

Circular Economy in Sport

A practical guide for sports organisations

BASIS
British Association for Sustainable Sport

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Why circularity matters

Sport relies on equipment, kit, catering, signage, fit-out, facilities, maintenance, packaging and constant purchasing. Often, those things follow a linear pattern: buy, use, throw away, replace. That creates unnecessary waste, drives up costs, increases dependence on virgin materials and leaves organisations exposed to supply chain disruption.

A circular economy offers a better model. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation defines it through three principles: eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials at their highest value, and regenerate nature.

For sport, that means asking better questions:

- > Do we need this at all?
- > Can we buy less?
- > Can we buy something that lasts longer?
- > Can it be reused, repaired, refilled or redistributed?
- > Can we avoid waste rather than just manage it better?

These decisions might feel removed from the actual delivery of sport and physical activity, but they are vital issues which have huge relevance to sports organisations. They affect action taken every day across every kind of sports organisation, venue or event. They also link directly to cost control, operational resilience, environmental performance and community value. Sport England's sustainability framework makes clear that circular economy is now a core part of what good practice looks like in the sector.





What is a circular economy?

A circular economy is an approach to designing and running systems so that waste is prevented, products and materials stay in use for longer, and natural systems are protected and restored. The core idea is simple: instead of the old take-make-waste model, we keep value in the system for as long as possible.

In sport, this means moving beyond the narrow question of how do we recycle more? and towards more long-term - or 'upstream' - decisions:

- > reducing what we use
- > reusing what we can
- > repairing and maintaining equipment
- > redesigning events and operations to avoid waste
- > choosing products and services that support longer life and better recovery
- > working with suppliers differently

UEFA frames this through the 4R approach: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Recover. That is a useful working model for sport because it puts the emphasis in the right place: prevention and reuse come before disposal.

What circular economy means in sport

Circular economy in sport is not one single initiative. It is a way of thinking about materials, products and purchasing across the organisation.

For a club, it may mean reducing single-use items, repairing equipment, reusing event materials and setting up kit donation schemes.

For a sports organisation such as a governing body or active partnership, it may mean embedding circular principles into procurement, events, funding requirements and wider network guidance.

For a venue, it may mean switching to reusable serviceware, cutting packaging, redesigning waste systems, extending asset life and working with suppliers on take-back and reuse.

For an event organiser, it may mean designing out temporary waste, renting instead of buying, using modular materials and planning redistribution before the event takes place.



Circular economy is not just recycling

This is one of the most important points in the guide.

Recycling, better waste segregation, and waste audits all matter. But they are not the same as a circular economy strategy.

Waste management asks what to do with waste once it exists.

Circular economy asks how to stop that waste being created in the first place.

That means the strongest circular actions usually happen earlier:

- > questioning whether something needs to be bought
- > reducing material use
- > choosing reuse over single use
- > extending product life
- > repairing before replacing
- > redistributing surplus
- > specifying circular criteria in procurement
- > involving suppliers in the solution

Sport England's maturity tool reflects that progression clearly. Early stages include basic actions such as encouraging reusable bottles and improving recycling. Later stages move into buying less, buying differently, building circular economy into procurement and tenders, prioritising reuse, and ensuring products and services procured actively promote circularity.

Why it matters for sports organisations



It can reduce waste and save money

Using fewer materials, extending product life and reducing disposal costs can all produce financial benefits. [UEFA's circular economy guidance](#) links circular practice directly with resource efficiency and cost savings.



It can reduce emissions

A large share of many organisations' environmental impact sits in purchased goods, food, materials and supply chains. Circular approaches help reduce those impacts by cutting demand for virgin materials, avoiding waste and keeping products in use for longer.



It can strengthen resilience

If you buy constantly, replace too often and rely on fragile supply chains, rising costs and disruption hit harder. Circularity can reduce that exposure by making better use of what you already have and by shifting purchasing decisions towards durability and long-term value.



It can create visible, practical action

Circular economy often shows up in ways people can see and understand: refill points, reusable cups, repaired equipment, redistributed kit, smarter event materials and less waste. That makes it a strong area for staff engagement, participant education and public credibility.



It can create social value

Some of the best circular examples in sport also improve access and inclusion. The ACCESS compendium highlights repair, reuse and redistribution of sporting equipment as a way to cut waste while helping communities access sport affordably.

Where the biggest opportunities are

Most sports organisations do not need to start everywhere at once. The smartest place to begin is with the most material and most visible hotspots.



Equipment and kit

Balls, bibs, cones, racquets, uniforms, protective gear, training kit and event apparel all offer circular opportunities. Equipment is often replaced too early, stored badly, or lacks any route for repair or redistribution.

Questions to ask:

- > Are we replacing out of habit rather than need?
- > Can more items be repaired?
- > Can elite or less-used equipment be cascaded elsewhere?
- > Is there a donation, swap or reuse route?



Food and drink

Food and beverage is one of the biggest circular opportunities in sport because it touches packaging, waste, procurement and user experience all at once. UEFA gives this area particular emphasis in its circular guidance and checklists.

Questions to ask:

- > Can we reduce over-ordering?
- > Can surplus food be redistributed?
- > Can reusable cups or tableware be introduced?
- > Are suppliers reducing unnecessary packaging?



Event materials and signage

Temporary events often generate highly avoidable waste through branding, set-build, accreditation materials, fit-out and furniture.

Questions to ask:

- > Can this be rented instead of bought?
- > Can it be designed for reuse?
- > Can signage be less event-specific?
- > Do we know where materials go afterwards?



Packaging and single-use items

Single-use cups, bottles, trays and food packaging are visible, expensive and often avoidable.

