Discussion Document (V06.26)

Circular Sustainable Cities and Towns

Local Government Briefing

Presented

REA

In partnership with

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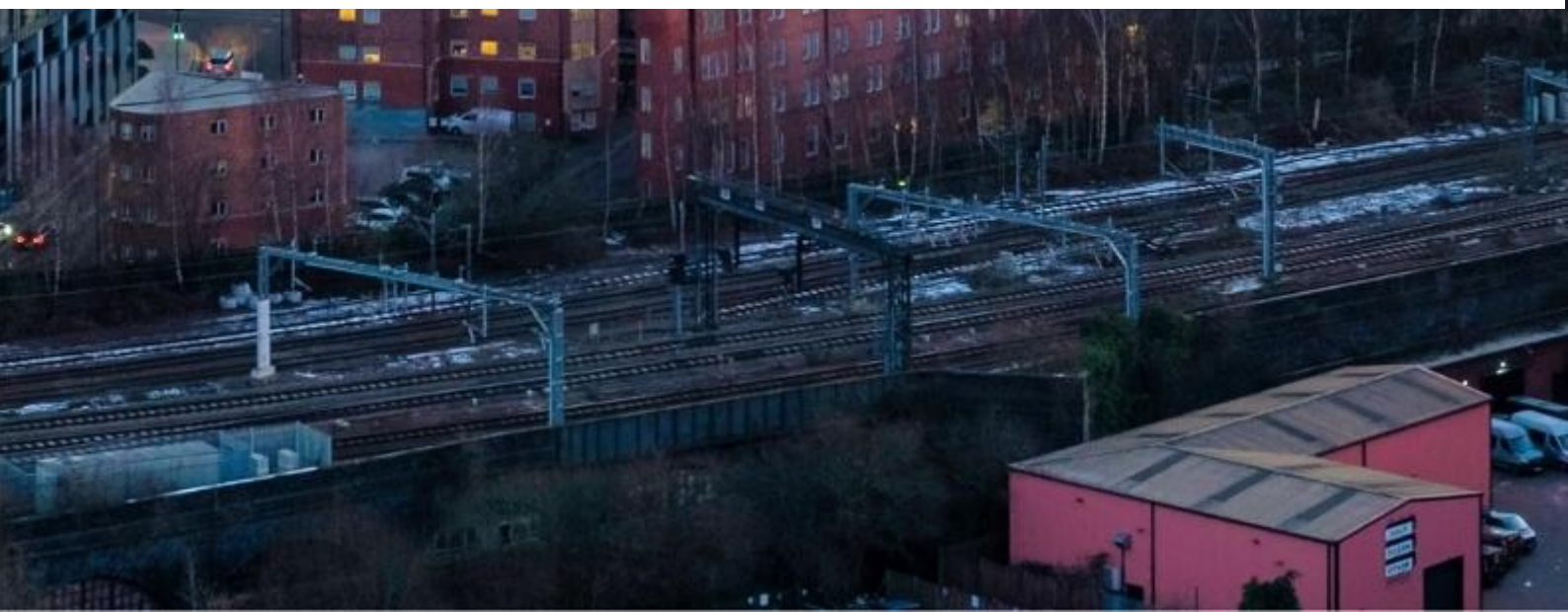


UK cities and towns sit at the sharp end of our country's biggest challenges: high energy bills, stretched infrastructure, rising waste volumes, housing demand, rising carbon emissions , and increasing demands on finite resources.

We cannot look at these in isolation. Our local governments must make a strategic, coordinated shift towards circularity and sustainability: **where resources are used efficiently, value is retained locally, and clean energy and circular economy initiatives support and reinforce one another.** This is not just better for our local environments, but local communities, infrastructure, and economies.

With the Government undertaking the largest restructuring of English local government in a generation – and England to launch its own Circular Economy Growth Plan – our cities and towns have the perfect opportunity to act as facilitators of change, working with the private sector to enable investment and to build the services and facilities of tomorrow. The timing could not be better.

Who is this briefing for?

This briefing presents **six principles which are central to the delivery of circular, sustainable cities and towns.**

Each principle covers a specific, but integrated, part of the circular, sustainable picture – with a particular focus on infrastructure (waste, energy, transport). Each principle has two to three specific, actionable asks which local authorities can immediately action, with support from the REA and our industry partners.

