



# SoCircular Summit



## Outcomes Report

# SoCircular Summit – Outcomes Report

## Report Information:

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## 1 Foreword

SoCircular Summit took place as part of the overall and first of its kind event, SoCircular. The event was about celebrating, enhancing and promoting the social economy and circular economy. The summit element was structured to consider the social and circular economies, associated trends, policies and ecosystem supports and also very importantly how the social and circular economies can respond to city challenges and opportunities in innovative, sustainable and inclusive ways. Hosted as part of the Economic Development and Enterprise SPC-led Dublin City Summit Series, SoCircular Summit featured 23 speakers who kindly shared a multitude of insights among four panel discussions and four fireside chats.

This report provides a compilation of those insights, along with an extensive account of the summit. It has been produced to share knowledge, inspiration and vision in order to ultimately encourage greater collaboration, awareness and development regarding our city and region. I wish to thank the Economic Development Office in Dublin City Council for organising SoCircular and producing this outcomes report which will benefit many interested parties and assist future policy formulation. Thank you as well to the representatives for sharing their valuable contributions. Finally, I wish to thank in advance all those stakeholders who will work collaboratively on account of the insights and ideas featured in this report and towards supporting a SoCircular Dublin going forward, a Dublin in which the social and circular economies thrive and are further supported to bring about greater impact to our society, economy and environment.

**Caroline Conroy, Lord Mayor of Dublin**

## 2 Executive Summary

SoCircular Summit was hosted in the Round Room at the Mansion House, Dublin as part of the overall SoCircular event on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 2022. The summit represented the 2022 iteration of the annual Dublin City Summit Series, an initiative of the Economic Development and Enterprise Strategic Policy Committee of Dublin City Council. It was led by Dublin City Council and LEO Dublin City in collaboration with the Lord Mayor of Dublin Caroline Conroy, supported by key stakeholders and hosted in alignment with various international, national and regional policies, initiatives and strategies. The aims of the summit were to share knowledge and perspectives, obtain insights and ideas, and to highlight opportunities for collaboration and development, in order to inform policymakers, stakeholders and interested parties regarding future policy formulation and strategies relevant to social and circular economy development.

The summit was structured on four interlinked themes, which although not exhaustive, represent key elements regarding social economy and circular economy development. Each theme was the focus of a panel discussion. Panellists were asked to contribute from their perspective regarding their current context, insights, ideas and examples, and recommendations on improving the panel discussion topic. The four themes and panel discussions were:

<input type="radio"/> Ecosystem Supports	<input type="radio"/> Finance, Investing and Procurement
<input type="radio"/> Dublin Challenges and Opportunities	<input type="radio"/> Education, Employment and Skills

The event and summit commenced with a welcome address by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, followed by a series of panel discussions and fireside chats. During the summit, key stakeholders shared insights, ideas and examples regarding the need, challenges and opportunities of developing the social and circular economy in Dublin and further afield. This outcomes report provides an account of the insights shared by contributors along with an extensive overview of the summit. It will be disseminated to inform national government, policymakers, stakeholders and other interested parties.

### 2.1 Summary of Key Insights

#### Welcome Address - Lord Mayor of Dublin Caroline Conroy

In post-pandemic Dublin, the population has developed a greater interest in work-life balance, cycling, walking, an appreciation of wildlife, and a desire to be closer to nature and to support local businesses. Dublin City Council wishes to maintain and progress these new approaches to how we live and work. Its plans prioritise the development of the green and circular economy and greater digitalisation for businesses and low carbon economy commitments.

SoCircular promotes the importance of sustainability in delivering the necessary infrastructure and services for the city to thrive and how the social and circular economy can help address challenges in making Dublin more sustainable, future-proofed and vibrant. This includes providing solutions to climate change, developing sustainable approaches in the supply chain, supporting marginalised people and helping Dublin and Ireland to become a more sustainable, inclusive and innovative place. Small changes by many can deliver real improvements in our cities and towns, with sustainability and inclusivity at the core. Innovation, collaboration and collective engagement are at the centre of the local and regional plans that aim to equip us to overcome future challenges.

○ Fireside Chat 1 - Ossian Smyth TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Procurement, eGovernment and Circular Economy

We need to address the idea that the way to measure society's prosperity is by how much and how fast we consume finite resources. With fragile global supply chains and difficulties getting staff, people are looking into where they can get things locally and seeking products that are upcycled or remanufactured. People are more positive about the circular economy than expected – there's widespread public backing and broad party support for the passing of the Circular Economy Act in the Dáil in July (2022) aimed at reducing single use plastics and ensuring things get reused and recycled. Social economy and social enterprise are central to the Waste Action Plan for Circular Economy and are an important part of Irish Government policy on circular economy.

The government spends €16 billion on goods and services a year and social enterprises and circular economy businesses should get their share. The government can buy goods if they've been renovated or upcycled, as long as they've been tested or certified. Purchasers are encouraged to first consider these options and there's no discrimination towards new products. Purchasers can use the EPA's Green Public Procurement guidelines as the criteria for how to buy things in a green and sustainable way while retraining and pointing out their contribution to a better world.

○ Panel Discussion 1 - SoCircular Ecosystem Supports

▪ Mary Fleming, National Network Executive, Community Resources Network of Ireland

CRNI is a growing network of community-based reuse, repair and recycling organisations, whose key concerns are core funding supports, access to space for reuse, repair, recycling, the rising cost of insurance, VAT reductions and low levels of public awareness. CRNI, the Irish Social Enterprise Network and others provide a set of supports for social enterprises, such as networking and advocacy, but we could do more and there are gaps in funding, space and other issues. A lot of people end up going to the LEOs for assistance and receive a mixed response – could more be done to ensure the same support is available in every LEO across Ireland by mainstreaming social enterprise?

Social enterprises often work in silos and have specific problems they think they're alone with. Initiatives like SoCircular can help them feel positive and energised by realising that others are going through the same thing in trying to solve similar social, economic and environmental issues together. Participants should reach out for support through the many networks and people in the room and learn from others going through similar experiences.

▪ Richard Gavin, Assistant Principal, Department of Rural and Community Development

Ireland's first social enterprise policy has a key objective of supporting social enterprise with funding, finance, training, mentoring and business advice. There's been one year of the first policy and consultations are underway for the new policy. The DRCD is conversing with colleagues in the business department to share understanding and education within the LEOs around social enterprise, and it's one of the key areas being focused on with the new policy.

SoCircular is an opportunity for social enterprises to interact with other social enterprises and potential buyers as well as to meet other circular economy businesses. The DRCD is trying to support

networking events and the Social Enterprise National Conference on 17<sup>th</sup> November is a prime networking occasion. Participants should contact their local networks, such as the Irish Social Enterprise Network, Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland, the Wheel, and the Irish Local Development Network to avail of their supports and programmes.

- Ross Curley, Senior Economic Development Officer, Dublin City Council

There's resilience, determination, enthusiasm and a desire at community level to find a way to meet unmet needs from the ground up. There's a range of soft supports and assistance available through the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Dublin City Council, including specific MODOS circular economy training. The Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards, managed by Inner City Enterprise have so far allocated almost €400,000 in funding, provided by the Department of Rural and Community Development and Dublin City Council to support social enterprise development. The awards, set up in 2015 and with 44 recipients to date, highlight positive impacts being made, and serve as a very useful, ready-made network.

It's important to create opportunities and remove barriers, social enterprises across the city are creating employment opportunities where it might otherwise have been a challenge for their employees to find jobs. With the DRCD starting its consultation on the second policy and Dublin City Council doing its part in the city, policy is what promotes innovation and drives the sector forward in parallel with funding. Social enterprises are not alone so they should lean into this vibrant, thriving sector and make use of the available information and assistance to start that journey.

- Clodagh O'Reilly, Founder, Social Enterprise Solutions

While generic, everyday business-working assistance is important, the scaling of social enterprises requires specific and tailored supports to meet exactly what they want and where they're at. The difference made in the last number of years is phenomenal and the supports for start-ups are very good and growing but there's still a huge amount of work to do.

Even though it can be tricky having so many events, those like SoCircular are important to show the "unconverted" that circular economy and social economy and associated enterprises are the way forward. It's important to demonstrate the value of the sector and it needs representation. It is important for social enterprise managers to be aware of what is going on in the ecosystem, be present on social media, take part, and both give and take advice.

- Michelle Licciardi, Enterprise & Social Enterprise Manager, Dublin South City Partnership (DSCP) / Social Enterprise Dublin

A lot has been achieved regarding social enterprise development, and access to training and mentoring funds, such as the ARISE Scheme, has helped build huge capacity in these enterprises. The level of pitches from social enterprises and the supports they're asking for is completely different to before. There's a lot more to do and it's about how to incorporate circular principles given the pressing resourcing issues facing business owners.

Among various services and supports, DSCP assist with feasibility studies, mentoring, aligning as many supports as possible and pointing out where someone is doing something similar elsewhere in the country. It also engages with other initiatives and stakeholders such as the Dublin City Social

Enterprise Awards, Social Enterprise Ireland, Rethink Ireland to assist with applications. Participants should learn from each other about funds, training and dealing with issues on a daily basis, such as salaries for founders and cofounders. Social enterprises are very adept at bringing things bottom-up – it's allowing a forum to share that information as validation that they have the solutions themselves.

○ Fireside Chat 2 - Bernie Walsh, Sunflower Recycling

Sunflower Recycling offers a recycling collection service for paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and polystyrene, and has an Eco Mattress Recycling business. It started as a community development initiative brought about by the need to address high rates of long-term unemployment in the northeast inner city 27 years ago. Bernie began it as a community development worker as opposed to a social entrepreneur and its social impetus was to hold onto jobs in a very marginalised community.

Despite almost full employment, huge pockets of people are in need of schemes and assistance going forward so that they feel they have something to give back in their local communities. It's about giving people another way of looking at their own lives and doing simple things such as planting a tree or getting a window or herb box. There are many large, well-established businesses in Dublin who don't see the social economy as something they can use but they should look at it as part of their corporate social responsibility and a step to their own social procurement. Social enterprises can link into big companies for corporate gifts or running cafés and cleaning coops to help them meet their social contract – it's not about looking for charity but is about buying from them because they give as good a service as anyone else plus added social value.

○ Panel Discussion 2 - SoCircular Finance, Investing and Procurement

▪ Eoghan Ryan, Operations Director, Rethink Ireland

Rethink Ireland aims to find the best social innovations and help them scale and maximise their impact through cash grants, capacity building and supports. It administered about €12 million to 225 awardees in 2021 and has supported over 112 social enterprises over the past five years. Rethink Ireland was created by government, backed by the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and works with private investors that create funds.

Rethink Ireland wants to help social enterprises build sustainability over time by having a plan and starting with the end in mind so they don't need the same level of support going forward. We need to promote the distinctiveness of social enterprises to raise awareness. They should have a clear plan, look at available supports / funding, articulate the ask (financial or non-financial support or capacity building) and tell their unique story in a structured way.

▪ Kathy Quinn, Head of Finance, Dublin City Council

Supporting and growing strong communities in the city is the business of Dublin City Council and it provides procurement opportunities to try to develop a more stable economy with a more sustainable base for the future. Within procurement and HR, the council is supporting a new 'Community Wealth

Building' methodology that takes a generative approach to keep wealth in the community rather than an extractive approach that will take wealth from it.

While it's a slow process, bringing in other large or small public or private sector organisations invested in Dublin will help get all the wealth and power of procurement or "procurement by values" that allows equal opportunities for all. Large or small organisations can make slight tweaks in procurement as well as looking at where they might recruit, to see how many people have come from marginalised communities and what's stopping them from progressing.

Part of Community Wealth Building and SoCircular is to lift social enterprise and circular economy from a niche to a mainstream part of the economy as it's a totally appropriate, wise and financially prudent economic approach. With more people participating in society, social problems and health and stress issues on an intergenerational timeframe are reduced.

- Donal Traynor, Group Chief Executive, Community Finance Ireland

CFI is an all-island provider of social finance to social enterprises and the third sector economy. Conventional banks are slow to invest in community-based and social enterprises, so CFI fills this market failure by lending money (subject to interest) to organisations that create a social impact and have repayment capacity. Community buy-in is very important and CFI invests in, and values, personal relationship building. Over the past 14 years, CFI has funded €40 million in the south and £40 million in the north of the country. Of the former, only €47,000 has gone bad.

A two year research project led by Rethink Ireland in conjunction with Dublin City University and Irish Social Enterprise Network found that while there's loan finance of €30,000 to €500,000 available for social enterprises, start-ups aren't ready to take on all that debt and pay it back on a capital interest basis from the outset. The study looked at adopting one of the European financial instruments to the Irish marketplace and the department has ring-fenced budget to roll out Europe's first ever loan-grant hybrid product next year. This is targeted at early stage social enterprises and first-time borrowers, particularly those staffed by migrants, travellers, former prisoners, women and young people.

