

Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy

4 June 2025, 17:00–18:30 (Hybrid)

How Can We Make the Rural Economy More Circular?

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Edward Mountain MSP (Chair)

Speakers

Roy Hiddleston - Solway Recycling

Simon Flemington - Moray Waste Busters

Helen Ross - Arran Eco Savvy

Cheryl Ross - Zero Waste Scotland

Non-MSP Pre-registered attendees

Jane Atterton - Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)

Sarah Baird - North Ayrshire Council

Sara Bradley

Sarah Bronsdon - Lower Impact Living CIC

James Calder - DCC Energy

Mike Danson - Strathnairn Development Company

Carey Doyle - SRUC

Claudia Erber - SEPA

Susan Evans - Resource Futures

Hannah Evans - Fidra

Fiona Fawcett

Simon Flemington - Moray Waste Busters

Gail Foster - NatureScot

Rachel Freeman

David Gass - Rural Matters

Catherine Gemmell - Marine Conservation Society

James Glendinning - SRUC

Stan Green - Horticultural Trades Association

Alice Hague - James Hutton Institute

Georgina Hart - Studio Hart

Andrew Heald - iNovaland

Nicola Hill - Dumfries & Galloway Council

Abbie Hudson

Jim Hume - Change Mental Health

Grace Hutchison

Ifeyinwa Kanu - IntelliDigest

Stephen Kelly

Anne-Michelle Ketteridge - Forth Valley and Lomond LAG/YLAG

Vicki Last - Scottish Islands Federation

Alice Lennox - Rare Breeds Survival Trust

Matt Lewis - Circular Communities Scotland

Roderick Low - Scottish Government

Jill Matthews

Lesley McKee - Change Mental Health

Tim McKeown - Thorntons Law

Ewen McLachlan - Northwest2045

Rob McMorran - Scottish Government

Michelle McWilliams - The Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen

Beatrice Morrice - NFU Scotland

Catherine Parker - Historic Environment Scotland

Lorna Pate - SRUC

Meg Pirie - Fashion Roundtable

Elaine Pritchard - Lloyd's

Violet Ross

Colin Seditas - ClimateXChange

Sarah Skerratt - Royal Society of Edinburgh

Bryn Smith - SRUC

Rebecca Smith

Alex Smith - Braemar Community Council

Brady Stevens - SAC Consulting

Susan Thomson

Luiza Toma - SRUC

Jo Vergunst - University of Aberdeen

Lisa Wilson

Apologies

MSPs

Ariane Burgess MSP

Emma Harper MSP

Non-MSP Apologies

Ailsa Clark – InspirAlba

Ann Packard

David Gass

Gail Foster - NatureScot

Agenda Item 1

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Edward Mountain MSP welcomed attendees and noted apologies. He confirmed that the meeting would be recorded and that the Secretariat (Rural Policy Centre, SRUC) would upload the video, slides (if used), and unapproved minutes to the Cross Party Group (CPG) webpage on the Rural Policy Centre (RPC) website as soon as possible after the meeting. Attendees were reminded to email the Secretariat with any amendments to the minutes. The minutes will be formally approved at the next meeting which will be after the summer recess period.

Agenda Item 2

Approval of Minutes from Last Meeting and Actions

Edward Mountain MSP confirmed that no comments had been received on the unapproved minutes prepared by the Secretariat from the last meeting in March 2025. The minutes were approved by Lorna Dawson and seconded by Jo Vergunst. No actions were identified from the previous meeting. The approved minutes will be uploaded to the CPG's webpages by the Secretariat as soon as possible after this meeting.

Agenda Item 3 - Discussion

Theme: How Can We Make the Rural Economy More Circular?

Four presentations were delivered, followed by questions and discussion. A summary of each presentation is provided below. The topic was chosen for focus in the meeting due to the upcoming Scottish Government Climate Change Plan and carbon budgets, and the Climate Change Committee recommendations to Scottish Government in May.

Roy Hiddleston – Solway Recycling

Roy presented the journey of Solway Recycling, a family-run business specialising in agricultural plastic recycling. Highlights included:

- Family company, based just outside Dumfries. Company formed in 2000 (although Roy started collecting waste plastic before that through a previous agricultural contracting business 30 years ago as more plastic became involved in farming) and employs about 22 staff.

