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Youth Perspectives on the EU Circular Economy Act

**A Youth Assessment of Ambition, Gaps
and Implementation Conditions**



ABOUT THIS PAPER

This position paper was produced by Academics for Circular Economy (ACE) in co-creation with Generation Climate Europe (GCE) and youth stakeholders across Europe. It is the outcome of a structured process spanning consultation design, a formal Youth Check event held on 22 April 2026, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and iterative expert review.

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This paper also draws on the inputs of 27 youth participants who contributed anonymously during and after the Youth Check.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the time this position paper was drafted, no legislative text for the EU Circular Economy Act had been published. The available official framing from the European Commission presents the Act as a 2026 proposal to create a Single Market for secondary raw materials, raise the supply and demand of high-quality recycled materials, and help double the EU circularity rate to 24% by 2030. That framing is important, but it is narrower than the political and ethical concerns raised by young people. The official summary of the 2026 youth session of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform shows that youth participants asked not only for better recycling markets, but also for affordability, transparency, sufficiency, SME access, public-health safeguards, skills, communication, and fairness beyond major cities.

The central conclusion of this paper is that the Act will fall short if it remains primarily an intervention in waste management and secondary material markets. Young people are calling for a broader approach based on sufficiency and absolute reductions in resource use, safe material cycles, fair governance of strategic resources, better economic incentives, stronger skills and regional capacity, and a transition that is affordable, inclusive and accountable. Evidence from the EEA, EPRS and JRC supports this wider approach. Recycling alone cannot deliver a circular economy without lower material demand, durable product design, reuse, effective collection systems and strong public governance. The paper therefore links each identified gap to a practical pathway for implementation.

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APPROACH

This position paper synthesises youth perspectives on the EU Circular Economy Act through a consultation survey of 57 responses across Europe, a youth check at the ECESP Annual Conference 2026 and additional qualitative stakeholder input. Based on the European Commission's consultation framework and adapted with Commission representatives and youth stakeholders, the approach considered differences in age, occupational status and familiarity with circular economy concepts. Findings were analysed through a systems lens focused on markets, incentives, infrastructure and governance. Although the sample is not statistically representative, it offers directional insight into the priorities and implementation concerns of an engaged youth constituency.

The paper assesses the emerging policy architecture rather than a final legislative text. It draws on official Commission communications, the Critical Raw Materials Act, recent EEA, JRC and EPRS assessments, and selected NGO and think-tank analysis. As the final proposal was not public at the time of writing, the paper evaluates the Act's ambition, coherence and implementability rather than specific legislative provisions.

HOW TO READ THIS PAPER

This paper is organised around two connected questions. "Youth Priorities: What the Act Still Needs" identifies what young people consider missing or insufficiently addressed in the current framing of the Circular Economy Act. "From Policy to Practice: What Effective Implementation Needs" explains how these priorities could be addressed through the Act and its implementation. Each youth priority should therefore be read together with its corresponding implementation pathway.

YOUTH PRIORITIES: WHAT THE ACT STILL NEEDS

Youth participants did not approach the EU Circular Economy Act as a purely technical policy exercise, but through questions of fairness, sufficiency and long-term accountability. The six priorities that follow begin with the overarching objective of reducing absolute resource use, before addressing the economic, governance and social conditions needed to deliver a just circular transition. Sufficiency is presented first because it emerged as the central cross-cutting message from the youth consultation.

SUFFICIENCY AS A MISSING PILLAR

Sufficiency emerged as the central cross-cutting message from youth participants. The Commission's summary of the ECESP session reflects their view that circularity cannot be separated from sufficiency, and that reducing material demand is as important as improving recycling and reuse. This is supported by EEA evidence that consumption must fall from unsustainable levels and by research showing that sufficiency remains underrepresented in mainstream circular-economy policy. Without an explicit focus on prevention and absolute resource reduction, efficiency gains may be cancelled out by rebound effects: products become more circular, while overall material use continues to grow. The Act should therefore establish a material-footprint reduction pathway and prioritise prevention, durability, repair and reuse ahead of recycling.