- Ingrid McElroy, Programme Manager, Community Benefit, National Paediatric Hospital Development Board Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement, Children's Health Ireland

The community went to the development board of Children's Hospital Ireland with an opportunity for urban regeneration. The board pioneered employment and social consideration clauses in the contract for the new hospital, some of the first reserve contracts being used in public procurement dedicated to the local economy and social enterprises. Through a health education programme for children and two local social enterprises that do office cleaning and catering for the hospital restaurant, the board works with social enterprises to assist those marginalised from employment and improve community health.

While a hospital is a niche business where it's difficult to work with social enterprises, it can be done. It's also for social enterprises to consider future hospital needs. Public procurement is difficult and it's unlikely social enterprises will be able to bid for specialised cleaning contracts, however, part of the clause for contractors and suppliers will specify that they need to connect with social enterprises as part of their supply chain providing services to the hospital. Contractors need to be able to find social enterprises that have the service / product they want, so enterprises must be visible.

### ○ Fireside Chat 3 - Leyla Karaha, YourY Network & KPesa

YourY Network started as one networking event in 2019 that grew to embody a global community. With 80 attending the inaugural event, some had never heard of social entrepreneurship so the network aimed to spread the word. Ms Karaha's research revealed that 70% of female entrepreneurs worldwide have no access to financial services and that the financial gap is over €300 billion for women entrepreneurs.

KPesa was founded as a new social innovation fintech that is a crowdfunding platform to help women entrepreneurs gain access to finance to grow their businesses in Tanzania. The global social enterprise movement is growing fast and a lot has changed in five years and social entrepreneurship is becoming mainstream. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is working hard in Tanzania to revive and grow the social entrepreneurship system. When it comes to environmental issues and global warming, making people more aware of it along with increased environmental, social and governance (ESG) funding can help grow the ecosystem.

### ○ Panel Discussion 3 - SoCircular Dublin Challenges and Opportunities

#### ▪ Prof Deiric O'Broin, Professor of Public Policy Practice, Dublin City University

The most obvious opportunity for the social and circular economy is the chance to localise economic activity and supply chains in a way that goes against the current trend of an increasingly globalised economy and supply chains. It's important to consider the policy framework for the social and circular economy, whereby the psychological shift towards them, gets people thinking about local supply chains and reuse, reduce, recycle and upcycle.

There are opportunities to localise the economy and build a much more robust, closer-to-the-ground local government system in Dublin that will impact hugely on pushing a circular economy agenda. There must be a psychological decision that circular economy is not a special initiative but is embedded in all programmes, with all the spend underpinned by circular economy to mainstream it.

#### ▪ Claire Byrne, Councillor, Dublin City Council

Circular economy (CE) ties in importantly with what the council is trying to achieve with the Climate Action Plan locally. The City Development Plan addresses embedded carbon in buildings and prioritising the reuse of buildings rather than demolition and rebuilding. The many co-benefits of moving to a CE include the employment, social and environmental perspectives. While great things are happening, the easy things are not being done well. Our public waste recycling targets are not being met. Belly bins are efficient in resource management, however, the public waste management systems have little source separation and are decades behind other European cities.

CE legislation at a national level will drive change locally. As part of the new Circular Economy Act, the council will have to develop a CE Plan and do a circular scan to identify gaps in circularity. One of the biggest challenges is that Ireland is still in pilot mode with CE, yet it's critical to the transition to a low carbon economy and survival of the planet. The focus has to be on managing public and hospitality (food) waste, while other ideas include Circular Sundays with low traffic or car-free streets and markets, swap shops and bulky waste recycling days that double as social events.

- Caroline Power, Programme Manager, Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

The Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan was launched in April 2022 with the main ambition of supporting regional balanced growth. Climate action is a key element of the low carbon and digitalisation transition within the plan. The plan has five objectives, including scaling SMEs and connecting them, placemaking and placebranding of Dublin, and reviewing the skills and talent landscape and key supports needed within circular economy development. With a bottom-up approach, people on the ground can inform government and the Department of Enterprise about supports that are needed.

For the objective on the low carbon and digitalisation transitions, one action is examining the feasibility of setting up a Circular Hub to support engagement among business and social enterprises, and collaboration to achieve tangible results. SoCircular is a first step in this. It's so important to work together, as one of the big challenges is communication.

- Dr Sabrina Dekker, Climate Action Coordinator, Dublin City Council

The circular economy as part of climate action is about helping reduce waste, engagement with businesses, the just transition and seeing the opportunities the social and circular economy provide for employment. Belfast City Council and Dublin City Council submitted an application to the Shared-Island Fund to undertake a €250,000 feasibility study investigating the connected circular economy between Belfast and Dublin in terms of future-proofing opportunities in transport, renewable energy, construction, and social housing. The study will hopefully lead into future capital projects to help the decision of whether to build infrastructure that underpins the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor and how to support industry to develop.

Another Dublin project is looking at using digital twins to make decisions about retrofitting and demolishing. Other areas of opportunity are in mobile phones and the electrical sector, and how to deal with the food sector and support restaurants in interacting with the agricultural sector. Dublin and Cork are included in the 100 climate neutral cities, involving a climate city contract that includes a Climate City Action Plan and an investment plan to focus on making Dublin City a circular economy. In the context of the Development Plan, Dublin should be a 15-minute repair city too.

- Aidan Sweeney, Head of Enterprise and Regulatory Affairs, Irish Business & Employers Confederation (Ibec)

IBEC tries to solve the problems of businesses at a local level. There's one economy and the question is how to embed the circular economy and the digital economy into ordinary, everyday business practices and make sure it's not treated as an isolated sector or segment. With various pressures on supply chains, there's a real opportunity in allowing social enterprises to sell into businesses and the public sector, direct or through supply chains, but the question is how to make those connections. Other queries include how to get investment into social enterprises to allow them to scale and ensure the environment adjusts accordingly, and how to ensure that the work of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and agencies embed circular economy so that social and circular enterprises become a business priority.

Part regulation and part commercial availability and engagement, it requires a collective approach, as does the joined-up thinking by policymakers. The question is how to tackle the regulatory side and

ensure that day-to-day policy implementation is considering these businesses and tackling challenges on a sectoral basis. If a social enterprise is selling to a large company or public sector organisation, how does it find out who the decision-maker is? People should talk to the person who decides about changing purchasing, not the procurement or finance officer. The public sector, IBEC and other business groups should run more showcasing (Meet the Buyer) events for the public and private sectors. Business bodies should be used to give voice to start-ups that may not be members of these groups yet, the issue is how can they grow and scale to become members.

#### ○ Fireside Chat 4 - Steve O'Reilly, Rediscovery Centre

Ireland won a competitive bid to host Circular Economy Hotspot, a major international conference held in a different city each year. The Hotspot celebrates the particular way in which the CE has manifested in a location with regard to industry, policy and culture and this is the first time it will take place in Dublin and Ireland. It will be a four day event hosted from 29/05-01/06 2023. Day one will feature the launch, day two will feature the main conference with talks, keynote addresses, and an expo showcase of social enterprise and circular economy organisations. Day three will feature deep dives / workshops and day four will be a series of tours to exemplars of projects and initiatives in social enterprise, food and the bio-economy, design and manufacturing, and the built environment.

With a lot of international experts attending, the opportunities are to learn about what the circular economy is in practice, what's happening elsewhere, demonstrate internationally and nationally what's happening in Ireland and Dublin, and engage with Dubliners on the lived experience of the circular economy. Participants can get further information and get involved via the Hotspot event website ([www.dublincirculareconomyhotspot.com](http://www.dublincirculareconomyhotspot.com)).

#### ○ Panel Discussion 4- SoCircular Education, Employment and Skills

- Bróna Ní Chobhthaigh, Head of Communications and Stakeholder Relations, Business in the Community Ireland

In BITC, 'EESG' stands for Economy, Environment, Social Inclusion and Governance. BITC helps member companies think about how they undertake the systemic change needed to deliver on sustainability, and provides education and employment programmes. There are formal requirements under the Climate Action Plan and also citizen demand to have ethically conscious, environmentally active corporates. While people and businesses are being held to account, it's unclear if businesses are responding because consumers want it or they're reflecting on who they want to be as leaders.

There's a much broader awareness of sustainability and CE. Traditionally, businesses considered carbon emissions. Now, businesses are interested in thinking about nature, CE in the context of how they make economic investments, undertaking responsible technology, the algorithms used in HR, and the social perspective. Social economics is about making sure there's active participation from all parts of society. A truly CE must be sustainable from a social side and BITC members are increasingly aware of the value and responsibilities they hold in this. Businesses must keep asking questions of themselves, their staff and peers in terms of how they operate and the impact the ir business is having.

- Dr Lucia Walsh, Lecturer and Researcher, Technology University Dublin

TU Dublin noticed a great need to incorporate sustainability and CE in all teaching and research. A top-down and bottom-up approach coupled with student demand resulted in colleagues from different disciplines setting up a community of practice called 'SDG [sustainable development goals] literacy'. TU Dublin formulated a strategy around the SDGs and the three pillars of people, planet and partnership, with one milestone as having SDG-related issues covered in all programmes by 2023.

Before sustainability and CE are incorporated into different programmes more naturally, TU Dublin has initiated separate modules, such as the business sustainability module for final year undergraduate business students. In addition, the University offers a part-time postgraduate certificate in sustainability leadership in business. Businesses should engage in programmes like MODOS via DCC, attend TU Dublin events, undertake short programmes and micro-credentials, listen to podcasts, and follow people on LinkedIn.

- Natasha Kinsella, Manager, Dublin Regional Skills Forum

The Dublin Regional Skills Forum is a national initiative under the Department of Further and Higher Education, providing a conduit between business and education providers. It's trying to support businesses by articulating the skills gaps and needs as the transition to CE will only be enabled by the skill set capacity of an entire organisation. Businesses are often time-poor and without finance, so they find it difficult to navigate the skills ecosystem and address future skills needs. By addressing the skill set capacity at all levels, it allows businesses to inform policy decisions through the fora and collaborative partners.

For FDI clients looking at Ireland's talent, there's a huge shift in roles being developed because of CE and it's about addressing what those roles might look like and what skill sets are required to make sure talent is within the pipeline. From a competitive perspective, the skills capacity and capability must be ensured to develop those businesses as they continue to grow within the CE. Digitalisation has changed the work world and there's a wider remit for businesses to understand what that looks like and means in terms of CE and communicating that outwards. SoCircular is showcasing what businesses are doing and they can be used as case studies to encourage others to engage in the CE.

- Deirdre NíCheallaigh, Strategy and Planning Coordinator, Rediscovery Centre

Housed in a repurposed boiler room, the origin of the Rediscovery Centre is in the Ballymun Regeneration Project from 18 years ago. It has four social enterprises that are exemplars in reuse, CE and labour activation, and is also the National Centre for the Circular Economy around education, collaboration, research and advocacy. Endorsed by the Environmental Protection Agency, the CE Academy was launched in 2019 as a mentoring and support programme to help social enterprises expand and adopt CE principles into their operations.

There's a multitude of resources, hands-on experiential learning experiences and formal tertiary education available if employers want to nurture their employees with new skills, training and experiences. As well as technical skills, entrepreneurship, leadership, self-belief, regional incubators, and making connections with local authorities are important. One fundamental thing is seeing the opportunity and benefits with CE, and championing employees and businesses to think differently through design thinking, looking for solutions and tapping into the ingenuity and possibilities.



### 3 Introduction

The inaugural SoCircular event took place on the 5th October, 2022 in the Round Room at the Mansion House, Dublin. It was led by Dublin City Council and LEO Dublin City in collaboration with the Lord Mayor of Dublin, supported by key stakeholders and hosted in alignment with the European Commission European Social Economy Regions project; UN SDG European Sustainable Development Week / Act4SDGs campaign, Circular Week; National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland; Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024; BuySocial IRL campaign and as a lead up event to Circular Economy Hotspot Dublin 2023. The aim of SoCircular was to help transform Dublin by: celebrating the social and circular economy (CE) ecosystem, encouraging stakeholders to buy from and support local social and circular enterprises, promoting supports for enterprises to adopt circular / sustainability approaches, and through providing a forum for conversation on developing the social and CE in Dublin. SoCircular featured discussions; fireside chats with key individuals including Minister Ossian Smyth, an immersive programme of social and CE themed arts and cultural performances and a trade expo comprised of 50 social and circular enterprises along with support organisations.

The forum for conversation on developing the social and circular economies in Dublin was realized via the SoCircular Summit and associated panel discussions and fireside chats which took place as part of the overall event. The aims of the summit element were to share knowledge and perspectives, obtain insights

and ideas, and to highlight opportunities for collaboration and development, in order to then inform stakeholders regarding future policy formulation and strategies relevant to social and CE development.

SoCircular Summit represented the 2022 iteration of the annual Dublin City Summit Series. The series is an initiative of the Economic Development and Enterprise Strategic Policy Committee (SPC). Each summit brings together key stakeholders including policymakers, elected officials, experts and practitioners to share insights in order to encourage greater collaboration, awareness and development regarding policy issues and challenges facing the city. After each summit, an Outcomes Report comprised of contributions is produced to support policy formulation, knowledge sharing and economic development. Previous summits in the series and the associated outcomes reports include [Brexit Summit 2016](#), [Infrastructure Summit 2017](#), [Apprenticeship Summit 2018](#), [Social Enterprise Summit 2019](#), [Reset Summit 2020](#).

