circular economy initiatives across the country, spanning multiple sectors, scales, and approaches, ranging from grassroots community projects to larger organisational and regional efforts.

Most initiatives focus on multiple themes with waste prevention, reuse and repair being most popular.



61% focus on waste reduction



50% focus on reuse



36% focus on repair

COMMUNICATIONS

Understanding of the circular economy in communities

Nearly all of the community organisations working in circular economy activity – e.g., reuse, repair, sharing and waste prevention – have a clear understanding of the circular economy and the vital role they play within it.

However, more than 60% don't use the term 'circular economy' as they believe that it's not well understood and doesn't resonate well with their community.



90%

of initiatives have an understanding of the term 'circular economy'

61%

of initiatives do not use the term in their communications

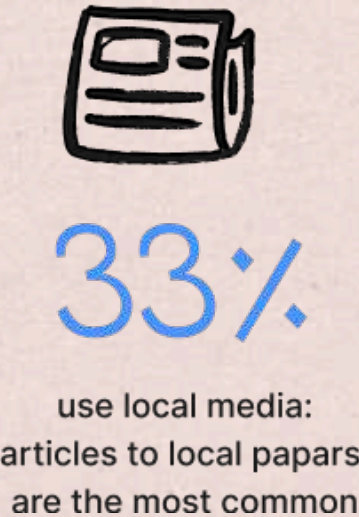
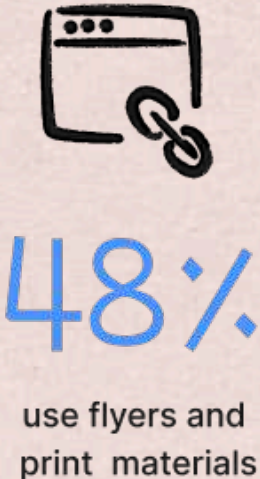
CHALLENGES

Needs analysis

The majority of community-based circular initiatives do not have dedicated resources (staff or budget) for communications or public engagement.

Less than 15% employ a communications professional.

The majority are calling for additional digital and communication resources, skills and insights to increase public engagement and awareness.



03

Campaigns



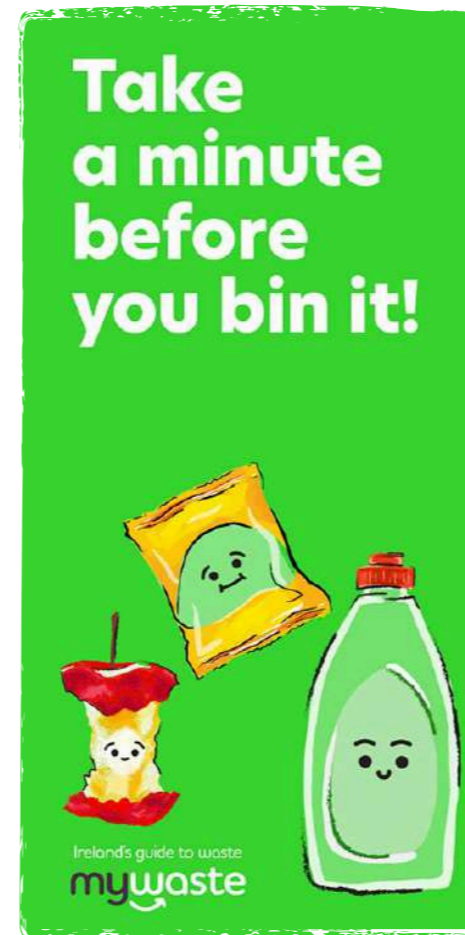
CAMPAIGNS

Circular economy campaigns audit

To inform this insights report an audit of identified successful circular economy communications in Ireland and internationally was conducted.

One-to-one interviews were held with campaign managers to understand the scope and objectives of campaigns, time-frames, channels used, and the PR strategies. Campaign materials, including visuals, messaging and content were reviewed and performance across various platforms examined to determine effectiveness.