This gives local authorities a clear, obvious place to start, but you are not alone on this journey.

We have also included case studies, which help showcase the benefits of this approach, and recommended experts for local authorities to reach out to for advice and guidance.

The purpose of this "discussion version" is to test the briefing's concept, seek feedback, and build a broader coalition behind this work.

If you are interested in providing feedback or supporting this work, please contact

- Megan Muller-Girard, Circular Economy Lead, REA | mmuller-girard@r-e-a.net
- Frank Gordon, Director of Policy, REA | fgordon@r-e-a.net

Circular Sustainable Cities and Towns

The Six Principles

Energy systems should be localised, low-carbon, and resilient; integrating renewable generation, flexibility, storage and smart networks.

Resource use should follow circular economy principles, prioritising prevention, reuse and high-value recovery in line with the waste hierarchy.

Heating solutions should be affordable and decarbonised at scale, prioritising efficient, shared systems such as heat networks.

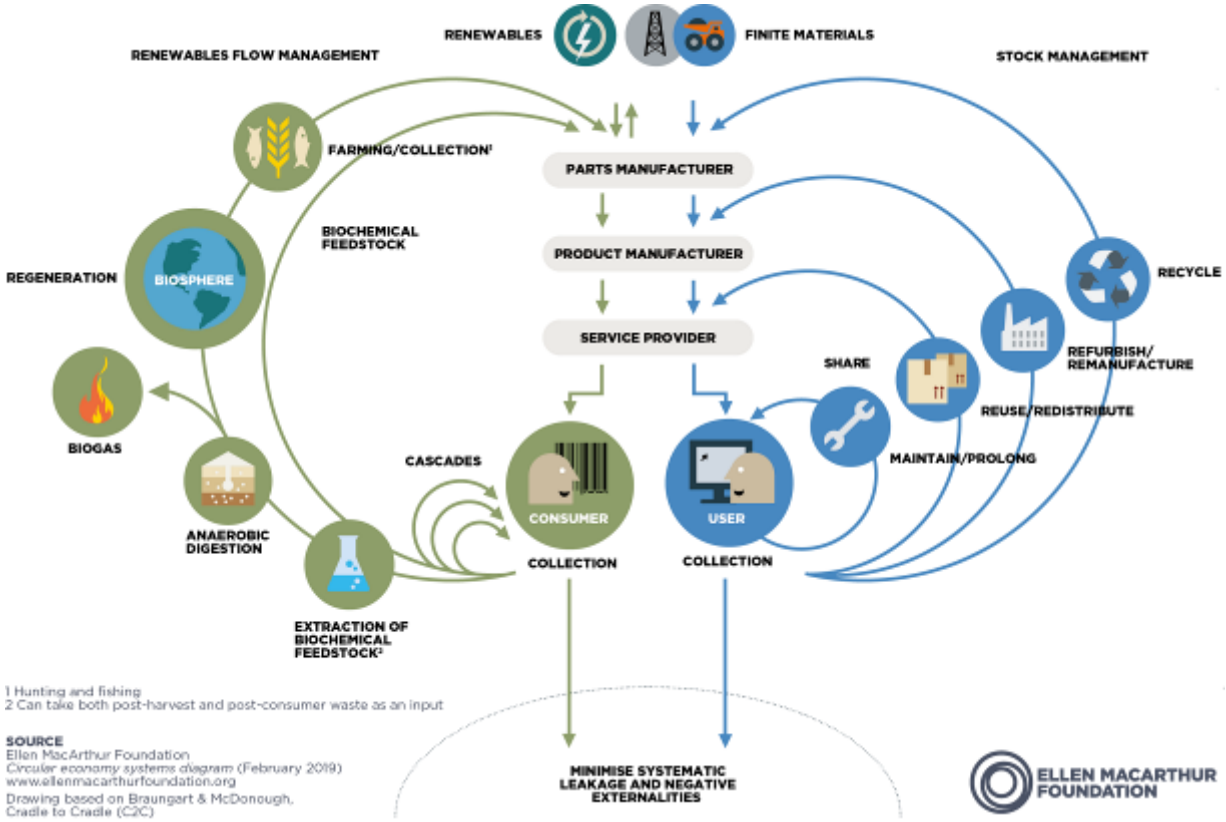
Energy and transport systems should be planned and operated as integrated systems to maximise efficiency and reduce emissions.

