EU GREEN WEEK PARTNER EVENT

#EU GREEN WEEK

Innovative cities, circular solutions: Tackling urban waste challenges

EVENT REPORT

This report summarises the EU Green Week Partner Event titled 'Innovative cities, circular solutions: Tackling urban waste challenges'. The event was co-organised by the Gothenburg European Office and the Cities Northern Netherlands EU Office and took place on 2 June 2025 in Brussels, Belgium.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EVENT

Achieving a circular economy in Europe requires a shift towards extending product life cycles, reducing waste and improving resource efficiency. A recent OECD report[1] states that cities, which currently generate between 50% and 70% of global waste, are projected to produce even more under a business-as-usual scenario. However, applying circular economy principles could reduce total municipal waste generation by up to 34% by 2030.

As centres of innovation, policy implementation and citizen engagement, cities play a crucial role in advancing the circular transition. With a large share of urban waste being preventable, reusable or recyclable, cities have the potential to drive the development of more sustainable and circular systems.

This EU Green Week Partner Event aimed to explore how cities across Europe are addressing urban waste challenges through projects and initiatives focused on waste reduction, resource efficiency and the creation of sustainable urban environments. By highlighting practical, on-the-ground experiences, the event showcased how local efforts are driving the shift towards more circular practices and approaches. With the EU Circular Economy Act expected in 2026, the event also provided a timely opportunity to reflect on key challenges, exchange insights on advancing circularity in urban contexts, and discuss how local actions can inform and shape broader policy ambitions.

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[1] OECD (2025), The Circular Economy in Cities and Regions of the European Union, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-circular-economy-in-cities-and-regions-of-the-european-union_e09c21e2-en.html

City of Gothenburg European Office

CITIES NORTHERN NETHERLANDS
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CIRCULAR SOLUTIONS AND EMERGING TRENDS IN EUROPE

Jack McQuibban from **Zero Waste Europe** set the scene of the event by sharing insights into circular solutions and emerging trends across Europe. His presentation explored key developments and challenges related to waste management and prevention, while also highlighting current EU legislative targets and offering recommendations for the forthcoming Circular Economy Act.

Among the challenges identified were declining recycling rates across Europe, reduced funding for cities to address waste issues, and the continued economic advantage of single-use products. To address these issues, several solutions were proposed such as deposit return schemes, door-to-door collection systems and enhanced sorting of mixed waste to recover recyclable materials in residuals.

In preparation for the forthcoming EU Circular Economy Act[2], Zero Waste Europe proposes a revamp of the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework. The organisation advocates for upgrading the EPR into a resource management tool, embedded within a broader circular economy strategy. Their proposed approach aims to incentivise both producers and consumers through fiscal measures and economic instruments that promote reuse and waste prevention. Furthermore, Zero Waste Europe recommends expanding the scope of the EPR to cover the full costs of collection, disposal and cleaning of all consumer products and calls for the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders, including municipalities, in the EPR governance system.

The presentation also underscored the important role cities play in waste prevention and management, highlighting their capacity to incentivise change, convene stakeholders, engage citizens and provide both regulatory and educational leadership to steer the direction of travel. These roles were illustrated through concrete examples of initiatives already being implemented in urban areas across Europe.

LOCAL PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES ON URBAN WASTE

A panel discussion, consisting of four panellists from the **City of Gothenburg**, the **Municipality of Assen**, **Lille Métropole** and **Aston University**, highlighted and discussed local initiatives and projects that address the challenge of urban waste. The panel was moderated by **Astrid Hannes** from the **European Regions Research and Innovation Network**.

The City of Gothenburg, represented by **Elina Järkil** from the Administration for Recycling and Water, presented a project focused on the reuse and recycling of abandoned bicycles. During its pilot phase, the initiative saved over 600 bikes from being scrapped by enabling material recovery and extending their lifespan - an effort that helped prevent approximately 5,000 kg of CO_2 emissions. The project was carried out in collaboration with three municipal housing companies, which assisted in collecting the abandoned bikes. In addition, operators specialising in second-hand bicycles were engaged, resulting in 43% of the collected bikes being sold for reuse.

[2] Zero Waste Europe (2025), Circular Economy Act Policy Recommendations, https://zerowasteeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ZWE_Feb25_RecommendationsforaCEA-1.pdf

The Municipality of Assen, represented by **Paolo Bakker,** shifted the focus from bicycles to circular street lighting. In collaboration with the company responsible for over 700,000 lighting columns across the Netherlands, Assen has launched an initiative to refurbish street lighting columns that would otherwise be replaced under current regulations. Through this project, decommissioned columns are restored to meet the same standards and lifespan as new ones, significantly reducing material waste. The pilot, which began in Assen in 2019, delivered promising results and has since sparked nationwide interest in adopting circular lighting solutions.

Eugénie Amoulé from the Household Waste Department of Lille Métropole presented an initiative focused on garden waste. Currently, the metropole provides several collection options for residents, such as door-to-door collection and recycling centres. However, to reduce both operational costs and CO_2 emissions linked to collection and transport, the goal is to cut garden waste collection by 15% by 2029. To achieve this, the metropole aims to encourage citizens to manage garden waste on-site by reusing it directly in their gardens. This will be supported through a range of awareness-raising activities, including educational games and instructional guides, and the distribution of appropriate tools to households.

Tim Miller presented the work of the Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute (EBRI) at Aston University, which supports the development of circular economy solutions with a strong focus on commercial viability. EBRI specialises in converting biomass into bioenergy and bio-based products, and the presentation showcased several urban projects the institute has supported. One example involved the processing of wood from urban tree cutting. Instead of allowing the wood to rot and release greenhouse gases, it was transformed into useful products such as biochar, bio-liquids, and gas. These outputs were then repurposed for new applications, demonstrating how circular practices can reduce emissions while generating value-added products.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE PANEL DISCUSSION

Following the presentations of local projects and initiatives, the four panellists engaged in a discussion on the challenges of transitioning from traditional waste management to circular systems, effective stakeholder engagement and the upcoming EU Circular Economy Act.

Below are some key takeaways from the discussion:

- Municipalities often serve as key drivers of circular initiatives, even in public-private collaborations. However, the long-term goal is for the public component of the business model to gradually become redundant as circular solutions become self-sustaining.
- Legislation must better support the development, scaling and economic viability of circular materials and products, ensuring they can compete with conventional alternatives.
- Citizen engagement remains a challenge in circular initiatives. It is important to communicate the broader benefits in ways that resonate with citizens' daily lives, values and circumstances. Only by doing so we can secure public buy-in and foster meaningful shifts in mindset.

- Inclusive stakeholder involvement is crucial when developing new circular solutions. This helps ensure relevance and long-term viability. In addition, testing scalability is key to building sustainable and replicable models.
- Ahead of the upcoming EU Circular Economy Act, cities expressed the following needs:
    - Dedicated funding for municipalities to support investment in circular solutions.
    - Enhanced support from the European Commission for inter-city knowledge exchange and sharing of best practices.
    - Greater EU-level support to scale up and replicate successful circular solutions across sectors and cities in Europe.
    - Simplified and more effective regulations that remove barriers to circular innovation.

CONTACT

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