The primary objective of the audit was to identify commonalities and shared approaches to successful campaign management, and provide insight into best practice.



KEY INSIGHTS & TRENDS

There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of campaigns that integrate behavioural insights

There is a growing body of evidence showcasing the effectiveness of campaigns that integrate behavioural insights at their core, both in Ireland and internationally.

Some examples such as WRAP's 'Love Food Hate Waste' and MYWASTE.ie's 'Take a Minute Before You Bin It' campaigns illustrate how psychological principles can be strategically applied to influence public behaviour and drive meaningful action. These campaigns demonstrate that, when messaging aligns with how people think and make decisions, it significantly enhances impact and engagement.

Additional analysis indicates that there is a clear shift towards youth-centric and digital-first approaches, particularly within sustainability-focused efforts such as those targeting textile consumption and waste. This is notable in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications' 'Reverse The Trend' campaign.

This approach reflects an understanding that younger demographics are both highly engaged on digital platforms and play a pivotal role in shaping future sustainable behaviours.

Observations

The audit also highlights an evolving trend in campaign execution models, where organisations are increasingly investing in the development of in-house creative teams. This has been reported to allow for greater agility, brand consistency, and cost-effectiveness, while still leveraging the expertise and scale of external media-buying agencies to maximise reach and campaign performance.

CAMPAIGNS

Best practice trends



Simplified Messaging:

“Repair, Reuse, Recycle” and other straightforward slogans help increase public understanding.



Pre-Campaign Testing & Post-Campaign Analysis:

Ensuring messaging resonates through testing before use and verifying impact post campaign



PR & Partnerships:

Building a narrative through leveraging trusted voices (e.g., scientists, celebrity chefs, influencers) and coherent storytelling greatly enhances credibility and engagement for some audiences.



CAMPAIN

Food Waste Focus

Food Waste presents a great entry topic to begin a conversation about the circular economy. Relatable and universal to all audiences, the entry point has been utilised by many circular economy campaigns.

The 'Stop Food Waste' (EPA) campaign utilises audience segmentation and behavioural insights to go beyond awareness raising to providing everyday hacks, informing new and sustained daily habits.

Additional motivations of specific audiences were explored in the Zero-Waste Scotland's campaign to cancel food waste, by highlighting the economic benefits of longer-life products.

CAMPAIGNS KEY INSIGHTS

Top tips for circular economy campaigns

1

Prioritise communications around behaviours which currently face the fewest systemic or infrastructural barriers. I.e., Ensure people can do what you are asking.

2

Provide people with a vision of a circular future to move towards, highlighting the benefits to them personally.

3

Where communications contain uncomfortable messaging or create worry, they also need to provide actionable solutions and something to aim for.

4

Scaling via partner toolkits can ensure consistency and amplification of campaign messaging where wide-scale impact is needed.

5

While socio-demographics are useful for targeted communications, understanding worldviews and life stages are also needed to mobilise action. Pre-testing and post-campaign evaluation is vital.

6

The potential to indirectly encourage prevention through clever messaging should be explored - examples include reframing 'buying less' as 'rewearing'