- Collection of waste and agricultural plastic (or farmers can drop off at the company) covering much of Scotland and northern England (from Blair Atholl and Dundee in the north to Wigan and York down south). There are usually only 4-5 different types of plastics used within agriculture so its potentially more straightforward to deal with than recycling food-related plastics in a household context, for example.

- At the time farmers tended to pile their plastics in a pile with other waste. Solway Recycling developed a bin and liner system whereby the bin is made from the plastic that is going into the bin. The bin contains information for farmers about how to recycle. The bins are sold nationally and even internationally (e.g. to New Zealand). Solway Recycling then charge farmers for collecting the waste (per liner) as there is cost to collection, washing it, etc. Farmers can store several bags on their farm until it is more economical for them to be collected (and Solway tend to try and collect from multiple farms during one trip to reduce costs).

- Once it is collected the plastic is washed and then turned into pellets/crumbs. Some of the product is washed elsewhere as Solway Recycling do not currently have the capacity to deal with everything.

- In 2022, Solway Recycling invested £1.5 million in a sheetline and a new building to make sheets out of the plastic for the bins. This represented a huge investment for a family-owned company. Previously the sheets were bought in from elsewhere, but this has been a game changer for the company but does bring concerns about their ability to pay off the investment and find markets for the sheets.

- The company make different size/width sheets which have huge strength and they design and manufacture their own products in their workshop. They sell to the army, back to farms for cattle handling system, animal shelters including hen houses, sheep pens, lamb warming boxes, pig arks, stables, dog kennels, and to households as sheds for gardens, raised beds, ground grid for stabilising ground, etc. Most are sold directly to blacksmiths and other industries. The products are simple, durable (more so than wood used for hen houses for example) and they are easy to wash so are less susceptible to infections and bacteria. Benches are also produced from the more rigid farm plastic waste.

- Products are sold over the UK and into Europe. They also used to sell into Ireland but that market has reduced since Brexit due to the additional bureaucracy required. There is potential to grow their market e.g. by producing glamping pods, etc.
- Most silage wrap is black and when it is melted down it almost always has to be made into a black product. However, clear silage wrap (made by a company in Austria) offers greater recycling potential as it can be dyed and used for a wider range of things. It is therefore a potential game changer for Solway Recycling. Solway Recycling is also working with a fencing company on a new product.
- Challenges include a bottleneck in terms of selling sheets as the company has so much plastic to recycle, and developing chemical recycling as a solution for not just agricultural plastic but all plastic going forward.
- There are a number of drivers for farmers to recycle their plastic, including the motivation of having a tidy farm and SEPA regulations which mean farmers are no longer allowed to burn and bury their plastic waste. The biggest driver is farm assurance whereby farmers get audited every year usually through inspections, including for how they deal with waste. There has been a change in mindset amongst farmers with young farmers wanting to recycle their plastic waste.

Key Questions & Responses:

- Susan Evans asked about replicability in aquaculture/fishing where there also is plastic to be dealt with. Roy noted potential but the specific plastic types would need to be assessed to find the most appropriate solution.
- Rachel Freeman asked about end-of-life recycling of Solway's products. Roy confirmed the products are recyclable again (though they are durable so this is not something that has come up often). He did note that they have recently recycled some older items.
- Edward Mountain MSP raised questions on seasonal fluctuations and market capacity. Roy confirmed summer is busier for the company and market demand for the sheets is the main bottleneck (compared to the huge quantity of plastic available for recycling).

Simon Flemington – Moray Waste Busters

Simon described Moray Waste Busters (MWB) as a reuse organisation co-located with the local Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) in Forres. Highlights included:

- There are lots of organisations involved in reuse and recycling across Scotland. What is particularly interesting about MWB is its co-location on the HWRC. When individuals come to the site, they have a choice – to throw their household items into the skip or to take the opportunity to give it to MWB for them to make a decision.
- The MWB site is just outside Forres and it's a mixed site with polytunnels and containers, parts of which are difficult to access and its hard to trolley items around. But it has become a central hub for community action.