The event and summit commenced with a welcome address by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, followed by a series of panel discussions and fireside chats. During the discussions and chats, key stakeholders shared insights regarding the need, challenges and opportunities of developing the social and circular economy. The summit was structured on four interlinked themes, which although not exhaustive, represent key elements regarding social economy and circular economy development. Each theme was the focus of a panel discussion. Panellists were asked to contribute regarding their context, insights, examples and recommendations on improving the panel topic. The four themes and panel discussions were SoCircular:

○ Ecosystem Supports	○ Finance, Investing and Procurement
○ Dublin Challenges and Opportunities	○ Education, Employment and Skills

The SoCircular Summit programme was:

- Lord Mayor’s Welcome
- Fireside Chat - Ossian Smyth TD
- Panel Discussion 1 - SoCircular Ecosystem Supports - Mary Fleming, Clodagh O'Reilly, Richard Gavin, Ross Curley, Michelle Licciardi
- Fireside Chat - Bernie Walsh, Sunflower Recycling
- Panel Discussion 2 - SoCircular Finance, Investing and Procurement - Donal Traynor, Eoghan Ryan, Ingrid McElroy, Kathy Quinn
- Fireside Chat - Leyla Karaha, YourY Network & KPesa
- Panel Discussion 3 - SoCircular Dublin Challenges and Opportunities - Prof Deiric O'Broin, Caroline Power, Dr Sabrina Dekker, Aidan Sweeney, Cllr Claire Byrne
- Fireside Chat - Steve O'Reilly, Rediscovery Centre
- Panel Discussion 4 – SoCircular Education, Employment and Skills - Deirdre Ní Cheallaigh, Natasha Kinsella, Dr Lucia Walsh, Bróna Ní Chobhthaigh

This outcomes report provides an account of the insights shared by contributors and an extensive overview of the summit. A highlight video of the overall SoCircular event is available [here](#). This report, the associated [SoCircular Brochure](#) and the SoCircular initiative were collaboratively supported by and developed in alignment with:





## 4 SoCircular Summit Contributions

### 4.1 SoCircular Hosts

Hosts Chris Gordon, CEO of the Irish Social Enterprise Network<sup>1</sup> and Dr Joanne Rourke, Resource Efficiency Officer at the Eastern-Midlands Regional Waste Management Planning Office<sup>2</sup>, introduced the SoCircular event in the Round Room at the Mansion House on 5th October, 2022. Mr Gordon explained how the Dublin City Council summit series focuses on how to support the economic development of the city by taking an in-depth look at policy topics, such as the circular economy and social economy in this instance.

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<sup>1</sup> [Irish Social Enterprise Network](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Eastern-Midlands Regional Waste Management Planning Office](#)



#### 4.2 Lord Mayor's Welcome

Lord Mayor of Dublin, Caroline Conroy warmly welcomed the distinguished guests, exhibitors, panelists, fellow councillors and colleagues to SoCircular. She heralded it as a special day when we move a step closer to lessening our impact on the environment by learning about circular economy and social economy and how, collectively, small steps can lead to significant impact. Believing it to be just the start of the journey, with each journey beginning with a single step, she introduced that step as the inaugural SoCircular, saying how appropriate it was that the event was taking place in the Round Room. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, she outlined how we now find ourselves in a new Dublin – a city with a fresh perspective and a population that has developed a greater interest in work-life balance, cycling, walking, an appreciation of wildlife, and a desire to be closer to nature and to support local businesses. The Lord Mayor highlighted how the clock has been reset for the better in many instances and there's now a new approach to how we live and work. In line with this, Dublin City Council (DCC) wishes to maintain and progress this momentum in the right direction.

The Lord Mayor explained how the scale of disruption experienced during the pandemic has led us to question and rethink how businesses operate, how consumers interact with businesses, and the potential for more flexible ways of working. She stated, 'some of these new ways of working have, in turn, opened up possibilities for new ways of living more sustainably and inclusively and have the potential to enhance Ireland's competitiveness and productivity'. As employment levels surge, Ireland's ports, airports, and transport networks are all seeing increased levels of activity, and she believes that these positive and encouraging trends must be carefully managed and their broader impacts considered. While many of the

indicators are extremely positive, she acknowledged the headwinds from the impacts of the geopolitical landscape and intensifying inflationary pressures, in particular, having the potential to limit growth. She highlighted that the vibrancy and attractiveness of our city as a destination for Dubliners is coming into sharp focus as we plan for the future. She said we must consider how our cities respond to changes in how consumers access goods and services. Retail trends are evolving significantly on the high streets across the country. On the other side of the commercial market, there is an uptake in commercial office lettings in the city, an indication of the enduring appeal of physical office space in central locations for employers despite the remote working phenomenon.

She expressed this as a key consideration in the context of the vibrancy of cities. To this end, DCC is developing and exploring themes around placemaking and city branding initiatives to make the city a place to live and work. 'Dublin City's plans for the future prioritise the development of the green and circular economy and achieving greater digitalisation for businesses. These plans have a new urgency in line with the ongoing surge in energy prices and commitments to develop a low carbon economy'. The Lord Mayor raised a pinch point recognised by the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council in Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021<sup>3</sup> as the undersupply of new housing, resulting in chronic shortages of properties in the rental and homeownership markets. These, in turn, have led to house price and rent increases and more homelessness, with many households priced out of local markets. She mentioned that housing is not the only vital infrastructure pressure point, with Dublin experiencing bottlenecks in other critical areas such as water and waste water, electricity, communications and transport. 'These infrastructure needs must be addressed in tandem with new housing and will be required to support new and existing enterprises in the Dublin area'. She continued by saying that other essential services in Dublin, such as childcare, education, health and social care must also continue to be addressed.

The Lord Mayor credited SoCircular with promoting our change in perspective and the importance of sustainability in delivering the necessary infrastructure and services for the city to thrive. She felt the event was shining a light on the social and circular economy and how the associated principles, approaches and enterprises can help address many of these challenges to make Dublin a more sustainable, future-proofed and vibrant place. 'Social and circular enterprises are at the forefront of addressing and responding to key challenges in society and the economy. This includes providing solutions to climate change, developing sustainable approaches in the supply chain, supporting marginalised people and helping Dublin and Ireland to become a more sustainable, inclusive and innovative place'. She was thrilled to have over 50 social and circular enterprises showcasing their businesses at the event and commended them all for being leaders in the field. She described the event as a key opportunity to develop these sectors and announced that SoCircular was also taking place as part of the Dublin City Summit Series, an initiative of Dublin City Council's Economic Development and Enterprise Strategic Policy Committee. The Lord Mayor concluded by saying that while we are in uncertain times globally and face challenges, there are also potential opportunities in the form of new ways of approaching how we work, live and consume. 'Small changes by many can deliver real improvements in our cities and towns, with sustainability and inclusivity at the core. Innovation, collaboration and collective engagement are at the centre of our local and regional plans that aim to equip us to overcome the challenges that lie ahead'. She lauded SoCircular as a progressive step in the right direction, saying she was delighted to be part of it.

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<sup>3</sup> [National Competitiveness & Productivity Council – Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2021](#)



#### 4.3 Fireside Chat - Ossian Smyth TD

Dr Rourke introduced Ossian Smyth TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Procurement, eGovernment and Circular Economy and commenced the fireside chat by stating: We're all well aware of the climate crisis and climate action we need to take to alleviate the crisis, but the circular economy and consumption is a really important part of climate action too. Why is this and how do you see circular economy fitting into our climate action?

Minister Ossian Smyth opened by saying that when people consider climate action, they think about retrofitting their houses, making it safe for children to walk and cycle to school, or putting solar panels on their roofs, but at the heart of all of this is the traditional 'business as usual' economy. According to the minister, what we don't want to do is simply add a green layer on top of our existing economy so we do everything we did before but with a solar panel on the roof to insulate the outside of it. He highlighted the circular economy as recognition that in order to change to a green economy, we have to alter the whole basis at the centre. He believes that we have to walk away from consumerism and the idea that the more you consume, the happier you are, i.e. that two dinners will make us twice as happy. We need to address the idea that the way to measure society's prosperity is by how much and how fast we consume our finite resources. Minister Smyth thought there was a general realisation from people globally that we've done really well with our capitalist market economy – it's made a lot of money and lifted people out of poverty – but we've reached a limit. 'At this point, enough is as good as a feast and we need to consider quality of life. The way to do that is to abandon endless consumerism and try to find a way to keep resources and money circulating within the local economy'.

Dr Rourke continued: When we talk about trying to reduce consumerism and moving away from capitalism, that's bound to make some people nervous, especially business people. Are you finding that the public and politicians on both sides of the house are in favour of circular economy? Are they even thinking about it?

Minister Smyth feels that people are really positive about circular economy, more than he expected, as evidenced by the broad support from every party in the passing of the Circular Economy Act in the Dáil in July (2022)<sup>4</sup>. Not only were younger, more progressive and entrepreneurial councillors in favour of the bill aimed at reducing single use plastics and ensuring things get reused and recycled, so too were more traditional and conservative voters. The latter cohort accepted the proposed changes because of tradition, knowing it's what their parents and grandparents did in the days when, for example, shoes wore out and rather than buy more, they'd get them fixed on the main street. He suggested getting all those businesses working again so there's an option to fix things, as in previous times. The minister is witnessing broad public backing for circular economy as it makes sense and there's a huge interest in removing the use of plastic wrapping and doing more recycling. He referred to the social enterprises in the room as being interesting and alluring to the public.

Dr Rourke then stated: If I buy something off someone who has made a product themselves, such as jewellery or clothes, there's something nice about giving the money directly to the person who made it rather than going through intermediaries.

Minister Smyth concurred, saying local businesses think about the money and natural resources circulating as well as shopping locally.

Dr Rourke: Looking at the Waste Action Plan for Circular Economy<sup>5</sup>, social economy and social enterprise were placed very much at the heart of it and are an important part of Irish Government policy on circular economy. Could you tell me about that?

The minister is convinced that there's a natural fit between social enterprises and circular economy. He cited the Rediscovery Centre<sup>6</sup> as an example, an organisation whose work involves renovation (fixing things), education (learning skills) and making products they can sell or give away to people who need them. He sees this model being repeated time and again, referencing the Bike Hub<sup>7</sup> in Dun Laoghaire as doing something similar. It gives training opportunities to people who are otherwise left out of the system, such as former prisoners, those without education or, for whatever reason, who need help starting off again. The close match between social enterprise and circular economy is also reflected in the fact that the Minister for Social Enterprise, Joe O'Brien, is often at the same events as Minister Smyth. 'If you take social enterprises that we mightn't have thought of as circular economy businesses, such as charity shops and men's sheds, they fit with everything that circular economy is trying to do'.

Dr Rourke: Mr Smyth is both the Minister for Circular Economy (in the Environment Department) and Procurement (in the Public Expenditure Department) – if you're a small business or social enterprise, how do you get work from the government?

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<sup>4</sup> [ISB Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2022](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Rediscovery Centre – National Centre for the Circular Economy in Ireland](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Bike Hub](#)

The minister confirmed that the government spends €16 billion on goods and services a year and he wants social enterprises and those in circular economy business to get their share of that. Over the past two years, he and his colleagues have done everything to ensure policies say that the government can buy goods if they've been renovated or upcycled, as long as they've been tested or certified. He said there would be no discrimination towards something that is brand new. He recommended looking at the EPA's Green Public Procurement guidelines<sup>8</sup>, which are easy to read and accessible, as the criteria for purchasers on how to buy things in a green and sustainable way. He also mentioned retraining those responsible for purchasing in government through the skills academy to teach them how to buy in this way, and trying to appeal to their better nature by saying that this will contribute to a better world. At the same time, there will often be good value for money. 'Recent events such as the Ukraine war have shown that the traditional long supply lines have become very fragile and it's difficult to obtain brand new goods that rely on ships from the other side of the world, so people are finding out where they can get things locally and seeking products that are upcycled or remanufactured'. He continued that it's also very hard to find staff to do things at the moment so people are looking for alternative options. Minister Smyth said that he encourages purchasers in government to always first consider the upcycled, renovated, and formerly used options. He also invited the attending social enterprises to contact his office if they're facing hurdles in selling to government or if they wish to meet with him. He assured participants that he'll be doing whatever he can to promote circular economy.

Dr Rourke: That's an amazing invitation so I hope people do take you up on that. Is it a case of the public service leading the way in circular economy?

The minister admitted that the public service is not yet leading the way, although it has been told to, and the private sector is often ahead in its uptake of local sourcing. 'The public sector can be quite traditional in the way it does things, keeping it the same as 20 years ago, but I hope it will reflect on the ways things were done 100 years ago instead'.