Food systems should strengthen local economies and minimise waste, supporting sustainable production and redistribution.

The built environment should enhance and work with nature, embedding circular design principles across development.

The case for circular cities and towns

With an estimated **55% of global climate emissions** stemming from **resource extraction and processing**[1], the decarbonisation strategies the UK has primarily employed to date (electrification, improving energy efficiency, and reducing demand) simply do not go far enough to achieve our commitment to reach net zero emissions by 2050. Effective decarbonisation also requires us to change our relationship with the resources we use; keeping materials in use for as long as possible to minimise both upstream extraction and processing emissions as well as downstream disposal emissions. ***In other words, a circular approach to resource use.***



Transitioning from a **'throwaway' society** to an economic model in which resources are valued and kept in use offers economic and social benefits above the usual environmental ones. The Green Alliance suggests that a more ambitious approach to the circular economy could generate up to **450,000 local jobs**[2] whereas research by WRAP suggests it could **save UK households between £2 billion and £8 billion per year**[3]**.**

Furthermore, the public are on board. A 2025 Green Alliance poll suggests that four in five British adults agreed that a throwaway culture is a big problem and the UK needs to move towards more efficient resource use[4]. The circular economy presents positive opportunities for individuals, businesses, and government at every level.

A note on the waste hierarchy

The waste hierarchy prioritises how waste should be managed to minimise negative environmental impacts, denoting waste prevention as the priority, with waste disposal as the last option. All principles and asks within this report should be read within the context of the waste hierarchy.

(Pictured above: waste hierarchy developed by Keep Britain Tidy with support from CIWM and SUEZ)

Principle One: Energy systems should be localised, low-carbon, and resilient; integrating renewable generation, flexibility, storage and smart networks.

Energy bills remain the number one cost pressure for British households[5]. Local clean energy systems cut dependence on volatile wholesale markets and keep value circulating in the local economy.

ASK: Establish or commission a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) that maps renewable generation potential (such as on council-owned carparks), grid constraints, and flexibility opportunities across the local authority boundary.

WHY: A LAEP gives councils a clear, evidence-based way to identify where local renewables, storage and flexibility can be deployed most effectively, so scarce public and private capital is directed to the projects that can cut bills and constraints fastest. A LAEP would also assist local government to turn an abstract net zero plan into a practical delivery pathway that strengthens energy resilience, supports local jobs and generates local revenue.

ASK: As well as working to embed the newly-formalised Future Homes and Future Buildings Standards locally, ensure all public sector building retrofits result in the highest possible energy savings and where feasible incorporate on-site renewables and encourage this in the private sector. Incorporate energy efficiency measures across operations, such as moving to LED streetlights and dimming, where safe and practicable.

Why: This will not only save carbon, but save occupants and the public sector money at a time of high energy prices. This will also help tackle fuel poverty and ill health caused by our often damp and outdated existing housing and building stock. Coupling ambitious energy efficiency measures with on-site renewables will not only save energy but generate it on site, potentially also generating a small income and coupling with more ambitious measures such as small-scale batteries will future proof buildings to participate in future flexibility markets and possibly benefit from 'Time of Use Tariffs.'

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle One, and walk you through implementation:

- Matt Parry, Head of Decentralised Energy, REA | mparry@r-e-a.net
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- Frank Gordon, Policy Director, REA | fgordon@r-e-a.net

Principle Two: Resource use should follow circular economy principles, prioritising prevention, reuse and high-value recovery in line with the waste hierarchy.

Reframing waste as a resource provides opportunities in prevention, reuse, repair, redistribution and recycling. A circular approach has the potential to reduce disposal costs, retain value of materials as a commodity and generate local energy through energy from waste delivery.

ASK: Local government and waste management companies - along with public sector bodies and charities - should jointly run citizen facing communications and behaviour change campaigns on key waste and resource related topics, such as food and garden waste collections, or removing high risk items from conventional collection streams (lithium-ion batteries and NO_2 canisters).

WHY: Empowering householders to effectively participate in recycling and waste collections (for instance, by correctly utilising their food and garden waste collections rather than binning these items) should save the council money and ensure that valuable resources can be recovered and that problematic items such as lithium-ion batteries and NO_2 canisters are disposed of safely in waste vehicles and sites. The public, waste sector, and local government can achieve their shared goal of fostering good public recycling practice more quickly and effectively through collaborative, locally-based education and behaviour change initiatives.

