

# ZERO WASTE ALLIANCE IRELAND

*Towards Sustainable Resource Management*

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## Pre-draft Consultation on the National Waste Management Plan for a Circular Economy

06/05/2021

Zero Waste Alliance Ireland is a member of



and



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### **Pre-draft Consultation on the National Waste Management Plan for a Circular Economy**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

There is an appetite to develop Ireland into a circular and waste free economy. The following document builds on the success of the plastic bag and land fill levies and suggests some circular economy waste management initiatives.

#### **2. ZERO WASTE ALLIANCE IRELAND (ZWAI)**

At this point we consider that it is appropriate to mention the background to our submission, especially the policy and strategy of ZWAI.

##### **2.1 Origin and Early Activities of ZWAI**

Zero Waste Alliance Ireland (ZWAI), established in 1999, is a Non-Government Environmental Organisation (eNGO). ZWAI has prepared and submitted to the Irish Government and to State Agencies many policy documents on waste management, and continues to lobby Government on the issue of using resources more sustainably, and on the implementation of the Circular Economy.

Our principal objectives are:

- i) sharing information, ideas and contacts,
- ii) finding and recommending environmentally sustainable and practical solutions for domestic, municipal, industrial and agricultural waste management in Ireland;
- iii) lobbying Government and local authorities to implement environmentally sustainable waste management practices, including clean production, elimination of toxic substances from products, re-use, recycling,

segregation of discarded materials at source, and other beneficial practices;

- iv) lobbying Government to follow the best international practice and EU recommendations by introducing fiscal and economic measures designed to penalise the manufacturers of products which cannot be re-used, recycled or composted at the end of their useful lives, and to financially support companies making products which can be re-used, recycled or are made from recycled materials;
- v) raising public awareness about the long-term damaging human and animal health and economic consequences of landfilling and of the destruction of potentially recyclable or re-usable materials by incineration; and,
- vi) maintaining contact and exchanging information with similar national networks in other countries, and with international zero waste organisations.

## **2.2 Our Basic Principles**

Human communities must behave like natural ones, living comfortably within the natural flow of energy from the sun and plants, producing no wastes which cannot be recycled back into the earth's systems, and guided by new economic values which are in harmony with personal and ecological values.

In nature, the waste products of every living organism serve as raw materials to be transformed by other living creatures, or benefit the planet in other ways. Instead of organising systems that efficiently dispose of or recycle our waste, we need to design systems of production that have little or no waste to begin with.

There are no technical barriers to achieving a “zero waste society”, only our habits, our greed as a society, and the current economic structures and policies which have led to the present environmental, social and economic difficulties.

“Zero Waste” is a realistic whole-system approach to addressing the problem of society's unsustainable resource flows – it encompasses waste elimination at source through product design and producer responsibility, together with waste reduction strategies further down the supply chain, such as cleaner production, product repairing, dismantling, recycling, re-use and composting.

ZWAI strongly believes that Ireland should have a policy of not sending to other countries our discarded materials for further treatment or recycling, particularly to developing countries where local populations are being exposed to dioxins and other very toxic POPs. Relying on other countries' infrastructure to achieve our “recycling” targets is not acceptable from a global ecological and societal perspective.

## **2.3 What We are Doing**

Zero Waste Alliance Ireland has prepared many policy documents on waste management, we continue to lobby the Government of Ireland on the issue of sustainable resource management, and to express our concern at the failure to address Ireland's waste problems at a fundamental level.

In recent decades, as many older landfills were closed or became better managed (primarily as a consequence of the implementation of European Directives, Irish legislation transposing these Directives, the development of a waste licensing regime by the Environmental Protection Agency, and the establishment of the Office of Environmental Enforcement in 2003), concern about the public health effects of landfills decreased considerably.

ZWAI therefore concentrated more on the objectives of ensuring that Ireland's government agencies, local authorities and other organisations will develop and implement environmentally sustainable resources and waste management policies, especially resource efficiency, waste reduction and elimination, the promotion of re-use, repair and recycling, and the development and implementation of the Circular Economy.

As an environmental NGO, and a not-for-profit company with charitable status since 2005, ZWAI also campaigns for the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including (but not limited to) Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, and Goal 6, Clean Water and Sanitation (having particular regard to the need to avoid wasting water).

In addition to responding to many public consultations, members of ZWAI have given presentations on how the European Union has addressed the problem of plastic waste (March 2019), on single-use plastic packaging by the food industry (November 2019), and other relevant topics.

It will be clear that ZWAI is primarily concerned with the very serious issue of discarded substances, materials and goods, whether from domestic, commercial or industrial sources, how these become "waste", and how such "waste" may be prevented by re-design along ecological principles. These same ecological principles can be applied to the many ways in which we abstract and use water as a resource, and to the equivalent volumes of wastewater produced as a consequence of these uses.

**ZWAI** is represented on the Irish Government's Waste Forum and Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce), is a member of the Irish Environmental Network and the Environmental Pillar, and is funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment through the **Irish Environmental Network**.

In 2019 ZWAI became a full member of the **European Environment Bureau** (EEB); and we participate in the development of European Union policy on waste and the Circular Economy.