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<sup>8</sup> [EPA Green Public Procurement – Guidance for the Public Sector](#)



L – R: Chris Gordon, Ross Curley, Richard Gavin, Mary Fleming, Michelle Licciardi, Clodagh O’Reilly

#### 4.4 Panel Discussion 1 - SoCircular Ecosystem Supports

Panel:

- Panel Chair: Chris Gordon, CEO, Irish Social Enterprise Network
- Ross Curley, Senior Economic Development Officer, Dublin City Council<sup>9</sup>
- Richard Gavin, Assistant Principal, Department of Rural and Community Development<sup>10</sup>
- Mary Fleming, National Network Executive, Community Resources Network Ireland<sup>11</sup>
- Michelle Licciardi, Enterprise & Social Enterprise Manager, Dublin South City Partnership / Social Enterprise Dublin<sup>12</sup>
- Clodagh O'Reilly, Founder, Social Enterprise Solutions<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [Dublin City Council](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Department of Rural and Community Development](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Community Resources Network Ireland](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Social Enterprise Dublin](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Social Enterprise Solutions](#)

Mr Gordon began by stating: You (the panellists) are the support systems and every day you get to see the lived reality of circular economy and social enterprise organisations. What are your roles and organisations? Are social enterprises being backed? Where were we and where are we now? Where's the growth?

Mary Fleming introduced the Community Resources Network of Ireland (CRNI) as a growing network of community-based reuse, repair and recycling organisations. Her time spent engaging with members revealed that core funding supports, access to space for reuse, repair, recycling, the rising cost of insurance, VAT reductions and low levels of public awareness are their key concerns. While CRNI, the Irish Social Enterprise Network and others work together to provide a set of supports for social enterprises, such as networking and advocacy, she feels we could do more and there are gaps in funding, space and other issues.

Praising SoCircular as a way of raising awareness of social enterprise, Richard Gavin from the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) highlighted Ireland's first social enterprise policy. He named its key objective as supporting social enterprise with not just funding and finance but also training, mentoring and business advice. There has been one year of the first policy and consultations are underway for the new policy. He said that it would be very useful to know the number, location and business area of social enterprises, urging participants to complete the department's current survey to help fine-tune the policy and supports for the sector.

Ross Curley from Dublin City Council described how his office looks at economic policy and structures and how it can promote development across Dublin City in a number of ways, such as through events like SoCircular and the Dublin City Summit Series that address topics in depth. Speaking about soft supports, he outlined a range of assistance available through the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) to any business, including the specific MODOS<sup>14</sup> circular economy training programme for small-medium enterprises. He highlighted typical expression of interest questions as being about where to start (given a possible new term), emphasising that the door is always open be it via an online or in-person contact.

Clodagh O'Reilly, who has been involved in the social enterprise sector for quite a long time, previously worked with Solas Project<sup>15</sup> and Recreate<sup>16</sup> and is now doing a PhD in the scaling of social enterprises in Technology University Dublin. She also has a consultancy called Social Enterprise Solutions. Having worked in two social enterprises, she acknowledged that, 'the difference made in the last number of years is phenomenal but there's still a huge amount of work to do'. Mentioning Ms Fleming and CRNI in the context of her work in Recreate, and the amazing help received with regard to sustainability, Ms O'Reilly explained that while the generic, everyday business working assistance is important, the scaling of social enterprises requires specific and tailored supports to meet exactly what they want and where they're at. Admitting that the supports for start-ups are very good and growing, and pointing to the fact that there would only have been five people at SoCircular seven years ago, she also accepts that there's more to do.

Michelle Licciardi, Manager of Enterprise and Social Enterprise at Dublin South City Partnership (DSCP) and representing Social Enterprise Dublin, works with grassroots organisations across Ireland. Describing the event as a dream come true and agreeing that a lot has been achieved within social enterprise,

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<sup>14</sup> [MODOS – Circular Economy Training](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Solas Project: The Yard](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Recreate](#)

especially in the context of COVID-19 and other crises, she spoke about how access to the training and mentoring funds, such as the ARISE Fund<sup>17</sup>, has helped build huge capacity in social enterprises. The level of the pitches Ms Licciardi is seeing every day from social enterprises and the supports they're asking for are completely different to what they would've been. She understands that there's a lot more to do and it's about how we do that given the pressing issues of the day. 'For a lot of social enterprises, it's the cofounders and founders that are starting up and trying to incorporate the circular principles but they're fighting day-to-day to resource the businesses'. She concluded that it's about how they do the right thing while scaling up.

Mr Gordon continued: Joe Public wants to do good for the environment, social enterprise and the community. And while it's still about business, income, sales and getting the product right, the narrative is changing. People don't want to set things up just to line their pockets with profits, they want to do it to make an impact with the environment. Am I wrong?

Ms Fleming said that a lot of people end up going to the LEO for assistance and receive a mixed response as some offices provide it and others don't. She wondered, 'is there more we could do to make sure the same support is available in every local enterprise office across Ireland by mainstreaming social enterprise?' Mr Curley described a desire at community level to find a way to meet unmet needs from the ground up, 'The first thing I see is the resilience, determination and enthusiasm on the part of anyone behind a social enterprise'. He noted the supports through the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards set up in 2015. There are 44 recipients thus far, that are supported on a continual basis and promoted in various ways such as via an annual brochure. It shows what others are doing and the impacts being made while serving as a very useful, ready-made network. Managed by Inner City Enterprise, just shy of €400,000 in funding has been divided among the awardees thanks to the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) and Dublin City Council co-funding of the programme.

Lauding the great work of Dublin City Council and the LEOs on social enterprise, Mr Gavin indicated that the DRCD is trying to expand this nationwide. 'It's a conversation happening with colleagues in the business department to share understanding and education within the LEOs around social enterprise, and one of the key areas being focused on with the new policy starting later in the year'.

Mr Gordon stated: There's also the local development companies who offer these types of supports and often did this before some of the LEOs knew they were backing social enterprises or did it on purpose. Why is there a difference and what's the advantage?

Ms Licciardi gave the example of someone in the community coming to say that their friend or son has a disability, is neurodiverse or is coming out of prison and they have an idea plus the lived experience. They see an opportunity to make a change so Dublin South City Partnership (DSCP) might match them up with technology and innovation, and ask them how they intend to get staff and revenue and who their market is. She outlined how it often starts with feasibility studies and matching social enterprises with mentors, looking at it holistically to align as many supports as possible and pointing out where someone is doing something similar elsewhere in the country. DSCP also engages with the likes of the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland<sup>18</sup> and Rethink Ireland to assist with the applications. It's

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<sup>17</sup> [Awareness Raising Initiatives for Social Enterprise \(ARISE\) Scheme 2021](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Social Entrepreneurs Ireland](#)

a case of constantly looking at the scaffolding supports and training and mentoring, which is usually from funds that it applies for and disseminates.

Mr Gordon proposed that: You find people where they're at, they have a problem and need someone to help, they have an idea, but making it work is so difficult sometimes. There's no real badge for social enterprise, rather it's a choice (given corporate governance responsibilities) so the expertise and assistance are appreciated. We've got incredible social and circular enterprises in the room that are making a difference in their own communities or with the environment, doing the things they know how to do well. Are there success stories you'd like to identify? What's the purpose of this event for you?

Ms O'Reilly maintained that it was good to come to events such as SoCircular to check in with people you already know and also to hear about new organisations, giving a shout-out to Native Denims who hand make and repair denim items with a five-year warranty. She feels that it's important to demonstrate the value of the sector, saying that it needs representation, and to highlight that, 'we're coming for you to change society'. She understood that 'it can be a lonely, difficult and challenging road running a social enterprise but this event shows that organisations are not alone. It's quite vulnerable to put yourself out there with an idea. You may think you're not getting anywhere but then you meet someone and they give you a word of encouragement'. She referenced the re-emergence of the Grow Dome in Dublin 8 and the importance of being able to share stories. Even though it can be tricky having so many events, those like SoCircular are important to show the 'unconverted' that circular and social economy are the way forward.

Mr Gordon mentioned: The Lord Mayor spoke about the problems and challenges we face with housing, people who can't find jobs because of some barrier to working, what we want Dublin to be, and the climate change reality. Why is today important?

Mr Curley emphasised the importance of creating opportunities and removing barriers, saying that social enterprises have always been about responding to an unmet need brought about by people with a passion to drive something forward. All the social enterprises across the city are creating employment opportunities where it might otherwise have been a challenge for their employees to find jobs. He referenced PACE Mug Shot that provides training for those coming out of the probationary service. 'Housing is linked to the cooperative movement where there has been solutions to problems for decades. We see the credit union movement stepping into the space left by the main commercial banks exiting the country'. He described how the credit unions are opening at weekends and welcoming people through the doors, showing what can be done when people come together.

Mr Gavin praised the event as an opportunity for social enterprises to interact with other social enterprises and potential buyers as well as to meet other circular economy businesses. 'It's always good to grow synergies, and networking is vital, it's something we haven't had much of for the past couple of years'. Congratulating the organisers of SoCircular, he said the DRCD is trying to support networking events such as this and reminded attendees of the Social Enterprise National Conference on 17<sup>th</sup> November as an upcoming prime networking occasion. Ms Licciardi advised the social enterprises and circular businesses present to learn from each other about funds, training and how they're doing things and dealing with issues on a daily basis. She emphasised that we've missed the peer-to-peer networking and sharing of business models during COVID-19. 'Often, I'm looking at bringing things top-down but social enterprises are much better at bringing things bottom-up. They use me as a sounding board but they actually have the answers themselves and it's allowing a forum to share that information as validation that they have the solutions'.

Mr Gordon stated to the panel: When we're trying to organise events, I'm hearing that people are very busy working and fulfilling orders. It's crucial that we don't slip into this 'season for funding' but that we back people where they're at.

Ms Fleming agreed that social enterprises often work in silos and have specific problems they think they're on their own with. 'This event can help social enterprises feel positive and energised by realising that others are going through the same thing and that we can all work together'. She cited the opportunity of the event, as the networks within networks who were all present try to collectively solve similar social, economic and environmental issues.

Mr Gordon asked: Where do people find out more? What would you like people to leave here with?

Ms O'Reilly advised participants not to leave the room without talking to someone new and if they had something specific, to 'corner' Mr Gavin to ask for exactly what they needed. Her suggestion was to make a new connection and ask. It was important for social enterprise and circular economy business managers to also be aware of what was going on in the ecosystem, be present everywhere (on social media), take part, and both give and take advice. Ms Licciardi confirmed there was lots of interest in EU funding, and that Dublin South City Partnership would be attending the National Conference on 17<sup>th</sup> November and disseminating the information. Her guidance for SoCircular was for social enterprises and circular businesses to ask questions and talk with each other on topics such as salaries for founders and cofounders. She highlighted that various resources, FAQs and basic information on the ARISE Scheme are available on the social enterprise Dublin website.

Mr Gordon posed a final statement to the panel: There are things happening and it's relevant to be there, half the battle is to show up.

Ms Fleming encouraged participants to reach out for support through the many different networks and to learn from others going through similar experiences. Although it was easy to get side-lined by administrative tasks, she reminded participants that there were people in the room that could help service their needs and to reach out by phone or meet online. Mr Gavin's main piece of advice to participants was to contact their local networks (as supports are usually transmitted this way), such as: Irish Social Enterprise Network<sup>19</sup>, Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland<sup>20</sup>, the Wheel<sup>21</sup>, and Irish Local Development Network<sup>22</sup> to avail of supports and programmes run through them. Mr Curley recommended that participants make the most of networking in the room. He concluded that with the department starting its consultation on the second plan and DCC doing its part in the city, policy is what promotes innovation and drives the sector forward in parallel with funding. Wanting to see more social and circular innovators come to the fore, his message to enterprises was, 'you're not alone so lean into this vibrant, thriving sector and use the available information and assistance to start that journey'.

Mr Gordon concluded: Make sure you get your voice heard as all of the panelists are here to assist you. The only purpose for us is to help you on your journey in whatever shape or form that is.

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<sup>19</sup> [Irish Social Enterprise Network](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland \(SERI\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> [The Wheel](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Irish Local Development Network \(ILDN\)](#)



#### 4.5 Fireside Chat - Bernie Walsh, Sunflower Recycling

Mr Gordon introduced Bernie Walsh as the ‘matriarch of social enterprise in Ireland’, and one of the first people to be part of LEO training specifically about social enterprise. Her role is to both support and be a social enterprise.

Mr Gordon began by asking: Where did it all start and what organisations are you involved with?

Ms Walsh described the beginnings of Sunflower Recycling<sup>23</sup> as a community development brought about by the high rate of long-term unemployment in the northeast inner city 27 years ago. She began it as a community development worker as opposed to a social entrepreneur and its social impetus was to hold onto jobs in a very marginalised community. Today, while there’s almost full employment, she emphasised the huge pockets of people that still need schemes and assistance going forward. ‘The social aspect isn’t just about engaging the long-term unemployed, it’s also the feeling that they have something to give back in their local communities’.

Mr Gordon: Why did you set up the project the way you did?

Having lived in Denmark, and her friend in Holland 30 years ago, they had both done recycling and couldn’t understand why there wasn’t anything like it in Ireland. The council was only implementing bottle banks at the time. In putting forward the idea, she mused that people had laughed and said no one would pay them to do recycling. FÁS funded the programme as it was the only mechanism to get the work paid for.

