

From repurposed old cotton clothes to landfill plastics, some companies won't throw in the towel on recycling. By Sandra O'Connell

In her late forties Frances Fogarty called time on a successful career as a restaurateur to go back to college and study her first love: fashion. Unfortunately, she found one element of the trade unpalatable. "The toxicity of the textile industry," she says. "I couldn't get over it."

Worldwide it is estimated that a full truckload of textiles is sent for incineration or to landfill every single second. Less than 1 per cent of all textiles produced are recycled into new textiles.

And that's only the damage done once the goods have been made.

"People don't realise the fallout from the protracted use of sprays on cotton over generations," Fogarty says. "It really upset me. I thought, what am I doing contributing to this just so I can make a few dresses? I'm just not doing it."

It was an unexpected stumbling block for someone who had always wanted to study fashion design but whose father had advised against it. Fogarty ended up training as a chef, and ultimately owned her own restaurants and cafés.

"My ethos was always about farm to fork, about slow food," she says. "I carried that forward with me. My values stayed the same." But what to make?

As a year-round sea swimmer near her home in Dingle, Co Kerry, she found her answer. "I saw people in swim robes and thought, I could do that," Fogarty says. "But when I went to buy organic cotton towelling, the same issues around the textile industry arose. It was at that point that I had my eureka moment: recycled towels."

* **Her business.** Lilymais, takes donations of old or unwanted cotton towels and gives them new life by turning them into fun and colourful towelling swim robes, which she sells online. "Like slow food, this is slow fashion," she says.

It also represents the circular economy in action. Awareness that one person's waste is another's valuable raw material has been growing for some time but, as concern about climate change hardens, circularity has moved centre stage at policy level too.

Currently Europe uses eight gigatonnes of materials each year, the vast bulk of which ends up as waste. Less than 10 per cent is reused or recycled. The production and use of these materials are responsible for a quarter of Europe's greenhouse gas emissions, and a third globally. The European Green Deal is the EU's policy response to the environmental damage this causes. At its core there is an effort to move more quickly to minimise waste by squeezing every last

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Frances Fogarty, founder of Dingle company Lilymais, turns unwanted towels into funky swim robes. "This is slow fashion," she says

LILYMAIS



cent's worth of value out of every resource used.

The EU's new circular economy action plan aims to make sustainable products the norm for both consumer and public buyers. It focuses on sectors that use the most resources, and where the potential for circularity is high, such as textiles, construction, packaging, plastics, electronics and IT. In future, new electronics

products will have to be easier to repair and upgrade.

Product-as-a-service business models will be incentivised, with companies keeping ownership of and responsibility for products, such as lawnmowers and cars, throughout their life cycles. Clothes will be made to last longer, and single-use products phased out wherever possible.

Investment in circular business models and production process is to be incentivised. Last year saw the rollout of supports under the government's first circular economy innovation grant scheme (Ceigs). Among the recipients was Novelplast Teoranta in Meath. The business, which was set up in 2019, takes in industrial plastic by-product, reconstitutes it and sells it on. Customers include the companies that supplied the material in the first place.

Managing director Neil Skeffington won't call it waste. "If it has a value on it, it shouldn't be called waste," he says.

Novelplast is part of a consortium that recently received €1.89 million under the government's Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund for its work to transform the plastics industry by drastically reducing the amount of fresh petroleum-based, virgin material used, and positioning its recycled PET (polyethylene terephthalate), which comes out in pellet form, as a valuable and perpetually reusable resource.

It aims to take up to 25,000 tonnes of post-use plastics from landfill each year. Already its repurposed material is used in applications as diverse as furniture and nappies. Novelplast is part of Circuleire, a membership organisation set up in 2019 to help business owners to see how the circular economy could be applied to their company and their supply chains.

"If people google 'circular economy' they get 50,000 responses, so where do they start?" Geraldine Brennan, its head of circular economy, says. Unfortunately

“When we started seven years ago, people did not want to know about saving waste”

Ireland is a "laggard" in relation to the circular economy, compared with other EU countries, but it's catching up fast, she says. The past two years have seen not only the launch of Ceigs but also the government's Circular Economy Bill and Ireland's first whole of government circular economy strategy, which launched last month.

There is money too. Circuleire has a €1.5 million Circular Economy Innovation Fund and hosts Ireland's first accelerator for circular economy ventures, and both are helping to close the "circular innovation gap", Brennan says.

The scale of the opportunity is enormous. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Ireland uses 100 million tonnes of materials each year. Implementing even a 5 per cent material improvement across the economy represents an annual €2.32 billion opportunity. On top of that come the additional benefits a circular economy creates such as opportunities for import substitution and the support of local supply chains for Irish businesses.

Wicklow company Acoustic Materials has received €50,000 in funding under Ceigs. Owner Stephen Stratton plans to use the money to get further certification for the specialist soundproofing products he has developed using repurposed plastics. These include a soundproofing vinyl film for use behind plasterboard walls and a novel matting that dampens floor vibrations from residential water pumps.

The company is working on a full range of solutions for the construction industry, all derived from offcuts and waste from the motor and furniture industries. "I'm always looking to see what I can change out," says Stratton, who started out as a plasterer before setting up Acoustic Materials.

Some of his products provide soundproofing to the internal doors at Leinster House - further evidence the circular economy has moved centre stage.

"When we started seven years ago, people didn't want to know about saving waste," Stratton says. "Now it's something people have to have."

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