### **3. RESPONSE.....**

Major mistakes have been made by the Department of the Environment over the last number of years with respect to waste, the main one being privatising waste collection in the Republic of Ireland. Originally there were smaller providers/operators with a more localised approach to waste collection, processing, and disposal. The local authorities, therefore, had more control of these local operators which brought greater compliance controls, etc. Nowadays, they do not have this level of control, in fact, they are being dictated to by large national operators which quite obviously, by the nature of their size, have a lot more influence than they should which should not be the case (the tail should not wag the dog). The Irish government, EPA, and the Department of the Environment must be able to control and direct these national operators.

In summary, the current waste collection systems are bureaucratic. Waste is a collective issue and as such the strategy, as in some European cities needs to be localised.

#### **The Opportunities**

##### **Pyrolysis**

The waste situation is being reversed in some countries in Europe where the waste is now being treated as a commodity and local waste is used to generate electricity for small communities. This reduces the carbon footprints for waste disposal it also reduces emissions as new technologies are being used for waste disposal and electricity generation. This seems to be the way forward. However, this cannot be through the use of obsolete and harmful technologies like incineration which is bad for the environment and harmful to humans (creates toxins and furans). In Japan for instance they are closing incinerators which are major polluters and major contributors to CO2 emissions. This approach seems to be successful and the Irish Government, instead of paying fines to the EU, should revert to local authority participation in waste disposal. The successful alternative to incineration is pyrolysis - Pyrolysis is the thermal decomposition of materials at elevated temperatures in an inert atmosphere. It involves a change of chemical composition. No negative toxins are released as part of the process and the process produces an economical supply of electricity (by way of steam that drives turbines). There is the added benefit of producing another valuable output as part of the process - the is Recovered Carbon Black (RCB) which is a highly valuable commodity used in mobile phone production and water filtration.

The idea that the Reduce, Reuse Recycle (RRR's) strategies have worked up to now is a fallacy, we are living in a throw-away society where it is currently impossible to reduce, reuse or recycle the amount of waste produced by manufacturers, industry, and society in general. In fact, there is a positive correlation between economic growth and waste growth which is born out in the statistics. Where waste is contaminated it cannot be recycled but instead of landfill, which is another harmful environmental solution, this waste could be

used to generate electricity to power local homes and business and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels. In conclusion, it is our view that the localised approach is the way forward for waste. A final point is that the above is all in relation to end-of-life waste. Of course, it is a given that where waste can be reused or recycled it should always be done - as soon as those currently aspirational solutions and processes have been productionised and widely available what we propose is the best solution to deal with our current waste crisis which allows us to make the best use of a problem which cannot go away or be 'swept under the carpet'.

### **Sustainable Education**

There is a deficit of knowledge in the public regarding sustainable practices and circular economy. Waste Prevention, recycling, treatment, plastics, textiles, food, construction and governance all require education. The green schools initiative has impacted on waste management. This needs to be developed further through schools and colleges. Curriculum needs to be adapted to include education in these areas.

In order to become a circular economy and reuse and recycle there needs to be access to expertise where this can be achieved, such as carpentry, dress making, landscaping, planting etc. College's need to be encouraged to provide training and development in these core craft areas. Industry organisations need to work with colleges to ensure these services are developed and ultimately provided. Flexible learning resources need to be put in place in communities to develop these crafts and skills. Independent sustainable expert training organisations need to be contracted to implement relevant training that will change behaviours and improve habits around waste.

### **Waste Management Initiatives**

A core element of the circular economy is waste prevention. Essential to this is a strong waste management policy and strategy. This needs to be localised. Waste is the responsibility of the consumer, the community, government, and Industry. To achieve waste targets and circular economy goals, levies are very necessary for noncompliance, but circular economy initiatives need to be rewarded in an unbureaucratic fashion. European cities have successfully implemented Zero Waste Tourism and zero waste food strategies. These achievements need to be copied by Ireland in relevant destinations, examples include, the island of Sardinia, Italy, Bruges, Belgium. Strategies in these regions are implemented at local level providing impactful benefits for the environment and local communities. Pontevedra, Spain have successfully introduced Biowaste community systems where individual, community and local composting is implemented. There is little point in reinventing, calls for proposals need to be based around what works. Efficient organisations showing they can produce results need to be contracted to deliver goals. All bureaucracy reduced. Currently, applications for grants through many of the agencies are time consuming and inefficient. Companies engaged in sustainable practices need to be supported.

## **Sustainable Digital Solutions**

The identification of how individuals, communities and Industry work and live sustainably needs to be enhanced by technology. The development of apps such as MyWaste.ie need expertise and investment from industry experts in technology and marketing and knowledge transfer.

Currently many of these initiatives are developed within local government. Prudent business professionals may deliver messaging more efficiently as they may not be hamstrung by bureaucracy.

In conclusion, Zero Waste Alliance admire the goals and strategy for the circular economy. A localised approach to implementation is recommended as well as emulating current European success stories. Essential to the effectiveness of a new waste strategy is change management and a broader, innovative approach. Education, training and certification are essential.

The members of ZWAI have expertise in sustainable practices and a wealth of experience in business, innovation, and education. ZWAI look forward to engaging further in the development of waste policy and planning.

Kevin Deasy

**Zero Waste Alliance Ireland**

06<sup>th</sup> May 2021