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<sup>23</sup> [Sunflower Recycling](#)

Ms Walsh submitted that Sunflower Recycling hasn't changed much since, other than new people and programmes. She's convinced that it's the easiest way to maintain momentum and to bring in long-term unemployed as a very important goal.

Mr Gordon stated: The purpose of Sunflower Recycling is to help the environment and local community. You were a pioneer in making things happen back then so tell us why today is important to you?

Ms Walsh thought the event was really important and while there were several panellists from large government departments looking at procurement, she also spoke about the many large, well-established businesses in Dublin who don't see the social economy as something they can use. When it comes to corporate social responsibility within a company, she questioned why they don't look at the social economy. 'Companies should realise that social economy can be a step to their own social procurement, just because a social enterprise isn't a huge multinational it can still offer a very good service'. She proposed that the social enterprises present could link into companies for corporate gifts or running cafés (such as Mug Shot for external cafés) and cleaning co-ops. These enterprises could be used to help big companies meet their social contract. 'This isn't about looking for charity but is about buying from us because we can give you as good a service as anyone else plus we give you added social value'. She explained, Sunflower Recycling offers a recycling collection service for paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and polystyrene (four things that come out of every office) in the inner city and beyond for cheap rates. It also set up Eco Mattress Recycling as well as three other businesses over the past three decades, two of which are still operating.

Mr Gordon: The things we've done to keep items out of landfill, make the city prettier and inspire people to want to take care of their homes have been transformative. Ms Walsh is an extraordinary leader in this space, she has changed lives and given employment. Any last thoughts?

Ms Walsh explained that it was all about giving people another way of looking at their lives. For example, thinking ahead, they might plant a tree or get a window or herb box (in the absence of a back garden) as these are very simple to do. Up to three or four years ago, she would have known everyone in the room so she was delighted to see so many new faces and people with the same vision going forward. It made her feel really strong and she hoped it was the first of a lot of steps.



#### 4.6 Panel Discussion 2 - SoCircular Finance, Investing and Procurement

Panel:

- Panel Chair: Chris Gordon, CEO, Irish Social Enterprise Network
- Eoghan Ryan, Operations Director, Rethink Ireland<sup>24</sup>
- Kathy Quinn, Head of Finance, Dublin City Council<sup>25</sup>
- Donal Traynor, Group Chief Executive, Community Finance Ireland<sup>26</sup>
- Ingrid McElroy, Programme Manager, Community Benefit, National Paediatric Hospital Development Board Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement, Children's Health Ireland<sup>27</sup>

Mr Gordon began by stating: So much has been going on for so long with so many people. To have this event as a pinnacle of where we're at is extraordinary. Can you please introduce yourselves?

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<sup>24</sup> [Rethink Ireland](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Dublin City Council](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Community Finance Ireland](#)

<sup>27</sup> [National Paediatric Hospital Development Board](#)

Eoghan Ryan felt that everyone was feeding off the energy in the room. He works with Rethink Ireland, aimed at finding the best social innovations so they can scale and maximise their impact. This is done through a venture philanthropy model, i.e. a mixture of cash and capacity building and supports. '2021 was a significant year for us, we administered about €12 million to 225 awardees'. He shared the fact that he once set up and failed at a social enterprise so he understands the journey.

Kathy Quinn, Deputy Chief Executive and Head of Finance in Dublin City Council (DCC), enthused that it was great to see so many people gathered. 'Our business is communities and we've a huge interest in trying to support and grow a stronger community in Dublin'. The council can provide procurement opportunities to try to develop a more stable economy with a more sustainable base.

Donal Traynor introduced himself as Group Chief Executive of Community Finance Ireland (CFI), an all-island provider of social finance to social enterprises and the third sector economy. CFI has made €90 million available over the last 20-plus years and it's continuously looking to push the boundaries of what it invests in, with some innovative initiatives happening at the moment.

Ingrid McElroy leads on the Community Benefit Programme for the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board, which is set to transition into Children's Hospital Ireland (comprising the three children's hospitals) in Dublin 8 with a brief around diversity, inclusion and community engagement. She confirmed that for the new children's hospital, the board pioneered social consideration clauses in the contract.

Mr Gordon characterised Ms McElroy as a stalwart and one of the first dedicated community benefit coordinators in Ireland, leading the way in speaking about the advantages of social enterprise at the very early stages. He asked her why it was important to do procurement?

Addressing public procurement specifically, Ms McElroy explained that the community came to the hospital board with an opportunity for urban regeneration. This resulted in an employment clause asking the contractor to engage with the local economy and social enterprises. Singling out Mr Gordon as her educator in social enterprise, she emphasised, 'we wanted to practice what we preached and so the development board spearheaded some of the first reserve contracts being used in public procurement dedicated to social enterprises'.

Ms Quinn addressed the question of why we would want to spend taxpayers' and ratepayers' money on social enterprises and circular economy organisations by saying that it's very important for DCC to grow, develop and support a city that is sustainable into the future. 'We're supporting a new Community Wealth Building<sup>28</sup> methodology, so rather than taking an extractive approach that will take wealth from the community, we're looking at the generative approach to keep wealth in the community. That can be across procurement or HR'. Describing it as a slow process, she is confident we will get there and proposed bringing in other large or small public or private sector organisations, such as hospitals or universities, that are invested in Dublin to get all that wealth and power of procurement. She believes that it's all about 'procurement by values' to allow equal opportunities for all. For large or small organisations, Ms Quinn suggested that slight tweaks in procurement can help. She pointed out that procurement is only one piece while recruitment is another, proposing that large organisations look at where they might recruit and see how many people have come from marginalised communities and what's stopping them from progressing

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<sup>28</sup> [Community Wealth Building in Dublin – Implementation Plan](#)

through an organisation. The council wants to ensure that it's not wasting taxpayers' and ratepayers' money with legal claims against it. Ms Quinn assured participants that it's striving to get it right and have a solid basis, seeking the values piece once requirements are met.

Mr Gordon proposed: CFI is helping community organisations up and down the country but you need to make money. You give money to organisations and they give it back because they earn revenue and have models to be able to make it sustainable. Is that right?

On the theme of open doors, Mr Traynor described the real circular economy as more of a revolving door because CFI lends money subject to interest to community-based organisations and social enterprises and they pay this back. When these businesses go through the conventional banking system with their social impact and mission, banks are slow to invest as they deal in hard cash and don't believe the figures are conducive to their risk appetite compared to lending to a conventional private enterprise. He said that CFI was filling a market failure by providing finance only to organisations that are creating a social impact but also have that important repayment capacity. As a social enterprise itself, CFI focuses heavily on the enterprise aspect and earned income to sustain growth and development. Should CFI fail as the only all-island provider of social finance, a lot of organisations won't be able to access debt. He surmised that nobody gets involved in the space thinking they want to set up a business and get a large loan but that it's all about getting the ball rolling with grants. 'You get to a plateau where you've covered overhead costs and passed the early stage of growth. Now you need to go to the next step but maybe the grants don't fit your needs, so debt finance becomes an important aspect of the funding system'.

Mr Gordon continued: The banks have a business model and are on the open market with shareholders while CFI manages funds for social enterprise, if they fail and hold your loans, then CFI fails so it's important that they succeed. Can you tell me more about that risk and why this event is important?

Mr Traynor elaborated that over the past 14 years, CFI has funded €40 million in the south and £40 million in the north of the country. Of the former, only €47,000 has 'gone bad', something he attributes to the fact that the people borrowing money have a needed business and are not just trying to make money or create a legacy. 'If we don't succeed, there'll be a big loss to society so there's an awful lot of community buy-in in terms of what we're doing'. He emphasised this as a very important aspect, nodding to Barry Simms, the Head of Community Finance in the Republic, and why CFI invests time in personal relationship building. He elaborated that if it took on thousands of clients a year, it wouldn't have time to sit down with them all. Repeating what Sean Mullen of Third Space<sup>29</sup> mentioned at the tenth anniversary of Social Finance Foundation<sup>30</sup>, that Sean thinks about the Third Space loan and not wanting to let Donal Traynor down, the same holds true for other organisations who value these personal relationships.

Mr Gordon stated: The purpose of this is hardnosed, social enterprises sell products and services and Rethink Ireland deals with these people every day. What's the meaning of today for Rethink funded organisations (as you give out grants in addition to supports)?

Mr Ryan said that it's amplified by the endorsement from IPB Insurance<sup>31</sup> specifically focused on social enterprise over the last five years. Taking up the good point made by Mr Gordon, it was not about social

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<sup>29</sup> [Third Space Café](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Social Finance Foundation](#)

<sup>31</sup> [IPB Insurance](#)

enterprises coming in for cash grants, supports and capacity building so that they return for the same again. 'The whole idea is that you're building sustainability over time, which is why we try to work with organisations over three years to help them have a plan'. He recommended starting with the end in mind, e.g. we have a €50,000 turnover in 2022 and want to get to €500,000 so how do we get there? He described it as multifaceted, like any commercial enterprise, with the social impact that's driving the social enterprise too. For over 112 social enterprises supported by Rethink Ireland over the past five years, the lessons are the same, 'we need to shout louder and prouder about the type of organisations in the room and to highlight why they're different'. He repeated the great quote by Karen Lee, CEO of Sensational Kids<sup>32</sup> that provides services to children with additional needs, who says, 'we're like any other business, it's what we do with the profit that makes us different'. He firmly believes that we need to promote what's distinctive and special about being a social enterprise to raise awareness, crediting the event as a great example of brilliant organisations talking about their uniqueness. Asked for a social enterprise story, Mr Ryan nominated Bounce Back Recycling<sup>33</sup> in East Galway that trains and supports traveller men and women into employment with mattress recycling. He outlined how Mark Ward and his team saw a problem, in that there were 600,000 mattresses being sent to landfills each year, and had a business idea that could also tackle a social issue. The business received money from Rethink Ireland, Pobal<sup>34</sup> and the Community Services Programme as well as direct support from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Social Enterprise Development Fund (endorsed by IBP Insurance and the DRCD). And it's also part of Rethink's Growth Fund that delivers €250,000 per annum for three years. Its plan was to initially deliver 3,000 mattresses and then 20,000, and now, with machinery, it can deliver 100,000. Mr Ryan used this as a perfect example of starting with the end in mind. These types of organisations are as big as other businesses going into the LEOs but we don't shout loud enough about it, he concluded.

Mr Traynor chose Teach na Daoine<sup>35</sup> as a social enterprise that had gone on to be sustainable. It's a Family Resource Centre on the outskirts of Monaghan town that began 10 years ago and is connected to a larger social housing estate. Originally, a Centra supermarket on the edge of the estate was connected to a semi-detached four-bedroom property. The Family Resource Centre had money to buy the property but not to redevelop and stock the shop so CFI provided this fit-out funding, providing 17 jobs in a town where a majority of the population depended on social welfare benefits. According to Mr Traynor, the residents had previously been buying products from the shop that lined private pockets but now not only are these young people getting work experience and being trained in retail management, they're also getting important commercial experience before they go out into the rest of the town. He explained how these people were always being stigmatised and weren't being given that start because of their address. Now they have an opportunity and reason to do that work.

Mr Gordon suggested: There's a community-based organisation operating a shop, where no one knows the difference but it has this particular motive to do well for the community it serves and those employed by it. Can you share a story where it was important for social enterprises to work with you to deliver something of value because our children's future is reliant on good partnerships?

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<sup>32</sup> [Sensational Kids](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Bounce Back Recycling](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Pobal](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Teach na Daoine](#)

Ms McElroy commented on examples of social enterprises the board has worked with in the health sector to assist those marginalised from employment and improve the health of the community. She spoke about developing a health education programme for children and two local social enterprises that do office cleaning and catering for the hospital restaurant. 'None of the staff know it's a social enterprise but when they're told that these are people who might otherwise not have a chance at employment, they're very interested in supporting it'. Admitting that a hospital is a niche business where it's difficult to work with social enterprises, Ms McElroy enthused that they've shown they can do it. It's also about thinking down the line and for social enterprises to consider what hospital staff, the children and their families need.

Mr Gordon said: This is holistic as the hospital is dealing with the most vulnerable in society being able to have opportunities to aid communities outside that and beyond. We're of Dublin and there are issues here that Dublin City Council can help solve, so how can people get involved with the council?

Ms Quinn pointed out various things that DCC gets involved with as it has a stamp on so much around the community. Part of Community Wealth Building initiative and SoCircular is to try to lift social enterprise and circular economy from a niche to a mainstream part of the economy as it's very wise and financially prudent. By having all of the economy participating, you reduce social problems and health and stress issues on an intergenerational timeframe as more people are participating in society. If you want to take a cold approach to it, she highlighted, that makes sense but in terms of building communities, it's the right thing. The council is looking at this increased mainstreaming, 'instead of being a small piece of something that is nice to do, it's a totally appropriate economic approach to take. And to do that in a stable way that gives people the sense of a longer timeframe than a very short contract'.

Mr Gordon invited the panel to share last thoughts on the 'open door' and being available to chat?

Ms Quinn hopes to try and draw as many people as possible into Community Wealth Building. She recommended looking at the tender site that will be changed, and encouraged social enterprises to have the confidence not to feel that they're purely offering a nice, social and ethic-based product but rather one that somebody will be glad to have.