Youth priority: Make sufficiency and absolute resource reduction core objectives of the Circular Economy Act.

TOXIC-FREE CIRCULARITY

Toxic-free circularity remains underdeveloped in the emerging framing of the Act. Keeping products and materials in use for longer is not sustainable if hazardous substances are repeatedly recirculated through repaired goods, recycled materials and new production. This can expose consumers, repairers and recycling workers to health risks and weaken trust in secondary materials. The Act should address both legacy substances already present in material streams and the continued use of substances of concern in new products. Better chemical traceability, safer product design and the gradual substitution of hazardous substances are needed to ensure that reuse and recycling support, rather than undermine, public health. Mandating clear information on chemical content throughout the product lifecycle would also help manufacturers, repairers and recyclers determine which materials can be safely reused, separated or recycled, while preventing contaminated streams from entering new products.

Youth priority: Ensure that materials circulate safely while substances of concern are progressively removed from circular value chains.

STRATEGIC RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

The emerging Circular Economy Act places strong emphasis on improving trade in waste and secondary materials, but gives less attention to who controls strategic material flows and who can access them. Without clear rules on transparency, allocation and market concentration, valuable secondary feedstocks may be captured by dominant actors while SMEs, municipalities and local repair, reuse and remanufacturing systems remain under-supplied. Greater coherence is also needed between the Circular Economy Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act. Although primary materials will remain necessary in some fast-growing sectors, expanding primary supply without equally strong measures for demand reduction, substitution and secondary-material use risks locking Europe into continued dependence on virgin resources. The Act should also prevent valuable materials and environmental burdens from being shifted outside the EU through poorly governed exports.

Youth priority: Govern strategic secondary materials transparently and align the Circular Economy Act with related EU resource, industrial and environmental policies.

INSUFFICIENT ECONOMIC MECHANISMS

Evidence points to a persistent gap between circular-economy ambition and investable reality. The EEA estimates annual financing needs of around EUR 55 billion, while EIB lending to circular projects totalled EUR 3.8 billion between 2019 and 2023. EPRS also identifies the price gap between virgin and recycled materials as a major structural barrier, while dedicated EU funding remains limited. Without stronger price correction and investment support, the Act risks benefiting mainly well-capitalised first movers while leaving wider circular markets underdeveloped. A dedicated Circular Transition Facility using blended finance and guarantees, fiscal reforms that reflect the external costs of virgin materials or reduce taxes on repair and remanufacturing, stable funding for repair and reuse, and recycled-content and circular-procurement requirements that create reliable demand have been identified as measures, but these should include affordability safeguards to avoid transferring additional costs to consumers.

Youth priority: Correct market conditions that favour virgin materials and create stable support for repair, reuse, remanufacturing and secondary-material markets.

SKILLS, AWARENESS AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Youth participants explicitly asked for better communication and capacity-building so that people can make circular choices, and for support that reaches beyond major cities. This is not peripheral. EEA work on a just circular transition shows that circular jobs have grown to around 4.4 million in the EU, but access, quality and skills pipelines remain uneven, while only a minority of EU skills initiatives are specifically circular. If ignored, the Act may generate compliance burdens without social capability to deliver it. Policy options are: sector-specific circular skills partnerships, which can align training with demand but take time to mature; regional circular competence hubs linking schools, repair networks and firms, which build local ecosystems but need sustained funding; and mandatory national awareness and outreach plans attached to implementation, which support legitimacy but can become superficial if not monitored.

Youth priority: Build the skills, knowledge and regional capacity needed to make circular options accessible across Europe.

EQUITY AND INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

Youth concerns about affordability, territorial inclusion and trustworthy markets should be treated as structural, not rhetorical. The EEA's just-transition work is clear that circular policies do not automatically produce fair outcomes: some circular jobs are low-paid or insecure, and benefits can accumulate to already advantaged groups. If the Act is designed only as a competitiveness file, it may deepen inequalities between urban and rural areas, between high- and low-income consumers, and between formal and informal circular actors. Policy options are: affordability and distributional tests for major circular requirements, which improve fairness but complicate ex ante assessment; dedicated support for social-economy, repair and reuse organisations, which can spread benefits but requires administrative openness to non-traditional actors; and equity-linked conditionalities in funding windows, which improve accountability but may reduce uptake if badly designed.