04

Behavioural trends



BEHAVIOUR

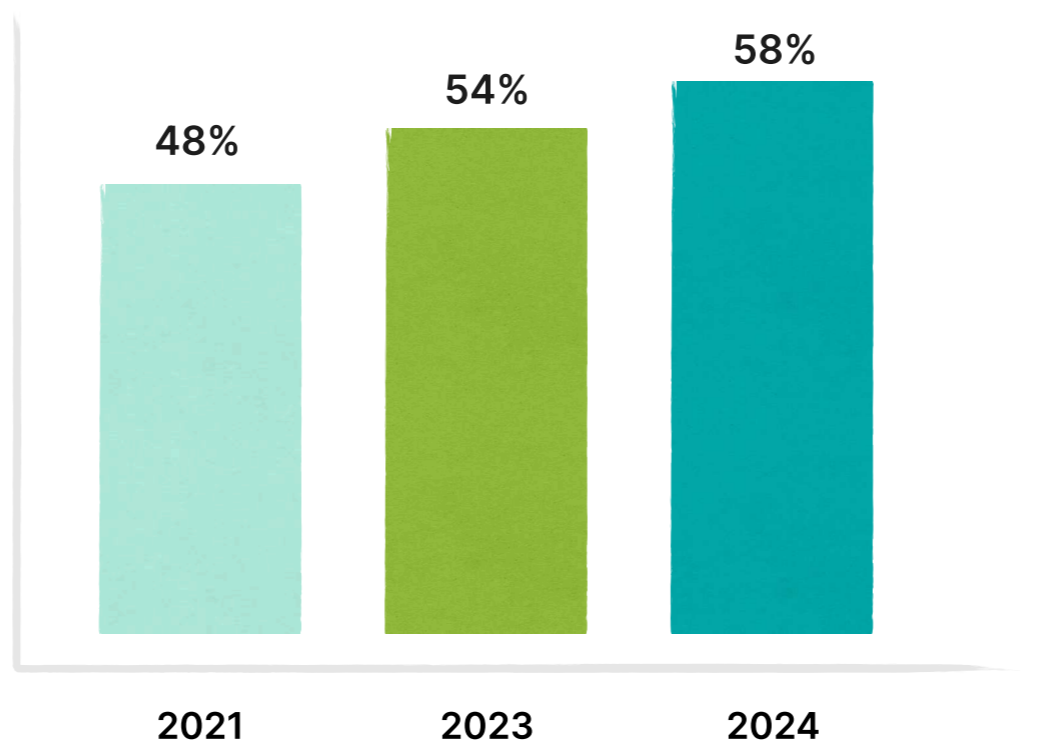
Circular economy behaviour is increasing

Despite relatively low levels of understanding and knowledge of the term, circular economy behaviour is increasing.

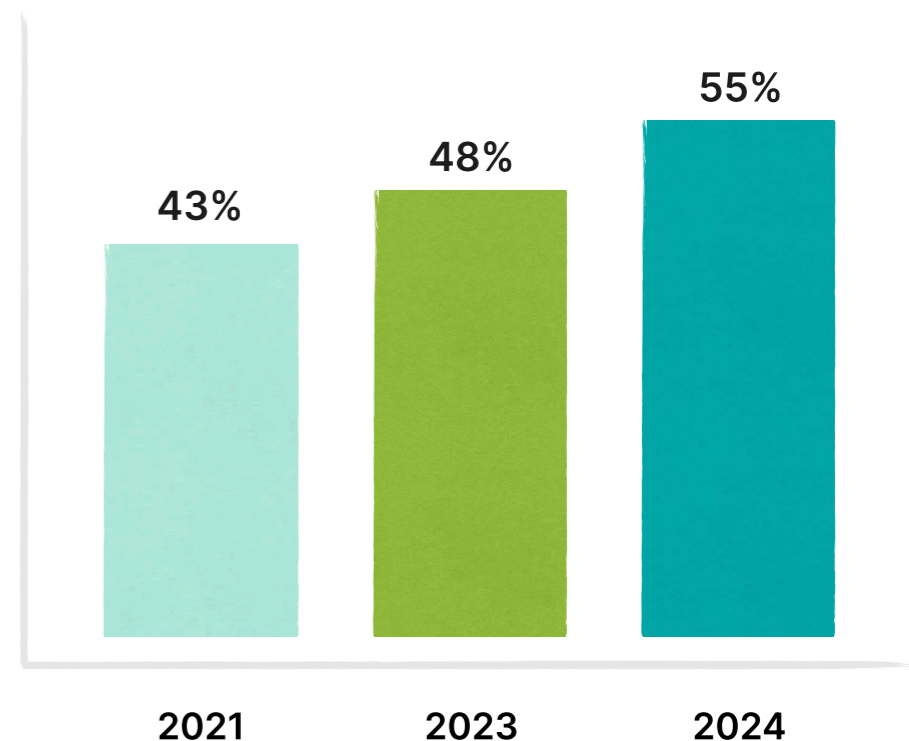
In particular, market research shows a steady increase in the number of people who report the repairing of items, where they have the skills.