- MWB make it as easy as possible for someone to hand something to them. They process so many items every day, to the point that they are now becoming overloaded. Items are priced very cheaply so they sell quickly. Items include books, bicycle, video games, small electrical items, gardening and DIY items, clothing, etc.
- MWB has 29 employees employed on the Real Living Wage. There is usually about 10 volunteers (c20 FTEs); forecast revenue from what people are throwing away is £730,000 in 2025 (more than £2,000 per day). They average about 400 visitors a day and 200 sales transactions per day.
- 275,000 items sold in 2024 (763 per day, average price per item is £2.25). They are diverting 300 tonnes per year from landfill/recycling. This represents 1,227 tonnes of carbon saved by diverting to reuse.
- MWB help people across Moray to access items at low price, thereby directing helping with the cost of living crisis, as well as the reuse benefits of items not going to landfill. It is hyper-local as all items are sourced from within a c12 mile radius.
- MWB also participates in employment schemes supporting people into work. They have strong community engagement and support, including education programmes with local schools around reuse and circularity in the economy, and donations to 74 community groups and charities every month.
- Challenges include being able to cope with the amount of material being given to them. People are giving as they know items are going to the community. Unfortunately the organisation's revenue has started to flatline as they simply can't cope with the amount of material they are being given, including to process it all.
- The site is very cramped, so they may take a large building in Forres Enterprise Park so they are looking at having the current site as a collection and processing point, and taking the items to the new facility and creating a shop there. This could lead to a trebling of the revenue over the next 3-5 years, with associated employment increases.
- Highland Council came to visit MWB recently and they are planning to build a new shelter or space at the Nairn quarry site at the western end of Moray to do something similar. This will be subject to a competitive process to get the site up and running in the near future.
- Importance of co-location with HWRC and staff presence to encourage reuse, although some HWRC sites are just too cramped for this to be possible. There is an opportunity for organisations to challenge councils to promote this type of activity which has real potential to grow and to be replicated in some places.

Post meeting note: Simon provided a handout, attached separately.

Helen Ross – Arran Eco Savvy

Helen outlined Eco Savvy's circular economy initiatives on Arran. Highlands included:

- Outlining Arran Eco Savvy's vision for Arran and how they aim to achieve it. They empower the local community through a circular economy model which includes a community shop, zero-waste café, e-bike loan scheme, and energy advice services and transformation workshops. They work in partnership with a range of local organisations.
- The community shop exchanges and repurposes preloved items thereby reducing waste going to landfill, and it is run by 19 volunteers. It also has a positive role to play in enhancing community spirit on the island.
- The food share programme redistributed over 116 tonnes of food since 2018 (that would otherwise have been sent for incineration). The organisation has an electric vehicle to transport items which has lower carbon emissions than an equivalent diesel van.
- Arran Eco Savvy also loans e-bikes for people to try before they buy (or decide not to buy). They also refurbish old bikes for people.
- The Green Islands project was developed with North Ayrshire Council to accelerate the path to net zero and help reduce fuel poverty on Arran and Cumbrae. Amongst other things, this involved training local people to deliver energy assessments on island where previously there had been nobody delivering these. Phase 2 of the project calculated Arran's carbon footprint and they have developed a plan for net zero by 2030 based on this evidence base.
- Transporting all goods on and off Arran takes energy and resources. Arran has experienced ferry issues for several months which has also helped to encourage rethinking about how items are transported. Building a circular economy also helps to increase community spirit.
- North Ayrshire Council is also working with businesses on Arran through the Net Zero Accelerator project and there are further projects on the mainland. Additional employment projects have grown from this including around employability, and there are other community initiatives focused on growing and composting and also the Arran Repair Café.
- Arran Eco Savvy have also supported Arran Community Renewables to develop a solar project on Arran but this is being slowed by the lack of a grid connection, the date for which is 2034.
- Going forward there is an onus on everyone to reduce consumption, reuse and repurpose.
- In terms of specific recommendations, bringing forward the grid connection date for Arran would help substantially as this would generate money which can be used locally to reduce the reliance on grant funding. More broadly a three-year funding cycle for circular economy initiatives would help. A strong national approach would help North Ayrshire Council to mainstream their existing circular economy work and being able to

build a sustainable building in Brodick would enable the community showcase their work as well as provide employment space and housing for local residents.