Mr Ryan acknowledged that Rethink Ireland was fortunate to be created by government, backed by the DRCD and working with private investors that are creating funds. He alluded to the Social Enterprise Step-Up Fund, from the Tomar Trust and the DRCD on Rethink's website and other social enterprise funds that will become available in 2023. He also confirmed that the deadline for the Urban Uplift Fund<sup>36</sup> (multiyear funding) for Dublin enterprises, backed by JP Morgan and the DRCD, has been extended with further information available on the Rethink website. Going forward, he advised social enterprises to understand what their next ask is, be that financial or non-financial support or capacity building, and to identify in advance where they might get that funding from. He applauded Dublin City Council for encouraging opportunities for social enterprise and Minister Smyth's open door offer and urged participants to have a clear plan, articulate the ask and tell their unique story in a structured way. He summarised his guidance as planning ahead, looking at available supports and executing accordingly.

Ms McElroy reiterated that procurement is difficult in the health sector. For the children's hospital, they plan to hand down to big contractors and suppliers so, in future, these will connect with social enterprises in their supply chain. Her advice was to make sure social enterprises are visible and heard as it's hard to

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<sup>36</sup> [Rethink Ireland – Urban Uplift Fund](#)

find people in this procurement space. For example, it's very unlikely for social enterprises to be able to bid for a big, specialised cleaning contract. However, the intention is to have part of the clause for contractors specifying that they need to connect with social enterprises as part of their supply chain providing services to the hospital. Speaking about the movement for socially responsible public procurement, Ms McElroy believes it's important to think about contractors being able to connect with social enterprises. 'They need to be able to find you and you need to have the service or product that a contractor needs and wants'.

Mr Traynor suggested participants check out CFI's website for film footage of case studies and client experiences<sup>37</sup> as well as the Spotify podcast series<sup>38</sup>. He also encouraged participants to check out a two-year research project led by Rethink Ireland in conjunction with Dublin City University and the Irish Social Enterprise Network<sup>39</sup>. This study found that while there's no shortage of cash to give loan finance of €30,000 to €500,000 to social enterprises, they realised that start-up social enterprises aren't ready to take on all that debt and pay it back on a capital interest basis from the outset. The research, therefore, looked at the financial instruments being used in Europe and where it would make sense to adopt them into the Irish marketplace. They narrowed it down to one and Mr Traynor was delighted to announce that the department has ring-fenced a portion of the budget to roll out Europe's first ever loan-grant (or non-repayable loan) hybrid product next year<sup>40</sup>. Calling it very innovative in European terms, as it has never been done before, this grant is primarily targeted at early stage social enterprises and first-time borrowers, particularly those staffed by migrants, travellers, former prisoners, women and young people. 'It's about trying to introduce the whole concept of social finance to social enterprises and organisations that were always afraid of it out of concern for their repayment capacity'. He described it as unsecured lending coupled with grant and nonfinancial business support plus a credit guarantee from the European Investment Fund, expressing confidence that it's going to be a good thing for social enterprise. There will be roadshows taking place in locations including Donegal, Cork, Galway and Dublin in two weeks' time, with dates and full project details on [www.socialfinance.ie](http://www.socialfinance.ie).

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<sup>37</sup> [Community Finance Ireland – Client Stories](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Community Finance Ireland - Podcast](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Social Finance – Joint Research Project](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Hybrid Social Finance Loan 2023 - 2024](#)



#### 4.7 Fireside Chat - Leyla Karaha, YourY Network & KPesa

Mr Gordon: I'm delighted to welcome a board member and my boss at the Irish Social Enterprise Network, Leyla Karaha, who founded YourY Network<sup>41</sup> and KPesa<sup>42</sup> and has worked in the social economy space for a while. Can you tell us about these?

Leyla Karaha opened by telling participants that the YourY Network started as one woman's social entrepreneurship journey, which she defined as lonely. In trying to build a community around her, she began with one networking event in 2019 that grew to embody a global community. With 100 people signing up and 80 attending the inaugural event, for some it was the first time they had heard of social entrepreneurship, so Ms Karaha realised it was important to spread the word. Holding events every two months, they cancelled them from April 2020 and went online from May due to COVID-19. By going online, there was a bigger reach and they connected people from all over the world every month to share their journeys and learnings.

Mr Gordon continued: You began with a problem and didn't know where to turn to find a solution to setting up your own thing, so please tell us about KPesa.

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<sup>41</sup> [YourY Network](#)

<sup>42</sup> [KPesa](#)

Ms Karaha founded KPesa as a new social innovation fintech that is a crowdfunding platform to help women entrepreneurs gain access to finance (loans) to grow their businesses. Having grown up in Tanzania and then visited on holiday, she had seen women in business at the same level as when she left them 20 years ago and didn't understand how their businesses weren't growing. In researching the problem, she found that 70% of female entrepreneurs worldwide have no access to financial services and that the financial gap is over €300 billion for women entrepreneurs.

Mr Gordon said: You've gone on this journey to be able to support entrepreneurs and on any given evening on YourY Network there are international speakers and attendees. Living in Ireland with your global perspective, how does Ireland's social enterprise movement compare to other countries?

'The global social enterprise movement is growing so fast and a lot has changed in five years. The ecosystem is buzzing here and that's amazing to see. It's the same around the world as social entrepreneurship is becoming mainstream which is really great'. Ms Karaha confirmed that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is working hard in Tanzania to revive and grow the system in social entrepreneurship. She hopes that in the next five years, everyone will know what social entrepreneurship is and the work social enterprises are doing to make it mainstream.

Mr Gordon asked: Is circular economy assisting with the environment too?

When it comes to environmental issues and global warming, making people more aware of it along with increased environmental, social and governance (ESG) funding can help grow the ecosystem, she continued.

Mr Gordon: Having worked with lots of different organisations, have you any last observations?

For KPesa, Ms Karaha talked about the New Frontiers<sup>43</sup> programme phase one taking place next summer (2023) with a pre-accelerator programme by NDRC<sup>44</sup> and pitching in October (2022). She encouraged participants to follow social media for NDRC and KPesa and go online to watch the pitch event on 14<sup>th</sup> October on the YourY network website.

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<sup>43</sup> [New Frontiers](#)

<sup>44</sup> [NDRC](#)



L-R: Dr Joanne Rourke, Prof Deiric O'Broin, Cllr Claire Byrne, Caroline Power, Dr Sabrina Dekker, Aidan

#### 4.8 Panel Discussion 3 - SoCircular Dublin Challenges and Opportunities

Panel:

- Panel Chair: Dr Joanne Rourke, Resource Efficiency Officer, Eastern-Midlands Waste Region Office
- Prof Deiric O'Broin, Professor of Public Policy Practice, Dublin City University<sup>45</sup>
- Claire Byrne, Councillor, Dublin City Council<sup>46</sup>
- Caroline Power, Programme Manager, Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan<sup>47</sup>
- Dr Sabrina Dekker, Climate Action Coordinator, Dublin City Council<sup>48</sup>
- Aidan Sweeney, Head of Enterprise and Regulatory Affairs, Irish Business & Employers Confederation<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> [Dublin City University](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Cllr Claire Byrne](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Dublin City Council](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Irish Business & Employers Confederation \(Ibec\)](#)

Dr Rourke began by inviting the panellists to introduce themselves, their work and how it relates to the circular economy.

Prof Deiric O'Broin is a professor at Dublin City University (DCU) School of Law and Government and the Head of Social Enterprise, having run social enterprise programmes for the past 20 years. As a teacher in public policy, he believes it's important to consider the policy framework for the social and circular economy.

Claire Byrne is a Green Party Councillor for the southeast inner city and Chair of the Climate Action Plan Subcommittee for DCC. She feels that circular economy ties in very neatly and importantly with what the council is trying to achieve with the Climate Action Plan at a local level and how we can reach the waste targets set out in the plan. Her job is to help steer policy in the right direction and embed climate action into the decision-making process in the policies and to also do that for the circular economy.

Caroline Power is Programme Manager for the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan to 2024. The plan involves the four Dublin local authorities and LEOs, and is one of nine national plans<sup>50</sup>. The plan was launched in April 2022 by the Tánaiste on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, with the main ambition of supporting regional balanced growth. She emphasised that climate action is a key element of the low carbon and digitalisation transition within the plan.

Dr Sabrina Dekker, Climate Action Coordinator for DCC, has a role to ensure we deliver on our climate action targets. The circular economy as part of climate action is about helping reduce waste targets, engagement with businesses, and perhaps most importantly, the just transition and seeing the opportunities social and circular economy provide for employment.

Aidan Sweeney of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) is in charge of enterprise and regional affairs policy and the Dublin Eastern region, so he is familiar with local authorities there. He works with Ms Power on the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan and also looks after procurement policy. He clarified that while IBEC is a national business organisation, it tries to solve problems of businesses at a local level as well by recognising that everything is interconnected. 'It's about how we look at decisions that may be relevant to businesses in Dublin today, such as those being taken in American boardrooms or around the policy tables in Brussels, and how we make sure they have a voice and input into what they need?'

Dr Rourke continued the conversation, asking: collaboration is so important in that transition to circular economy. In the last few years, have you noticed a difference in your job in connecting with local authorities for businesses because of moving towards circular economy?

While Mr Sweeney's colleagues may talk to him about the circular economy and the digital economy, for IBEC, there's one economy and the question is how to embed the two elements into ordinary, everyday business practices. Talking about the need for entrepreneurship and a better start-up culture, he highlighted the fantastic participants in the room who happen to be in certain segments, asking how we show that it's real. For everyday policies, how do we make sure that we don't look at this as an isolated sector or segment? 'It's back to supply chains and everything we've faced with Brexit, COVID-19, inflation and other pressures. This is a real opportunity so how do we allow social enterprises to sell into businesses and the public sector, whether it's direct or through supply chains, and how do you make those connections and close those loops?' He also questioned how we get investment into social enterprises to

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<sup>50</sup> [Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment - Regional Enterprise Plans](#)

allow them to scale if they want to and how we ensure the environment adjusts to that. His key point was that a lot of policies are made on one side of government but how do you make sure that work by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the agencies beyond it embeds circular economy so that they're not forgotten or treated as a 'nice to have' but are made a business priority.

Dr Rourke proposed: What are the opportunities for Dublin by moving towards a circular economy?

ClIr Byrne called out the drive and innovation that could be seen in the room as inspiring. She mentioned initiatives such as the Rediscovery Centre<sup>51</sup>, MODOS<sup>52</sup>, Recreate<sup>53</sup> and other social enterprises as examples of the interest in looking at circular economy and identifying employment opportunities (such as people making a living out of waste), saying that we need to go in this direction. As well as employment opportunities, she stressed the social and environmental opportunities that the circular economy presents. She named Prague as a European city that is early in the circular economy but nevertheless is a beacon for doing exciting things. One idea, that she has put as a motion for the next Climate Action, Environment and Energy Strategic Policy Committee<sup>54</sup> meeting, is to use the Bring Centres for people to bring bulky waste once a month instead of leaving furniture outside houses or having to pay for it to be collected. People can come and swap items so that it becomes a social event and a nice day out, something she would love to see happening in Dublin in the near future. ClIr Byrne also spoke about the Singing Waste Truck in Taipei, which has a terrible waste situation, where people brought their waste out and could chat on the street, an initiative that was important during COVID-19 when citizens were isolating. She referenced the many co-benefits of moving to a circular economy as the employment, social and most importantly, the environmental perspectives, citing the 45% of emissions coming from our overconsumption and sense of convenience. 'We'll see things changing in the not too distant future, with circular economy legislation at a national level which will drive change at a local level too. I'm excited to see the opportunities that will bring for the city'.

Dr Rourke: A key thing about circular economy is that it's not just about the economy and finance but also other things like the social and environmental aspects. In investigating the circular economy from an academic standpoint and being part of the first focus group on the MODOS circular economy training course held by Dublin City Council, can you talk about the idea of learning from elsewhere and the opportunities for Ireland, Dublin and for businesses?

Prof O'Broin acknowledged both the opportunities and the big challenges. For him, the most obvious opportunity is the chance to localise economic activity and supply chains in a way that goes against the current trend. As we've globalised the economy over the past 20 to 40 years, supply chains have become increasingly international. He said the psychological but policy shift towards the circular economy gets people to think about local supply chains and reuse, reduce, recycle and upcycle, all positive things. He highlighted the challenge in learning from other European cities is that the Irish local government (urban) system is unique. It's the 46<sup>th</sup> weakest out of 47 in the Council of Europe, with only Moldova having a narrower range of competencies and autonomy, and that creates quite a lot of problems. Taking the work of the Citizen's Assembly over the past year, in Dublin, the four local authorities had a pot of about €2.5 billion to spend. A similar size city region in any Northern European country would have €10 billion (a

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<sup>51</sup> [Rediscovery Centre](#)

<sup>52</sup> [MODOS](#)

<sup>53</sup> [Recreate Ireland](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Climate Action, Environment & Energy Strategic Policy Committee – Dublin City Council](#)

400% increase) because they do more. According to Prof O’Broin, therein lies a challenge but also a potential opportunity with the significant move to the devolution of powers to the city or city region, as demonstrated through the Citizen’s Assembly. ‘There are significant opportunities to localise the economy and build a much more robust, closer-to-the-ground local government system in Dublin which will have a huge impact on pushing a circular economy agenda’.