ASK: Beyond core recycling services, councils should pursue wider opportunities for reuse, repair, redistribution and recycling through partnerships with local companies and charities. These can include local repair cafes; reuse collections and shops at Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs) for items such as paint, bikes, toys and furniture; local clothes swaps; or specialist collections of non-core recyclables such as textiles, batteries and small electrical items for recycling.

WHY: While recycling services are essential, much of what ends up in the bin could be reused, repaired, or redistributed instead. For instance, each year the UK buys 320 million litres of paint, 50 million of which goes to waste[6]. Waste treatment of paint is more challenging and costly than reuse, yet currently only 2% of leftover paint is reused or remanufactured[7]. Likewise, the UK disposes of clothes (roughly 35 items per person per year[8]), bikes, toys and electronics, much of which could be given a new life. Often systemic barriers prevent people from making more sustainable choices with consumer products they no longer need. Reuse, repair and redistribution services reduce pressure on council waste services, provide a social value to communities by expanding access to affordable goods, and offer practical solutions to unlock more resource efficient local economies.

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle Two, and walk you through implementation:

- Megan Muller-Girard, Circular Economy Lead, REA | mmuller-girard@r-e-a.net
- Sue Reed, Delivery Lead - Resource Management, WRAP | sue.reed@wrap.ngo
- Dr Adam Read Read MBE, Chief External Affairs and Sustainability Officer | adam.read@suez.com

CASE STUDY #1: Greater Manchester Renew Hub

In Greater Manchester, SUEZ recycling and recovery UK manages around 1 million tonnes of municipal waste every year from over one million households on behalf of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and 9 local councils.

Re-use plays a central role in the journey towards decarbonisation, supporting the city-region's target of becoming carbon neutral by 2038.

As part of the partnership, the Renew Hub was launched in 2021. The UK's largest re-use and repair facility is located in Trafford Park, Greater Manchester. It is a pioneering initiative demonstrating how waste management can deliver environmental, economic, and social benefits simultaneously. It's a blueprint for industrial-scale re-use, helping cities transition to sustainable consumption patterns while supporting vulnerable communities.

The Hub has been developed in an empty former In-vessel composting facility and is designed to tackle waste, reduce consumption, and promote a circular economy by repairing, refurbishing, and reselling pre-loved items that would otherwise go to waste.

Household items are donated at the 20 household waste recycling centres and transported to the Renew Hub for repair and upcycling before being sold to the public through three recycling centre shops, along with an online sales page and regular events at the Hub itself.

Since 2021, the Renew Hub has sold 455,000 items that would otherwise have been thrown away, moving waste up the hierarchy. Being able to repair furniture and bikes, and PAT test electricals means that a wider range of items can be sold to the public for affordable prices.

As part of the partnership, SUEZ donates £100,000 every year from shop sales to the Greater Manchester Mayor's Charity focused on reducing homelessness and £200,000 every year to a Renew Community Fund. The fund has supported 110 local community groups since its inception, for projects like bike repair and tool libraries, creating long-term behavioural change and fostering community engagement.

Furniture items are also given freely to a selection of local charities who work with those most in need in the local communities.

John Scanlon, Executive Vice President UK, SUEZ: "Setting up the Renew project in Greater Manchester was an intentional step outside of standard waste management. We can't continue to consume the Earth's finite resources and then just discard them - driving the circularity of

Principle Three: Heating solutions should be affordable and decarbonised at scale, prioritising efficient, shared systems such as heat networks.

Heating is the hardest and most expensive part of the energy transition for most councils. Heat networks can unlock stranded waste heat that is already being generated - from data centres, waste treatment, and industrial sites - and turn it into an affordable local asset.

ASK: Identify major sources of surplus heat, including energy-from-waste plants, data centres and industrial facilities, and work with national government to support fiscal incentives, such as ETS exemptions or other tax reliefs, that recognise the wider economic and carbon benefits of heat recovery and heat network development.

WHY: Large volumes of low-carbon heat are currently wasted despite being located close to homes, businesses and public buildings that require heating. Fiscal incentives that recognise the wider economic and carbon benefits of heat recovery, such as ETS exemptions, business rates relief, targeted tax incentives or investment schemes, for example, adapting the Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS), can improve project viability, reduce energy costs and accelerate investment in affordable low-carbon heat.