Youth priority: Ensure that circular policies are affordable, inclusive and fair to workers, communities and present and future generations.

YOUTH PRIORITIES AT A GLANCE

The youth priorities identified in this paper reflect a broader understanding of circularity: one that reduces resource use, protects health, distributes benefits fairly and builds the systems needed for implementation.

1. **Sufficiency:** Reduce absolute material use and prioritise prevention, durability, repair and reuse.
2. **Toxic-free circularity:** Prevent hazardous substances from circulating through products and secondary materials.
3. **Strategic resource governance:** Ensure transparent and fair access to secondary materials and greater coherence across EU policies.
4. **Economic mechanisms:** Correct market conditions that favour virgin materials and linear business models.
5. **Skills and capacity:** Build the knowledge, infrastructure and regional capabilities needed to deliver circularity.
6. **Equity and intergenerational justice:** Ensure that circular policies are affordable, inclusive and fair to present and future generations.

The next section turns these priorities from statements of what is missing into proposals for how they can be addressed in practice.

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: WHAT EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION NEEDS

Youth representatives who contributed to this paper did not stop at identifying what is missing. They brought concrete proposals for how to address it — drawing on their expertise, lived experience and understanding of the systems that will shape their futures.

EMBEDDING SUFFICIENCY RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

Effective implementation requires the Act to move from circularity-as-efficiency to circularity-with-limits. In the next three years, the Commission should add material-footprint and product-lifetime indicators to the CEA monitoring architecture and require that implementing measures demonstrate how they reduce absolute demand, not just improve recycling. In three to seven years, the test of success is a downward material-footprint trend and longer product lifetimes in key sectors. Indicators should include material footprint per capita, repair volumes, reuse rates and average product lifetime.

The Act needs a governance spine that binds together the CEA, the CRMA, ESPR implementation, WEEE reform and waste-shipment reforms. In the next one to three years, the Commission should require Member State implementation plans and publish an annual cross-file progress report. In three to seven years, a scheduled review should assess whether the Act has reduced fragmentation, increased secondary uptake and improved resource security. Indicators should include compliance rates, spending absorption, circularity-rate progress, and the share of CRM demand met by secondary sources.

SAFE MATERIAL CYCLES

Implementation must prevent substances of concern from circulating repeatedly. In the next one to three years, the Commission should improve chemical information, link product data to safe repair and recycling, set safety criteria for recycled content, and support substitution and the safe separation of contaminated materials. In three to seven years, success should mean fewer hazardous substances, stronger traceability and better protection for consumers and workers. Indicators should cover access to chemical information, contamination rates, substitution progress and worker safety.

MARKET CORRECTION

The core implementation task is to make secondary materials commercially normal rather than politically exceptional. In the next one to three years, the Commission should identify priority sectors, set early recycled-content floors where value-chain readiness exists, and publish a scoreboard tracking the virgin-to-secondary price differential. In three to seven years, success should mean visibly narrowed price gaps, stable offtake agreements and a higher share of secondary material in priority sectors. Indicators should include recycled-content uptake, bankable offtake volumes, and cross-border trade in priority secondary materials.

SKILLS AND CAPACITY

Effective implementation depends on both functioning systems and people equipped to operate them. In the next one to three years, the Commission should harmonise standards for priority material streams, improve collection and digital traceability, and support regional training in repair, reuse, remanufacturing, circular design and advanced sorting. In three to seven years, success should mean interoperable standards, lower transaction costs, recognised circular occupations and wider access to quality jobs and services. Indicators should include collection and contamination rates, training completions, vacancy and wage trends, and participation by young people and disadvantaged groups.

SOCIAL EQUITY

Effective implementation must make circular options affordable and accessible while keeping young people involved in decision-making. In the next one to three years, affordability and territorial-equity screening with targeted support for community repair, social enterprises and underserved regions should inform all measures. An ongoing youth-participation mechanism should be developed. In three to seven years, success should mean lower barriers to repair and reuse, wider regional access, better-quality circular jobs and routine youth co-governance. Indicators should include repair affordability, access to circular services, job quality, youth participation and uptake of youth recommendations.

