Why circular economy policy needs a wider lens

By Lisa McLeod

WASTE POLICY REMAINS ESSENTIAL. Councils need robust systems for collection, recycling, organics processing and safe disposal. But by the time a product reaches the bin, most of the decisions that determine its environmental impact have already been made.

The circular economy asks a more fundamental question: How can we avoid waste being created in the first place, while keeping products and materials useful for longer and regenerating the natural systems on which communities depend?

That distinction is central to Frankston City Council's recently endorsed City Circularity Roadmap (March 2026). Rather than simply extending its existing Waste Circularity Plan 2023-2030, Council developed a separate roadmap to broaden the conversation beyond waste management and embed circularity across the systems that shape everyday life, such as buildings and infrastructure, food, clothing and consumer goods, local business, and Council operations.

It is a useful example for the sector. Circular economy policy does not replace waste policy. It expands it. Waste management focuses on what happens after a product is discarded. By contrast, circular economy policy aims to limit waste generation and ensure materials retain their value for as long as possible.

From end of life to whole of system

Waste services are the most visible part of a council's resource recovery work. They are also where the consequences of resource decisions become apparent: a discarded sofa, a food scrap in the red bin, packaging that cannot be recycled, or building materials sent to landfill during demolition.

Yet those outcomes are largely determined well before collection day. Product design, procurement decisions, building specifications, access to repair and reuse services, business practices and the availability of alternatives to buying new all shape what eventually becomes waste.

A circular approach shifts attention upstream. It prioritises designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials at their highest value, and regenerating natural systems. Recycling remains important, but it is not the destination. It is one tool among many, after opportunities to avoid, reduce, reuse, repair, share, refurbish and remanufacture have been considered. This broadens both the opportunity and the challenge.

Local governments cannot create a circular economy, but they can contribute, and circularity is not owned by a waste team alone. It requires input from procurement, economic development, planning, infrastructure, property, parks, community development and communications. It also depends on collaboration with businesses, institutions, community, neighbouring councils and state government.

Why Frankston created a separate roadmap

Frankston City Council already has policies and programs that supported circular outcomes. These include waste and resource recovery services, food waste avoidance education, business support through its Trim Your Bin program, reusable product rebates, and use of recycled materials in Council projects.

The Roadmap brings this activity together and identifies where further strategic direction can help accelerate progress. Its five-year plan is organised around three objectives:

- Foster a circular economy culture: Make circular choices such as reuse, repair, sharing and food waste avoidance easier and more visible for residents.
- Position Frankston as a circular economy hub: Support local businesses, innovation, skills and partnerships that can create economic opportunities from circular models.
- Lead by example: Embed circular principles in Council procurement, asset management, infrastructure, policy and staff capability.

The approach recognises that waste prevention is not simply a household behaviour issue. It is shaped by the availability, affordability and convenience of circular options. Repair cafés, Libraries of Things, clothing swaps and refill services do more than reduce waste. They can lower household costs, strengthen community connections and support local enterprise.

The Council's public messaging captures this practical dimension well: a borrowed tool instead of a new purchase, a salvaged building material used in its next project, recycled glass used in road base, or a shampoo bottle refilled for another use. These are modest examples individually, but together they point to an economy that extracts more value from the materials already in circulation.

Focusing on places where councils can influence change

To turn broad principles into practical action, the strategy focuses on three areas where councils have high influence and where measurable outcomes are achievable.

The built environment is a major opportunity. Councils influence planning, construction, infrastructure delivery and the management of substantial public assets.

Circular principles can extend the life of buildings and infrastructure, support adaptive reuse, improve material recovery during renovation and demolition, and create demand for recycled-content products. In Frankston, this includes developing guidance, standards and decision-making tools for Council assets, identifying flagship infrastructure projects, and pursuing local end markets for recyclable materials.

Food systems connect climate, cost of living, health, local enterprise and resource recovery. Preventing food waste is preferable to managing it after disposal, while unavoidable organics can be transformed into valuable compost and mulch. The plan links food literacy, food rescue, support for local businesses and manufacturers, and greater use of recycled organics in parks, gardens and landscaping.

Clothing and consumer goods are where circularity becomes particularly tangible to households. Repair, reuse, sharing and second-hand options can keep products in use, reduce pressure on household budgets and strengthen local social enterprise. Frankston's plan includes support for community-led activities such as repair cafés, clothing swaps, Libraries of Things and upcycling workshops, alongside investigation of connected community and business circularity hubs.

Leadership means changing Council's own systems

A circular economy strategy needs to be more than a



Excess pavement material from the project was reused to seal Wedge Road, Skye, reducing waste and supporting Frankston City Council's circular economy objectives. Images: Frankston City Council.



Delivering circularity in practice: Foam bitumen treatment was used to rehabilitate sections of McCormicks Road, Carrum Downs, extending the life of existing pavement materials and reducing demand for new resources.

list of community programs. Councils have considerable influence through their own purchasing, construction and asset decisions.

Frankston's Roadmap includes actions to integrate circular economy principles into strategies and policies, introduce environmentally sustainable procurement provisions, improve data on material use and waste flows, establish metrics, and build circular capability across Council teams.

This internal focus matters. It helps turn circularity from a concept into routine practice. It also gives councils the credibility to ask residents and local businesses to make changes when they can demonstrate their own commitment.

Measurement will remain difficult. Local circularity data is inconsistent, and outcomes are affected by supply chains and markets beyond municipal boundaries. Frankston's proposed measures are therefore deliberately practical. For example, tracking the proportion of recycled aggregate used in civil works, compost and mulch used in parks, household food and clothing waste, and employment in circular economy sectors.

No single measure can fully capture circularity. However, practical indicators give councils a way to track progress, identify gaps and demonstrate value to their communities.

The next step for waste policy

The waste and resource recovery sector has done much of the groundwork for circularity. It has built the collection systems, processing infrastructure, market knowledge and community understanding needed to reduce landfill. But circularity challenges the sector to work further upstream and more collaboratively across government and the economy.



Community reuse events make circular choices visible, accessible and social.

Frankston's separate Circularity Roadmap is valuable because it makes this shift explicit. It retains the importance of waste policy while recognising that a circular city will not be achieved through better disposal alone.

The strongest local circular economy strategies will be those that connect waste and resource recovery with procurement, economic development, planning, infrastructure, food systems and community life. They will make circular choices practical, affordable and visible. And they will build on the many businesses, community organisations and residents already finding smarter ways to use resources.

Frankston's approach is not necessarily a model to be copied in every detail. However, it highlights an important principle for local government: circular economy strategies work best when they sit across organisational functions rather than being treated solely as an extension of waste management.

In a circular economy, waste is no longer simply a disposal problem. It is a signal that value has been lost and a reminder that better decisions can be made much earlier in the system.

This article draws on Frankston City Council's City Circularity Roadmap and related public communications. Images and review kindly provided by Lisa Finn, Co-ordinator Circularity Strategy and Programs Frankston City Council.

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