ASK: Develop or commission a Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) that maps whole-system energy demand and supply, including heat demand, low-carbon heat sources and anchor loads, and identifies priority heat network zones for delivery and investment.

WHY: Heat decarbonisation requires spatial planning that aligns infrastructure, development and investment decisions. By considering heat within the wider energy system, LAEPs can identify opportunities to recover surplus heat and support a more circular use of local energy resources. They provide the evidence base for investable heat zoning by matching strategic heat sources with long-term demand and anchor loads, giving developers and investors confidence by ensuring investment is targeted where it delivers the greatest economic, environmental and affordability benefits.

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle Three, and walk you through implementation:

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- Neil McLoughlin, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, Heat, REA | nmcloughlin@r-e-a.net

CASE STUDY #2: Using unrecyclable waste to heat the West Midlands

Kelvin is the sixth and newest facility in enfinium's fleet of state-of-the-art energy from waste sites. Located in West Bromwich in Sandwell, the facility will prevent up to 395,000 tonnes of residual, unrecyclable waste from entering landfill each year.

Not only will Kelvin prevent this unrecyclable waste from entering landfill, but it will use this to generate baseload, domestic energy. The turbine at Kelvin has the capacity to generate up to 44MW of electricity, which will be exported to the local distribution network to power the equivalent of 95,000 homes.

Given Kelvin's location in West Bromwich, the site is also set to anchor a new local heat network. Working with Sandwell Council, who have received central government funding under the Green Heat Network Fund to develop the scheme, Kelvin will provide up to 40MWth of bulk heat to this new network each year via an energy centre which will be located adjacent to the facility.

This will see unrecyclable waste providing heat to local schools, hospitals, homes, and businesses. In displacing the gas generation which these users currently rely on, Kelvin will both help to decarbonise urban infrastructure whilst at the same time providing lower cost and more reliable heating – heating which is today reliant on volatile gas markets and global geopolitics.

Energy from waste plants underpin urban heat networks in many places in Europe today, especially Northern Europe where there are greater demands for heat. With the right policy and infrastructure in place, the UK's growing fleet of waste management facilities can come to do the same, getting the most out of residual material and ensuring nothing truly goes to waste in circular cities.

enfinium is a leader in the UK in developing heat offtakes from its facilities. Already, enfinium's site in Kemsley, Kent, provides steam to the neighbouring paper mill and in 2025 was the largest provider in the UK's EfW fleet. In south Leeds, enfinium's Skelton Grange facility is also set to underpin another new network under development in the Aire Valley.

Principle Four: Energy and transport systems should be planned and operated as integrated systems to maximise efficiency and reduce emissions.

Electric vehicles and public transport are top of the agenda for most mayors but the grid costs of uncoordinated charging are real. Smart integration means cleaner streets and lower infrastructure bills, not higher ones.

ASK: Establish a lotting model for on street charging, allowing operators to select their own sites based off market intelligence to boost utilisation.

WHY: The commercial viability of AC charging (Alternating Current charging, charging supplied by the grid) is under threat, as evidenced by low utilisation of the AC segment and participant consolidation in this segment of the market. There is a commercial imperative for on-street charging, and a lotting model has the capacity to serve this demand. A lotting model enables operators to deploy infrastructure at scale across multiple locations, spreading risk, improving investment certainty, and supporting delivery in areas that may not otherwise attract private investment. This helps ensure widespread access to convenient on-street charging while minimising costs to local authorities.

ASK: Require all municipal owned car parks and Park & Ride sites to have solar canopies, a mix of EV charging speeds on site and, and battery energy storage capacity; subject to feasibility.

WHY: Although the government is not currently pursuing this as a mandate, this is still a key method to improve local transport systems (i.e. in conjunction with mobility hubs combining EV charging with Active Travel and e-Bike/Scooter charging). Further, as electricity prices are unlikely to fall significantly in the short or medium term, this model offers predictability in the business case and offers a route to delivery that avoids lengthy Distribution Network Operators connection queues. This is a common-sense solution immediately in local authority hands.

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle Four, and walk you through implementation:

- Mark Constable, Head of Transport, REA | mconstable@r-e-a.net

CASE STUDY #3:
Waste collection fleet V2G

Veolia, the UK's largest waste collection fleet operator, is piloting vehicle-to-grid technology using electric refuse collection vehicles (RCVs) - demonstrating how circular transport infrastructure can become one of the smartest assets on the grid.