Cheryl Ross – Zero Waste Scotland

Cheryl reflected on the presentations, including drawing in insights from Zero Waste Scotland's work, and highlighted:

- The importance of innovation and localised solutions in circular economy models in rural locations. For Solway Recycling, they are collecting and processing the plastic as well as making new and bespoke products from the plastic waste and looking at opportunities for further product development, including identifying new markets for recycled products and barriers to growing those markets.
- Moray Waste Busters is a great exemplar of how to do reuse well. Reuse needs to be made easy for consumers, their first choice. Again it's a hyper-local solution and includes wider services including employability for example and working with young people in schools to raise awareness and capacity.
- The roles of local authorities are critical here in terms of providing support. Examining replication potential is also important, going beyond simply showcasing community-based models across a range of stakeholders, including local government. They can be great promoters, enablers and supporters of local circular economy initiatives over the longer-term.
- Islands are often a perfect ecosystem to look at circular economy initiatives, in the wider context of wellbeing, employment and building skills, community empowerment and community wealth building, localised food production, etc.
- Shared links to Zero Waste Scotland's research on rural circular economy models and societal impacts.

Key Issues Raised in Discussion

- It was noted that there is a lot of will amongst people to reuse and recycle. The Circular Economy Bill will help those generating waste to get rid of it in different ways, but how do we also support people to stop simply throwing things away?
- Rachel Freeman asked about online expansion for MWB for example delivering using e-vans (although noted this would incur a cost) to extend the reach of the project. Simon noted MWB had considered having an online presence, preference for hyperlocal, low-cost model particularly when things are selling so quickly often for low value.
- Sarah Bronsdon asked how we can disrupt the system more fundamentally in terms of being more local, community wealth building or trying mutual credit systems on islands? Findhorn community had a share and exchange system which scaled up but now no longer operates so there may be challenges around sustaining momentum. They were a

significant disruptor on many things but some things didn't have a long-term lifespan. Arran are interested in all ways of supporting and developing a circular economy.

- Susan Evans noted the role of MWB in driving behaviour change when people visit the HWRC site. Are figures are available to compare staffed sites like MWB versus containers where stuff is taken away but there is no one encouraging use or explaining the process. It would seem to be a critical finding. The container model provides a dark hole and no certainty that the items will be picked up (drawing on evidence from other local authority areas). MWB has 20 years experience of people engaging with them. To break the cycle and change behaviour you need people on site.

- Matt Lewis (Circular Communities Scotland) emphasised the co-location being so important and also noted the early engagement that MWB had with the local authority to help support the project; that relationship is critical to delivery and may also unlock funding. Having a reuse investment fund would also be great. Simon emphasised that Moray Council recognised the value MWB brings from early on. The issue for councils is that waste departments have targets and priorities so trying to put reuse front and centre in a HWRC is difficult, particularly if space is tight and there are vehicles to manoeuvre, budgets are tight, etc. so its difficult for councils to commit to this. It is however possible to do this in many places, although there is a need for scale (e.g. it might not be possible on small islands)

Action Points

Draft letters to relevant Cabinet Secretaries/Ministers:

- Mairi Gougeon MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands) - on supporting circular economy initiatives in island communities.

- Gillian Martin MSP (Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work) - on encouraging local authorities to make it easier to recycle along the lines of the MWB model, in particular through supporting HWRC co-location and reuse models, and how that model can be rolled out.

- Jim Fairlie MSP (Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity) - on supporting agricultural plastic recycling and how an approach like Solway Recycling is taking can be rolled out; and how it can be made easier and more competitive for farmers to recycle their plastic.

- All letters to include a request for long-term (minimum three-year) funding for circular economy initiatives and plans the Government has for such funding for businesses and community groups.

AOB

Edward Mountain MSP thanked all speakers and attendees. He confirmed that the next meeting will be held after summer recess in Autumn 2025, with the topic and date to be confirmed by the Secretariat.