Increase in repair skills available



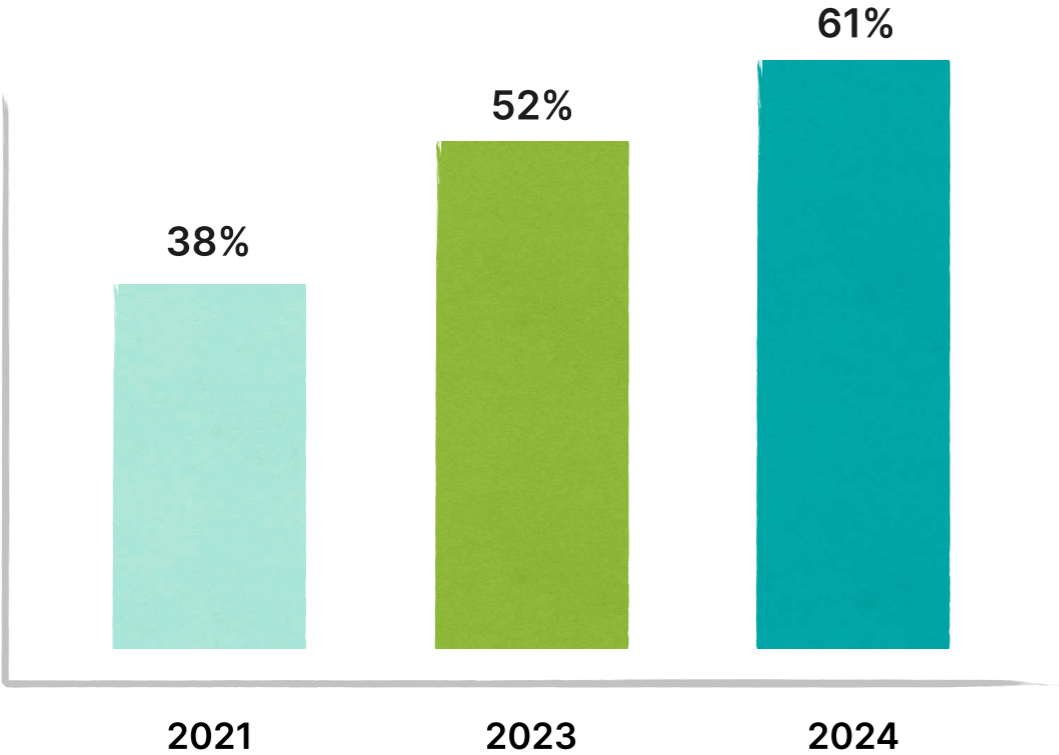
Increase in people lending their items to friends or neighbours