Dr Rourke asked: Please tell us about the very interesting shared-island project and what we hope to do with it and learn from it.

Announced the previous week, Belfast City Council and Dublin City Council submitted an application to the Shared-Island Fund to undertake a feasibility study investigating the connected circular economy between Belfast and Dublin. Dr Dekker explained that the study would address future-proofing opportunities in transport (such as electric vehicles and associated wastage and batteries), renewable energy (given wind and solar project lifespans and upcycling thereafter), construction, and social housing (how do we address the embodied carbon in that?). Another project in Dublin is looking at using digital twins to make decisions about retrofitting and demolishing, which has a big carbon footprint. Other areas of opportunity are in mobile phones and the electrical sector, such as the one-plug policy, and how to deal with the food sector (farm to fork and back) and support restaurants in interacting with the agricultural sector. ‘There is €250,000 for the feasibility study to look at the opportunities ahead. And this will hopefully lead into future capital projects that will help us decide if we need to build infrastructure that underpins the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor and how to support industry to develop’.

Dr Rourke continued: The Greater Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan is about moving Dublin to a low carbon economy. Can you tell us more about the plan, its objective and the likely impact on Dublin?

Ms Power outlined that the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan has five objectives, including scaling up SMEs and connecting them to each other, and supporting placemaking in and placebranding of Dublin as a region on behalf of the four local authorities from the international and regional perspectives. ‘Aligned to government policy, the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan is the driver behind the low carbon and digitalisation transitions, which means working with the economy collectively to see how we can do that and including digitalisation within that process’. Another aim is to review the skills and talent landscape to see how it’s going within the circular economy. For the plan’s low carbon transition objective, one of the actions is to set up a Circular Hub and SoCircular is among the first steps in that process, something Ms Power praised. The 2023 Summit is about working and engaging together as one of the big challenges is the communication piece and social enterprises moving collectively as part of that. In looking at talent and skills, maybe there’s a gap within that market (the next panel would address that). She stressed that it’s also important to look at the key supports needed for circular enterprises and social enterprises. ‘The Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan is about a bottom-up approach so that people on the ground can inform government and the Department of Enterprise about the supports that are needed’.

Dr Rourke asked: What are the challenges for a business in the transition to the circular economy?

Mr Sweeney queried if it was a business that is consuming and producing or one selling to that business. Part of it, he continued, comes back to regulation in particular areas like food waste, which he took as an example. He asked: If you’re moving into secondary resource materials, how do you certify that they’re up to standard? Can enough be produced? Where are decisions happening? Is the purchasing taking place locally or globally? If it’s on the public sector side, who are the decision-makers? He suggested that it’s

part regulation and part commercial availability and engagement. 'It's realising that it's so big that not one person can do it alone but rather it needs a collective approach, and it's the same for policymakers using joined-up thinking'.

If a company is selling to a large company or public sector, he questioned how one finds out who the decision-maker is, especially for a new, different or innovative product. He referred to one of the things Ms Power 'undersold' in the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan as the particular objective around 'Meet the Buyer' events for the public sector but potentially the private sector too. Mr Sweeney put forward that it's not the procurement or finance officer people should talk to, because they're looking at costs and process, but the decision-maker who says they're going to change purchasing so you can influence and promote to them. He believes that putting pressure on the public sector, IBEC and other business groups to run more of these showcasing and Meet the Buyer type events for the public and private sectors is key. Separately, using the business bodies to give voice to a lot of businesses that are start-ups but may not be members of these groups yet can help. He wondered how we get them to grow to scale that they may become members, and how we tackle the regulatory side and make sure that in day-to-day policy implementation, we're thinking about businesses operating in this space and tackling those challenges on a sectoral basis.

Dr Rourke: In moving to the circular economy away from the capitalist system, there's a different mindset politically. What do you see as the challenges from the political viewpoint?

Cllr Byrne spoke about the local aspect as a councillor and the challenges that she can only interpret as being a lack of understanding, will or joined-up thinking. 'While there are a lot of great things going on in the city from a circular economy perspective, we're not doing the easy things or picking the low-lying fruit. Apart from domestic and commercial waste, which is privatised, our public waste management systems have little source separation and are decades behind other European cities. Admitting that belly bins are brilliant from a resource management perspective, as they're only collected when full and use digital technology, they don't separate anything at source so we're not reaching our recycling targets with public waste. Likewise, she alluded to the mixed or recyclable public recycling bins being on the third pilot and ironically sponsored by Coca-Cola, one of the biggest plastic polluters in the world.

Cllr Byrne affirmed that there is no public food waste system, even though initiatives and legislation are driving our restaurants, bars and the hospitality industry away from single-use plastics, coffee cups and kitchenware, 'we're not disposing of them correctly'. As a Green Party member, she said she was eight years trying to bring forward different solutions and that the slowness of the uptake was incredibly frustrating. She pointed out some domestic food waste challenges in Dublin City, for example, the lack of wheelie bins and composting for terraced houses. She stressed that she was four years waiting for approval of a pilot scheme on shared bins for these houses on the north and south side of the city. The same held true for water drinking fountains, a very simple solution to avoid people having to buy bottles of water as they can carry their own refillable bottles around, similar to what we're doing with coffee cups. She confirmed it took her three years to get a fountain put in Chatham Street and she's looking at 2023 or 2024 to get another three fountains installed. Reiterating that the slowness and lack of vision and will at the council level was frustrating, she hopes we will see changes as part of the new Circular Economy Act. The council will have to develop its own Circular Economy Plan and do a circular scan to identify gaps in circularity to inform that plan. 'The circular economy is so critical to our transition to a low carbon economy and the survival of the planet, yet we're still in pilot mode. This is one of the biggest challenges'.

While appreciating that there are challenges from the business perspective, she feels that the focus has to be on how we manage our public and hospitality waste. On the need to develop a really good food waste strategy, Cllr Byrne referred to the 'Edible Dublin' food strategy and Dr Dekker, but urged that we need to step up the pace.

Dr Rourke posed a follow up question: What's the one thing you would like Dublin City Council to do in the next six months?

Cllr Byrne acknowledged that there are some good things in the City Development Plan<sup>55</sup> in terms of embedded carbon in buildings and prioritising the reuse of buildings rather than the demolishing and rebuilding of them. She also promoted the motion she has tabled that Dublin might join some European partners in the Circular Cities Declaration. Given the need to consider all the different parts that make a city function, she continued the list to include her hope to see a focus on food waste, Circular Sundays with low traffic or car-free streets and markets, swap shops and bulky waste recycling days that double as a social event.

Ms Power highlighted the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan and the action in it on examining the feasibility of establishing a Circular Hub to promote engagement among business and social enterprises, and collaborating and communicating together to get tangible initiatives out of it.

Dr Dekker clarified that Dublin and Cork are included in the 100 climate neutral or Net Zero Cities<sup>56</sup>. As part of that, we need to do a climate city contract that includes a Climate City Action Plan and an investment plan to focus on making Dublin City a circular economy. In the context of the Development Plan and 15-minute city, she surmised, 'it's hard to repair your favourite shoes close to home so we should be a 15-minute repair city as well'.

Mr Sweeney reiterated Cllr Byrne's important point in asking what the role of Dublin City Council is in this area. While it can do waste and other measures, it needs to move on to the circular economy but is not expected to do this alone. It needs to be networked internationally, Dublin is a member of Eurocities<sup>57</sup> but that's the only group that all of the other cities in the Republic of Ireland are connected to globally, whereas Belfast is developing its involvement in the C40<sup>58</sup> initiative along with other groups and cities to enhance the circular economy. The recovery strategies (from COVID-19) for most cities across Europe mention sustainability, circular economy, and diversity and inclusion but this is not the case for Dublin. Mr Sweeney said cities are talking to each other, which brokers partnerships and potential EU funding opportunities, and recommended using those networks and learning that can be deployed locally.

Prof O'Broin emphasised, 'we need to make the decision psychologically that there are no more special initiatives but that circular economy is embedded in all programmes. All the spend has to be underpinned by circular economy so that it's mainstreamed'.

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<sup>55</sup> [Dublin City Development Plan 2022-2028](#)

<sup>56</sup> [Net Zero Cities](#)

<sup>57</sup> [Eurocities](#)

<sup>58</sup> [C40 Cities](#)



#### 4.9 Fireside Chat - Steve O'Reilly, Rediscovery Centre

Dr Rourke commenced the Fireside chat by asking: There's a very big international conference coming to Dublin next year as a result of a lot of work that went into the application and a competitive process that we won. Steve O'Reilly put the application together with assistance from a committee. Can you tell me about the conference?

Steve O'Reilly enthused that Ireland won a competitive bid to host a four-day international conference, the Circular Economy Hotspot – Dublin 2023<sup>59</sup>, which will take place at the end of May 2023. It's a branded event held in a different city each year and previously hosted by Amsterdam, Glasgow, Barcelona and the Nordic cities. It celebrates the particular way in which circular economy has manifested in a location with regard to industry, policy and culture. Officially declaring the Hotspot open for business, Mr O'Reilly welcomed it as the first opportunity to showcase circular economy in Dublin and the successes that have made it thrive here. There will be a lot of international circular economy experts attending so it's an opportunity to learn about what is happening elsewhere. Key parts include a launch day followed by a conference day with talks, keynote addresses, a showcase of social enterprise and circular economy organisations, and innovation and ideation sessions on specific topics. The 3 core pillars are (i) policy in practice (those we're developing in Ireland and would like to share as well as those from abroad that could be adopted here), (ii) innovation and collaboration, and (iii) civic engagement (this is good because circular economy events are usually industrially focused and inaccessible).

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<sup>59</sup> [Circular Economy Hotspot – Dublin 2023](#)

'Research by the Rediscovery Centre revealed that only one in four people have heard the term circular economy before and only 6% feel they have a good grasp of it'. Mr O'Reilly said that the aim of the event was to put Dublin on the circular economy map and put circular economy on the map for Dubliners. The last day will be a series of tours, where national and international delegations will be brought to exemplars of projects, organisations and initiatives in the four thematic areas of social enterprise, food and the bioeconomy, design and manufacturing, and the built environment. The visits will be to initiatives that are leading the charge in Ireland on these topics and they will be followed by talks and ideation sessions to dive deeper into them.

Dr Rourke: What will this mean for Dublin as a city and moving us towards a circular city?

Mr O'Reilly highlighted the various opportunities: to learn about what the circular economy is in practice, to demonstrate to the international community what we've got, to show the nation what's happening in Dublin, and engage with Dubliners on the lived experience of the circular economy.

Dr Rourke: It's an opportunity for businesses to link in with citizens on the circular economy. It's both an international and national event as it's not restricted to Dubliners so the regions are encouraged to join in. How do businesses engage with the Hotspot?

Mr O'Reilly advised participants, businesses and interested parties to scan the QR codes on the business cards provided at their stand, which links directly to the Hotspot event website for further information and also to express their interest in supporting the event via the online form on the website. Anyone interested can also sign-up to receive updates, can follow @CEHotspotDubon Twitter<sup>60</sup> or LinkedIn<sup>61</sup> and can find out all the latest information at [www.dublincirculareconomyhotspot.com](http://www.dublincirculareconomyhotspot.com).

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<sup>60</sup> [Circular Economy Hotspot – Dublin 2023: Twitter Account](#)

<sup>61</sup> [Circular Economy Hotspot – Dublin 2023: LinkedIn Account](#)



L-R: Bróna Ní Chobhthaigh, Dr Lucia Walsh, Natasha Kinsella, Deirdre Ní Cheallaigh

#### 4.10 Panel Discussion 4 – SoCircular Education, Employment and Skills

Panel:

- Panel Chair: Dr Joanne Rourke, Resource Efficiency Officer, Eastern-Midlands Waste Region Office
- Bróna Ní Chobhthaigh, Head of Communications and Stakeholder Relations, Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI)<sup>62</sup>
- Dr Lucia Walsh, Lecturer and Researcher, Technological University Dublin<sup>63</sup>
- Natasha Kinsella, Manager, Dublin Regional Skills Forum<sup>64</sup>
- Deirdre Ní Cheallaigh, Strategy and Planning Coordinator, Rediscovery Centre<sup>65</sup>

Dr Rourke began by asking each panellist to introduce themselves, their work and where that fits into the circular economy.

