

# **Submission to the Productivity Commission inquiry: Australia's circular economy: Unlocking the opportunities**

**From: Julie Evans, on behalf of the WasteLess group, SEE Change**

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## **Background**

SEE Change is a grass-roots sustainability organisation based in Canberra. We seek to make beneficial changes to our Society, Environment and Economy (SEE) in order to live more sustainably. Formed in 2008, SEE Change delivers sustainability information, activities and programs through its volunteer-led SEE Change groups.

WasteLess is one of these groups, and I have volunteered with the group since 2023. Our focus is on encouraging Canberrans to reduce waste. We run campaigns, hold stalls and talks and make submissions. Last year we had a particular focus on Plastic Free July and ran a Buy No Clothes challenge for October. For more information, see: <https://seechange.org.au/waste>.

SEE-Change also supports the Community Toolbox Canberra and a number of repair cafes. I am a volunteer at the toolbox and two of the repair cafes. That experience has been valuable in understanding the benefits and challenges of circular economy ideas.

## **Introduction**

WasteLess is very concerned at the overwhelming amount of waste generated in our society, and we have been looking at how we can most effectively bring about change. The principles of the circular economy are vital to improve how we use resources and energy while reducing waste and emissions.

The interim report clearly sets out the issues and challenges for the circular economy. Overall, on reading the interim report and recommendations, I was concerned that the emphasis for action is largely around the last part of the product lifecycle ('closing material loops'), particularly on recycling initiatives. While mentioned as important, there are fewer initiatives under the opportunities earlier in the lifecycle, such as reuse and repair ('slowing material loops').

This is even reflected in Figure 1 in the Overview (Comparing the circular and linear economies). In the figure for the circular economy, the segment for 'Recycling' is substantially larger (about 3 times the size) than the segment for 'Consumption, use, reuse and repair'. This emphasis should be reversed – in the diagram and in actions – to make the most of the resources we have.

My comments on specific matters below focus on expanding opportunities around slowing material loops within the areas related to our activities. This includes analysis of the data from the two repair cafes I volunteer with in Canberra: the Hughes Repair Café (data from Feb 2023 to Mar 2025) and the Community Toolbox Canberra Repair Café (data from Apr 2022 to Feb 2025): 1,191 items in total. I enter the data from each café onto the Restarters database, which brings together information from repair cafes around the world. <https://restarters.net/>

## **Chapter 6: Textiles and clothing**

From the repair café data on Restarters, almost a third (32%) of the items seen were clothing or textiles, of which 87% were repaired at the café and another 10% were repairable but needed items or time outside the café. This shows both that there is a high demand for textile and clothing repairs, and also a high level of success. Often our repairers assist customers to learn how to repair their clothing, rather than do the repairs themselves.

The demand for textile and clothing repair services is greater than can be met through volunteers at periodic repair cafés. There are also some aspects (such as stain removal) that cannot be completed at a repair café, although the repairers provide advice where possible.

With product stewardship initiatives, it would be good to see an increased focus on repairability, not just collection and recycling of items. Repair is mentioned as being important in the interim report and on the Seamless website, but needs to be translated into actions that make services accessible and affordable – maybe including in-store services to make repair services visible and accessible.

There is always a tension with product stewardship schemes – if clothes are worn longer, there would be fewer clothes sold, yet businesses want to increase sales. There is a need to have the incentives to be able to change the model, to support a new way of doing things. At the moment, businesses are profiting from disposable fashion with others bearing the costs.

## **Chapter 9: Household, consumer and emerging electronics**

Just over a third (35%) of the items seen at our repair cafes are electrical, with the most common being small kitchen appliances, including kettles, toasters and coffee makers (9% of all items, 27% of electrical items).

Of all electrical items, 42% were repaired at the café, and only 29% of small kitchen appliances. There are many challenges for repairing electrical items, with items not being able to be opened, or needing specific parts that are not available. We often have very long queues for the electrical repairers – such work requires specialist skills, and is often very complex to identify and address the fault. This shows both the difficulties and demand for repair services for electrical items.

Designing for repairability and durability is vital. We strongly support Recommendation 9.1 for the labelling of items, as recommended by the PC Right to Repair inquiry, so that customers can make informed decisions when purchasing, and there is pressure on manufacturers to make products that can be repaired and will last.

Supporting reuse and repair is also vital. At present, repair services for many household items are difficult and expensive to access, with the cost to look at an item prohibitive. More needs to be done to provide access to information about repair and the parts required.

One additional option to support repair could be to introduce a repair voucher scheme, as has been done in some European countries and is now being trialled in the UK: <https://therestartproject.org/news/repair-vouchers/> . This can help build the capacity and market for repair, making repair affordable and increasing the capacity and scope of professional repair services.

We strongly support Recommendation 9.2, that the National Television and Computer Recycling Scheme including reuse and repair within the annual targets (as previously recommended by the PC Right to Repair inquiry).

## **Chapter 10: System-wide arrangements**

The interim report picks up some of the issues from the 2021 PC Right to Repair inquiry, as noted above for electronic items. There are more opportunities around repair and reuse that could come under system-wide arrangements, although do not seem to fit under the headings presented.

In particular, the current bill under consideration in New Zealand – the *Consumer Guarantees (Right to Repair) Amendment Bill* – features opportunities to increase repair and support the circular economy using consumer legislation. The changes would require manufacturers to make repair parts and information available to consumers, and empower consumers to request that suppliers repair goods rather than replacing them. See:

<https://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/member/2024/0039/latest/whole.html>.