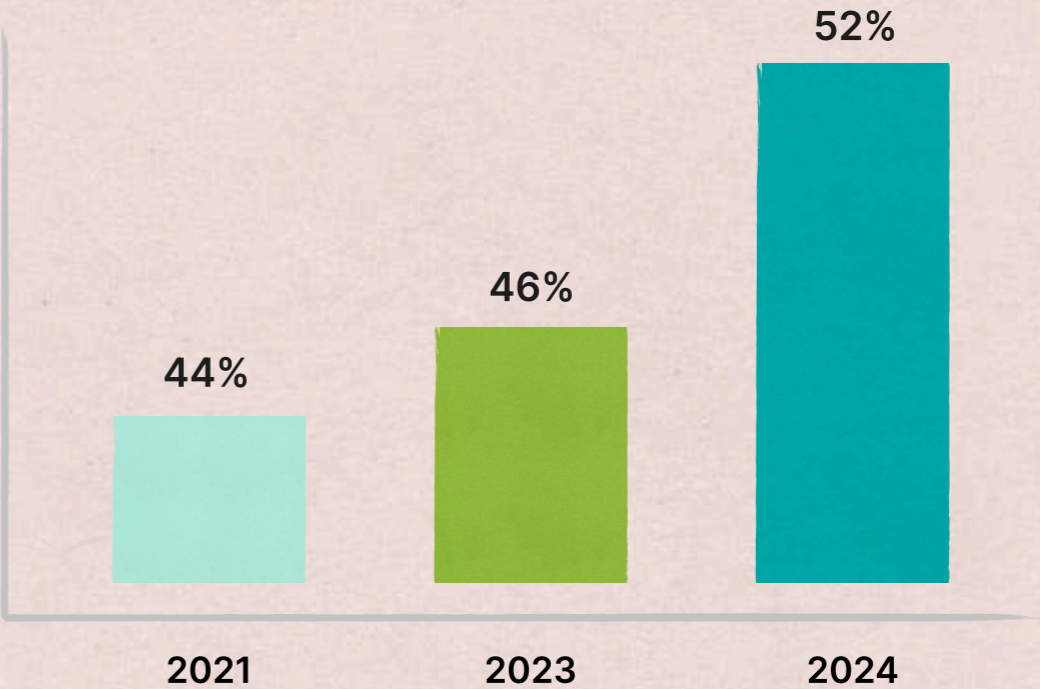
RECOGNITION

Circular economy behaviour is increasing

Percentage of population who make effort to buy paper products made from recycled paper



Increase in population choosing to buy products in reusable or recyclable containers (where applicable)





Young adults are more inclined to engage in sharing/renting models

(EPA, 2021c, 2022a, 2022c 2023b, IKC3 et al., 2023).

Cost and accessibility still remain as major barriers for people in lower social grades when it comes to engaging with circular economy behaviours

(EPA, 2022b).

Younger people are more likely than older people to trust circular economy information coming from influencers, celebrities, and media personalities

(Rediscovery Centre, 2024)



People in higher social grades are more likely to report wasting food and frequently purchasing textiles

(EPA, 2022a, 2024c, Fadiran and Onakuse, 2022) and EPA, 2021c).

Research gaps & recommendations

- **Cultural acceptability:** More research is needed to understand the cultural acceptability of desirable circular economy behaviours, including repair, reuse and renting.
- **Psychological factors:** Factors such as conscientiousness and openness may prove to be more predictive of pro-environmental behaviours than socio-demographic variables. Further research insights work might involve comparatively testing communications which target socio-demographic variables on the one hand, and psychological variables on the other.
- **Experimental tests:** This report highlights the need for further research to experimentally test interventions within the Irish context which have the potential to increase engagement with circular behaviours, or to reduce the gap between attitudes and circular behaviours.
- **Product maintenance:** More research is needed to understand product maintenance behaviours, which reduce consumption by prolonging product lifespans. Such behaviours remain understudied in the Irish context.
- **Observed data:** There is a need for more direct observations of behaviour to corroborate self-reported data and reduce reporting biases. Such data is more commonly available in other countries.
- **Increased use of longitudinal studies:** In the context of Irish environmental behavioural research, repeated surveys often ask the same questions of different participants. Studies which track how the attitudes and behaviours of individual participants over time may be useful for understanding trends and the impact of specific behaviour change interventions.
- **Isolation of variables:** Double-barrelled and triple-barrelled questions should be avoided at all times in survey designs, to remove ambiguity from responses.
- **Enhanced survey design:** There is an opportunity to enhance survey design in such a way that self-reporting biases such as recall bias and socially desirable reporting could be minimised or eliminated. For example, instead of asking participants to report how frequently they engage in repair or reuse behaviours, surveys could instead ask participants to report specific instances of actions taken during a specified period.