The logic is straightforward. RCV batteries are six times larger than those in a typical electric car, and the fleet sits idle at depots precisely during evening peak demand hours (when we need that energy the most). These RCV batteries can feed back stored electricity into the grid; providing energy during peak demand periods and contributing to grid stability. Veolia's ambition is to electrify all 1,800 of its RCVs by 2040 - providing vehicle-to-grid technology - and unlocking around 200 MW of daily flexible capacity. This is equivalent to the evening peak demand of over 150,000 homes.

The circular, sustainable dimension goes further. Veolia is powering its vehicle depots with low-carbon electricity from its own energy recovery plants - including the Landmann Way depot in North London, supplied by the SELCHP energy recovery facility. Waste collected on Monday can, in effect, power the vehicles collecting waste on Tuesday, which then feed back into the grid later that evening.

Principle Five: Food systems should strengthen local economies and minimise waste, supporting sustainable production, redistribution, and nutrient recycling.

Food poverty and high street decline are live issues in most towns and cities. Supporting local food economies creates jobs, cuts food miles, and reduces pressure on waste and water infrastructure simultaneously.

ASK: Develop a local food partnership and food waste strategy that connects local partners from all sectors to deliver changes in community food growing, surplus food redistribution, and food waste prevention and recycling; outlining unseen additional benefits, such as production of renewable biogas and biofertiliser for use in local agriculture and community food growing.

WHY: Roughly 25% of all food is wasted[9] in the UK, with nearly three quarters comprised of edible food. Yet research shows that approximately 25% of people in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland were food insecure in 2024[10], with those in urban areas disproportionately impacted. Developing local food strategies can simultaneously unlock reductions in food-waste emissions, support greater access to healthy, affordable, nutritious food, and enable more sustainable agricultural practices throughout the UK's farming communities.

ASK: Support food waste reduction in households by pairing regular food waste collection with prevention-led behaviour change.

WHY: England has recently rolled out the largest reforms to waste collections in a generation – many households will now have weekly food waste collections for the first time and as a result will be more aware of how much food they are wasting each week. This presents a unique opportunity to communicate the benefits of food waste prevention in addition to the proper recycling of unavoidable food waste. Reduction in total waste results in lower collection and processing costs for councils and will save householders money on weekly bills at a time when the cost of living is a stressor for many households across the UK.

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle Five, and walk you through implementation:

- Local Authority Support, WRAP | la.support@wrap.ngo
- Jenny Grant, Head of Organics, REA | jenny@r-e-a.net
- Dr Adam Read Read MBE, Chief External Affairs and Sustainability Officer | adam.read@suez.com

CASE STUDY #4:
Cally Circular Food Community

During 2024-25, ReLondon, Islington Council and a local community co-designed and delivered a circular food community model in the Caledonian ward ("the Cally"), a tight-knit area in north London with around 6,000 households facing high levels of deprivation, food insecurity, and climate vulnerability.

The project aimed to reduce food-related carbon emissions by increasing access to affordable, low-carbon food and cutting household food waste, while also generating social value through improved wellbeing, skills development, and community connection.

Central to the project was Jean's Café and pantry, based at the Jean Stokes Community Centre. Operated by Manor Gardens Welfare Trust and a large network of local volunteers, it offered pay-as-you-like meals made from surplus food sourced from nearby businesses and redistribution networks. The café acted as a social hub, creating opportunities for volunteering, training, and employment, while fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Jean's Café

Additional interventions were designed to fit into everyday life and included plant-based cooking workshops, low-waste demonstrations, school chef training, and community growing sessions. A low-carbon recipe bag scheme provided families with free ingredients and simple plant-based recipes, distributed through local hubs alongside hands-on cooking sessions to support healthier, sustainable eating.

The project engaged over 220 residents, 20 businesses, 46 school staff and 30 volunteers across 46 events - generating £160,017 in social value. It demonstrated clear environmental, social and economic benefits, highlighting the effectiveness of locally rooted, circular food systems. The approach offers a replicable model for other communities, provided it is adapted to local needs and contexts.

> "It's good for meeting people, bringing people together to fight loneliness, people would be stuck at home otherwise - food brings people together." - Café attendee

CASE STUDY #5: Nutrient recycling through AD

Anaerobic digestion (AD) plants provide an essential service to towns and cities across the country, both as a reliable and sustainable solution for treating food waste, and also as a secure, local, source of renewable energy and biofertilisers.