The Youth Check should not end when the consultation ends. In the next one to three years, the Commission should publish a formal response showing which youth asks were accepted, rejected or deferred, and create a permanent youth observatory linked to implementation. In three to seven years, success should mean routine youth co-governance rather than ad hoc consultation. Indicators should include youth participation rates, uptake of youth recommendations, funded youth pilots and public reporting on follow-up actions.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

This section translates the six youth priorities into concrete actions for the Circular Economy Act and its implementation. Each action responds directly to a gap identified in “Youth Priorities: What the Act Still Needs” and builds on the implementation pathways set out in “From Policy to Practice: What Effective Implementation Needs”.

Priority action	Mechanism	Equity and health safeguard
Resource-reduction pathway	Set an EU material-footprint pathway alongside prevention, durability, repair and reuse measures.	Pair measures with affordability support and accessible repair services.
Safe material cycles	Improve chemical traceability, set safety criteria for recycled content and support hazardous-substance substitution.	Protect consumers, workers and communities from exposure.
Strategic resource governance	Use joint CEA-CRMA material balance sheets, transparent feedstock rules and circularity conditions.	Protect SME, municipal and regional access to valuable materials.
Circular market correction	Combine virgin-material price correction, recycled-content demand, EPR support and transition finance.	Direct support towards affordable repair, reuse and social-economy actors.
Regional systems and skills	Harmonise standards and data while investing in collection, repair infrastructure and circular training.	Extend services and quality jobs to rural and underserved regions.
Just transition and youth accountability	Apply affordability and territorial screens and establish permanent Youth Check follow-up.	Monitor distributional effects and the uptake of youth recommendations.

A credible Circular Economy Act must go beyond creating markets for secondary materials. It must reduce absolute resource use, ensure materials circulate safely, correct economic distortions, govern strategic resources fairly, build skills and regional capacity, and embed justice and youth accountability throughout implementation.

A YOUTH AGENDA FOR CIRCULAR EUROPE



REDUCE RESOURCE USE SAFELY

- Make sufficiency and absolute material reduction core objectives of the Act.
- Prioritise prevention, durability, repair and reuse.
- Prevent hazardous substances from circulating through products and materials.

MAKE CIRCULAR MARKETS FAIR

- Correct price distortions that favour virgin materials.
- Create stable demand and finance for repair, reuse and secondary materials.
- Govern strategic secondary resources transparently and align the CEA with the CRMA.

BUILD CAPACITY ACROSS EUROPE

- Invest in collection, traceability, repair and reuse infrastructure.
- Build circular skills and support quality jobs.
- Ensure circular services reach rural and underserved regions.

ENABLE ACCOUNTABLE TRANSITION

- Apply affordability, territorial-equity and health safeguards.
- Make youth participation a permanent part of implementation.
- Track and publicly report how youth recommendations are addressed.

ENDNOTES & REFERENCES

1. Cite as: Academics for Circular Economy (ACE) & Generation Climate Europe (GCE). (2026). Youth Perspectives on the EU Circular Economy Act, Brussels.
2. This paper draws on a youth consultation survey, a youth dialogue at the ECESP Annual Conference 2026, and a formal Youth Check event on 22 April 2026. Quantitative data was analysed by Amanda Gómez de San José.
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**ACADEMICS FOR
CIRCULAR ECONOMY**

Academics for Circular Economy is an international network of early-career researchers dedicated to advancing the circular economy through interdisciplinary academic research and collaboration by positioning science at the intersection of society, justice and systemic change to ensure a just transition grounded in evidence and shaped by diverse voices.



**Generation
Climate
Europe**

Generation Climate Europe is the largest coalition of youth-led networks in Europe on climate and environmental issues, uniting 7 member organisations across 46 countries to advocate for a just and green transition in the European Union guided by principles of democratic participation, intersectionality and human rights.