The background is a solid teal color. A circular arrangement of approximately 15 colorful brushstrokes, resembling confetti or paint splatters, is positioned around the central text. The colors of the brushstrokes include white, yellow, pink, brown, and light blue. The text "Moving forward" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, sans-serif font.

Moving forward

Acknowledgements and the road ahead

The Rediscovery Centre recognises the vital role of data and insights in advancing effective circular economy communications.

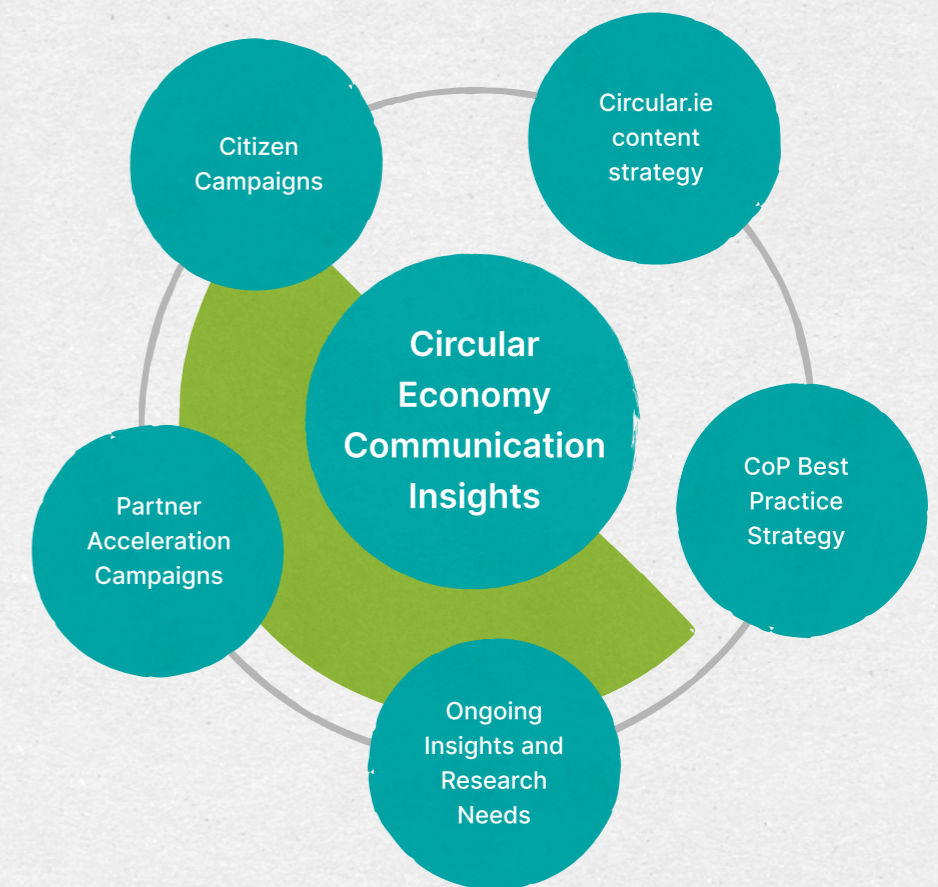
The annual Circular Economy Insights Series is designed to help shape future messaging strategies and inform the development of targeted supports for our partners and communities of practice across Ireland. The series also serves to highlight research gaps, and will guide future experimentation and further work in this area.

The Rediscovery Center would like to acknowledge the support and guidance from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, and everyone who contributed to this body of work in any way.

We would particularly like to thank those who reviewed the Synthesis Report, took part in the campaign or community of practice audits, or participated in one-to-one-briefings, community events or stakeholder workshops.



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Role of insight outputs in developing excellence in CE communications



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