With the advent of Simpler Recycling and the roll out of separate food waste collections for homes and businesses, the role AD plays in managing our waste and powering our towns and cities is set to grow. In 2030, when the vast majority of food waste collections will be in place across England, the Government expects 4.8m tonnes of separately collected food waste will be treated in AD plants. This will produce enough biogas, a by-product of the AD process, to heat or power 400,000 households – a city roughly the size of Birmingham.

AD is an alternative way of treating food waste to composting, that produces renewable energy and avoids carbon emissions. It's a circular process that alongside biogas, also produces a nutrient rich digestate that can be supplied to agriculture to improve soils and help to reduce the reliance on imported fossil-derived synthetic fertilisers.

SUEZ is expanding its anaerobic digestion capacity, with a new facility in Northumberland to serve the county and wider north east under construction and plans for a further three plants in the north west and London.

SUEZ'S Ellington Road AD Plant

John Scanlon, Executive Vice President UK, SUEZ: "As a sector we are developing and operating critical infrastructure that not only ensures our waste is safely managed, keeping our streets clean, but that also represents a growing element of the UK's renewable energy pipeline. At SUEZ, we continue to play our part in maintaining the UK's position as a climate leader, with infrastructure that provides

Principle Six: The built environment should enhance and work with nature, embedding circular design principles across development.

Planning for housing is one of the most politically charged issues facing local leaders.

ASK: On all new major planning applications, integrate changes to maximise ecosystem services and recovery of natural resources. For instance, requirements for minimum accessible green space provision and urban greening in new developments to reduce heat/ cooling demand, maximum walking distances requirements to nearby green spaces, procurement and use of locally produced composts in city parks, and rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse.

WHY: As the government endeavours to build 1.5 million houses this parliament to contend with the current housing crisis, local government must think critically about the way new housing is designed and delivered maximise the benefits of nature integration upfront. As a nation subject to increasing extremes in temperature and regularly contending with both flooding and water shortages, water and heat management must be factored into urban planning. Access to green space is not only linked to improved physical fitness and mental health outcomes[11], urban greening can also regulate temperatures to minimise urban heat island affects. While planning decisions will largely apply to new developments, retroactive swaps like using locally produced compost in urban parks and collecting rainwater can help to improve rain infiltration and support flexible water storage, respectively.

ASK: Develop the necessary physical and digital infrastructure to facilitate circular supply chains. This includes establishing material reuse hubs, as highlighted in the London Infrastructure Framework[12] as well as the data infrastructure needed to support these activities, leveraging material information already held by projects in pre-demolition audits and submitted as part of Circular Economy Statements.

WHY: Each year, the construction industry generates between roughly 55 and 70 million tonnes of the UK's waste[13] while being significantly exposed to rising costs of material imports. Encouraging localised reuse of construction materials cuts the industry's dependence on imports and unlocks local employment and innovation opportunities while tackling embodied emissions.

Further questions? The following experts are available to answer local authority questions on Principle Six, and walk you through implementation:

- Pauline Metivier, Partnerships and External Affairs Director, ReLondon | pauline.metivier@relondon.gov.uk

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Food systems should strengthen local economies and minimise waste, supporting sustainable production and redistribution.

The built environment should enhance and work with nature, embedding circular design principles across development.

A city that acts on all six principles looks different.

Its residents pay less for their energy, because generation is local and bills are insulated from volatile wholesale markets. Its streets are cleaner and its air better, because transport and energy systems work together rather than against each other. Its waste is a resource, not a liability - collected, recovered, and fed back into the local economy rather than exported to landfill. Its new homes are built to last, designed from the outset to consume less, waste less, and connect to the clean infrastructure around them. Its food system nourishes rather than depletes - redistributing surplus, building soil health, and reducing the emissions that nobody currently accounts for.

None of this requires a council to act alone. **The REA and our partners are here to help local authorities move from ambition to delivery** - providing technical expertise, connecting councils to members and supply chains, and advocating for the national policy conditions that make local action easier and more fundable.

For a more detailed discussion or for further information, please contact:

- Megan Muller-Girard, Circular Economy Lead, REA | mmuller-girard@r-e-a.net
- Frank Gordon, Director of Policy, REA | fgordon@r-e-a.net

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