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<sup>62</sup> [Business in the Community Ireland](#)

<sup>63</sup> [Technological University Dublin](#)

<sup>64</sup> [Dublin Regional Skills Forum](#)

<sup>65</sup> [Rediscovery Centre](#)

Bróna Ní Chobhthaigh, introduced herself as Head of Communications and Stakeholder Relations at Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI), which is the leading advisor on sustainability in the country. The organisation advises and supports businesses across Ireland to dig into sustainability. She clarified that 'EESG' stands for Economy (how you make good investment decisions), Environment (low carbon, nature positive), Social inclusion (in workplaces) and Governance (ensuring structures are in place to ensure we're doing the right job). BITC helps member companies to think about how they undertake the systemic change they need to deliver on sustainability. It also provides education and employment programmes across Ireland, such as: EmployAbility to support people with disabilities and health challenges to return to work, EPIC to support migrants and asylum seekers to enter the workforce, Traveller Employment Programme to support Travellers on their career path, and Time to Count which involves businesses partnering with Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS Schools) to support literacy and numeracy development. Details for each are on the website in the Business Action section<sup>66</sup>

Dr Rourke: It's wide-ranging and BITCI has been working in this space for some time, as has the Rediscovery Centre. You're highlighting three pillars of sustainability: economic, social and environmental.

Dr Lucia Walsh, lecturer and researcher at Technology University (TU) Dublin, works in the Faculty of Business in the School of Marketing and Entrepreneurship. She explained that TU Dublin incorporates sustainability and the principle of circular economy into its teaching and research, and that she chairs a programme for a postgraduate in sustainability leadership in business and co-designs other programmes and modules within TUDublin in this area.

Natasha Kinsella, Manager at the Dublin Regional Skills Forum, said that she felt at home as the event was all about networking and making connections. Her role at the forum, a national initiative of the government under the Department of Further and Higher Education, is to provide a conduit between business and education providers at all levels, be it higher or further level, Skillnet Ireland or the LEOs<sup>67</sup>. She explained that the forum is trying to support businesses by articulating the skills need and that the transition to circular economy will only be enabled by the capacity of skill sets of an entire organisation. More importantly for businesses today, she believes, is knowing the funded state provision that's there to meet and support the skills and talent need.

Deirdre Ní Cheallaigh, Strategy and Planning Coordinator at the Rediscovery Centre, commended the vibrant occasion. She mentioned that circular economy is at the heart of everything the Rediscovery Centre does and its mission is to lead Ireland's transition to a circular economy. Its origin is in the Ballymun Regeneration Project from 18 years ago and it has four reuse social enterprises that are exemplars in reuse and labour activation. Additionally, it has a remit as the National Centre for the Circular Economy around education, collaboration, research and advocacy (to look at the policy environment and make sure it's supportive of circular economy).

Dr Rourke: The panel is addressing employment, education and skills for the circular economy. We often speak of reuse and repair as important parts of it and yet we've lost so many skills in this area and perhaps other skills we don't even know we need. Can you explain how you're looking at that and give examples of the skills we need to build up?

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<sup>66</sup> [BITCI Business Action on Employment](#)

<sup>67</sup> [Local Enterprise Office \(LEOs\)](#)

Ms Kinsella emphasised that the skills gap is the focus to start with in terms of conversations within the fora, and that she's a member of similar groups as Dr Rourke that address skills and the mismatch. She outlined that the difficulty for any business now is to articulate or address what the future skills needs might look like. That's where the forum offers a free service to support businesses in conducting a skills audit that gets down to a granular level on each occupational role within the business. 'When we talk about the circular economy, because of the transition of almost the entire operation, we need to take a bottom-up to top-down level look at the current skills capacity and where the mismatch lies'. In discussions with businesses, the forum has seen that it's not necessarily just technical skill sets but rather softer skills such as leadership, creativity, design and innovation that they can bring to the table. She said that a lot of these skill sets are being addressed through funded provisions, such as TU Dublin that offers Springboard initiatives. However, it's about making companies aware of where they can tap into, depending on the skills mismatch that has been identified, and connecting them to the right provider who can meet that gap. Ms Kinsella is convinced that there's a huge amount on the leadership side but we need to look at all levels of the organisation and where that capacity might lie. For initiatives coming through, it allows businesses to inform policy decisions through the fora and collaborative partners. 'We can't predict that transition and future skills right now to some degree. What we need to do is inform policy so when the likes of TU Dublin are coming up with provisions, it's important for businesses to feed into that in trying to anticipate what that future skill need might be'.

Dr Rourke: With reference to the audit, how do businesses get that done and do you charge for it?

Ms Kinsella confirmed that it's a free one-to-one service, especially for Dublin businesses and SMEs, in recognition that they may not have a person looking after the learning and development space. Through conversations, as opposed to form filling, it can help businesses to assess critical skills needs right now as well as for the medium and longer-term. She described the relationship building piece as a continuum lasting well beyond the skills audit because these needs will change again in six months and a year's time. The forum goes back to each of the providers and if there are provisions there, they make the connection straight away for the business so it can be a quick turnaround. A lot of the state-funded provisions are 90% or 100% funded and that's where the awareness piece for business is critically important. Also, the conversation continues for the longer term and how they feed into other funding streams that may become available as digitalisation and emerging technologies come through. The forum can then assess what that other need might be to feed it back to the provider and deliver on smaller quick hits of modular or micro-credential (short, accredited learning) pieces.

Dr Rourke posed the next question to Dr Lucia Walsh: Can you tell us about the courses you teach and why circular economy modules are part of that? Are most optional or is there a plan to make them core?

Dr Walsh is involved in developing and delivering circular economy modules within courses at TU Dublin. She outlined how, a few years ago, they noticed a great need to incorporate sustainability in general into all of the teaching and research. It was a bottom-up approach gathering colleagues from different disciplines to set up a community of practice called 'SDG [sustainable development goals] literacy'. In parallel, TU Dublin formulated a new strategy built around the SDGs and the three key pillars of people, planet and partnership. It was therefore both a top-down and bottom-up approach coupled with demand from students. Dr Walsh and her colleagues co-created different modules and programmes and one of the milestones is to have SDG-related issues covered in all programmes by 2023. Before sustainability and circular economy are incorporated into different programmes more naturally, TU Dublin has initiated

separate modules, for example, a business sustainability module offered as an option to final year undergraduate business students. Available for the first time in 2021, the module attracted 94 graduates that year, and 145 in 2022, highlighting the demand by students for it to be part of core programmes. 'There's also a part-time postgraduate certificate in sustainability leadership in business, funded through Springboard<sup>68</sup>, that's proving to be in demand and a great success'. According to Dr Walsh, the university created CPD (continuous professional development) for staff to give them the confidence and skills to be able to implement these important issues into their teaching and research.

Dr Rourke: It's exciting to see that progression from optional courses to making sustainability and circular economy core. Can you tell me about training from BITCI and have you noticed greater demand in the last few years as businesses are becoming increasingly aware of circular economy, from hearing about it through understanding it, to realising they have to start moving on it? How's that translating into the training you are doing?

Ms Ní Chobhthaigh wholeheartedly agreed that, 'sustainability is really popular right now and everyone wants to be part of it'. There are the formal requirements that people have to deliver on under the Climate Action Plan and there's more consumer or citizen demand to have ethically conscious and environmentally active corporates. She feels that we're holding people and our businesses to account, although it's not quite clear whether it's a supply or demand issue, 'Are businesses responding because consumers want it or are they reflecting on who they want to be as leaders in the world?' It's evident from BITCI's members that there's a much broader awareness around what sustainability is and within that, what circular economy is. Traditionally and from a policy perspective, she explained, we know that a lot of businesses just consider carbon emissions and how they report on formal elements. Ms Ní Chobhthaigh found that businesses are now very interested in the rounder elements and thinking about nature, the circular economy in the context of how they make economic investments, undertaking responsible technology, the algorithms used in HR, and the social perspective. 'To have a truly circular economy, we need to make sure it's sustainable from a social end. Social economics is about making sure you've got active participation from all parts of society. Our members are increasingly aware not just of the value of that but of the responsibilities they hold in that'.

Dr Rourke: I was on a panel with Dr Ana Davies who does research for Trinity College Dublin around circular economy who mentioned that you cannot have climate action and climate justice without social justice. It's very interesting that businesses are coming to that conclusion themselves. BITC and the Rediscovery Centre have been banging the drum long before it was called the circular economy. The Rediscovery Centre is now the National Centre for Circular Economy and has a Circular Economy Academy – who is it for and how does it work?

Ms Ní Cheallaigh acknowledged feeling like a voice in the wilderness for a while and pointed to the momentum, connections and linkages now being made between circular economy and social enterprise because they're an amazing fit. Endorsed by the Environmental Protection Agency<sup>69</sup>, the Circular Economy Academy<sup>70</sup> is an initiative launched in 2019 involving 12 social enterprises from across Ireland. Praising the wonderful diversity, creativity and innovation of social enterprise, she told the audience that the participants ranged from researchers and retailers to others providing goods and services. It was a

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<sup>68</sup> [Springboard](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\)](#)

<sup>70</sup> [Rediscovery Centre – Circular Economy Academy](#)

mentoring and support programme to help social enterprises expand and adopt circular economy principles into their operations. ‘The programme has been hugely successful, with a number of social enterprises bringing a paint-reuse element into their existing operations like one of the social enterprises in the Rediscovery Centre. This culminated in the launch of the Paint Reuse Network<sup>71</sup> in 2021 incorporating seven members and going from strength to strength’. As well as technical skills, she reiterated Ms Kinsella’s points on entrepreneurship, leadership, self-belief, regional incubators and making connections with local authorities. Ms Ní Cheallaigh enthused that some of the members of the Circular Economy Academy 2.0 were among the exhibitors present. She highlighted this as a peer-to-peer model that facilitates the cross-fertilisation of ideas from within social enterprises that have been pioneers and innovators, with huge knowledge sharing and lessons to learn from one another.

Dr Rourke: From the Dublin Regional Skills Forum perspective, what has been the impact of moving towards a circular economy, getting those skills, and injecting circular principles into business on the competitiveness of Dublin as a place to bring business and employment?

Ms Kinsella believes that it’s an enabler to bring talent in. For Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) clients from the IDA<sup>72</sup> side, when they look at locating in Ireland, the biggest question is around talent. She said that there’s a huge shift in roles being developed because of the circular economy piece –it’s addressing what those roles might look like and what skill sets are required to make sure talent is within the pipeline. And from a competitive perspective, we must ensure the skills capacity and capability to develop those businesses as they continue to grow within the remit of circular economy. Digitalisation has forced a change to the world of work and there’s a wider remit for business to understand what that looks like and what it means in terms of circular economy and communicating that outwards. Ms Kinsella advocated for the likes of the SoCircular event to showcase what businesses are doing and using them as case studies to encourage others to play their part too within the wider Dublin region.

Dr Rourke: Roles are changing within jobs because of circular economy. TU Dublin is seeing a lot of people doing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and sustainability modules, do you think businesses are doing it because they will become more competitive? What are the other reasons?

Dr Walsh affirmed that the postgraduate certificate in sustainability leadership in business, in its second year, has been very successful. Having spoken to businesses before submitting the Springboard application, they knew sustainability was important and had to do something about it but didn’t know where to start. The small medium enterprises (SMEs) in particular felt quite overwhelmed so they went to TU Dublin to understand what it was all about and get the steps they needed to take. ‘The whole programme is structured around giving them knowledge and skills, part of which is a consultancy project that includes a pitching workshop. Students are ready to go with a plan and a pitch to create stakeholder buy-in and implement what they learnt once they finish the course’.

Dr Rourke: What can businesses do to start building their skills and the circular economy skills of their workforces?

Ms Ní Chobhthaigh maintained that businesses are time-poor and there’s not much funding, so she suggested that they keep asking questions of themselves, their staff and peers as this doesn’t take much

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<sup>71</sup> [Paint Reuse Network](#)

<sup>72</sup> [IDA Ireland](#)

time or money. She spoke about positive starts, 'The more you inform yourself and reflect on things businesses can do to change how they operate or consider the impact their business is having, the better'.

Dr Walsh proposed that businesses do the MODOS<sup>73</sup> programme with Dublin City Council, attend TU Dublin events (such as the ConnectED<sup>74</sup> series), and undertake short programmes and micro-credentials. Describing it as a great way to learn quickly, she advocated listening to podcasts as well as following people on LinkedIn. She concluded with advice for business, that they identify real and tangible things they can implement.

Promoting it as an easy call to action, Ms Kinsella recommended that businesses engage with the Dublin Regional Skills Forum because there's a skill set that's required, but for SMEs to navigate that ecosystem is difficult as they're time-poor and in most instances, don't have finance behind them. 'If you engage, we can help you articulate what the need is and connect you to the state-funded provisions that are available through all of us'.

Ms Ní Cheallaigh invited participants to visit the Rediscovery Centre in the repurposed boiler house in Ballymun, commenting that seeing is believing and that everyone would be greeted with a warm welcome. She used it as an exemplar of reuse and the circular economy in action. There's a multitude of resources for employers to tap into and if they want to nurture their employees with new skills, training and experiences, there are a huge amount of hands-on experiential learning experiences available as well as formal tertiary education. She pointed to one fundamental thing as seeing the opportunity and benefits within the circular economy, and championing employees and businesses to think differently through design thinking, looking for solutions and tapping into ingenuity and possibilities. 'It's about taking a benefits approach, even though some people may find this unsettling and struggle with the uncertainty, but there's so much to offer and so much to gain'.

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<sup>73</sup> [MODOS Circular Economy Training](#)

<sup>74</sup> [TU Dublin ConnectED Seminar Series](#)

## 5 Photograph Gallery