UEFA's event checklist explicitly asks whether reusable cups, trays and tableware with deposit systems are in place.



Procurement and suppliers

This is where circularity becomes strategic rather than cosmetic. If procurement still rewards lowest upfront cost over whole-life value, circular progress will be limited.

Questions to ask:

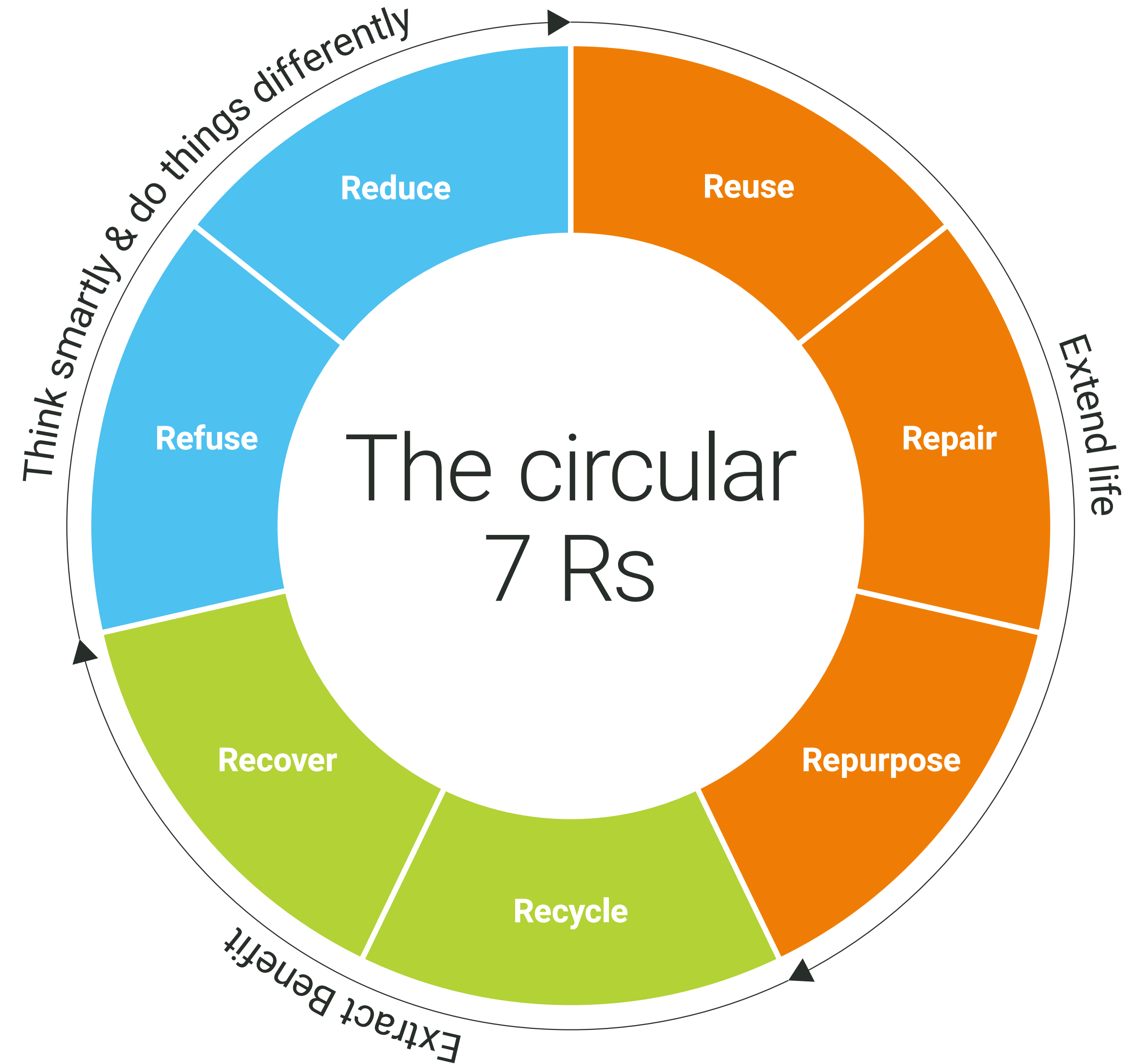
- > Do tenders ask for durability, repairability and take-back?
- > Are we asking suppliers to reduce packaging?
- > Can products be leased, returned or refurbished?
- > Are suppliers part of the solution?

A simple framework for action

A useful framework for sport is:

- > **Refuse** – do we need it at all?
- > **Reduce** – can we use less?
- > **Reuse** – can it be used again?
- > **Repair / Refurbish / Repurpose** – can we keep it in use for longer?
- > **Recycle** – if it cannot stay in use, can materials be recovered effectively?
- > **Recover** – only after higher-value options have been exhausted.

This circular economy model aims to keep products and materials at their highest value at all times. You can do this by focusing on the principles of this model known as the '7 R s' of circular economy.



A sport-specific maturity pathway

Starting

At this stage, organisations are doing basic waste actions and encouraging simple behaviour change, such as recycling and reusable bottles.

What this looks like:

- > recycling bins and signage
- > reducing obvious single-use items
- > early conversations about waste and purchasing
- > limited measurement

The next step:

- > understand your biggest material and waste streams
- > run a simple audit
- > identify a few practical quick wins

Progressing

At this stage, organisations have started assessing impact, setting targets and considering procurement.

What this looks like:

- > a waste audit or materials review
- > basic goals to reduce waste
- > first steps toward buying less and buying differently
- > one or two practical initiatives underway

The next step:

- > choose priority categories such as food packaging, equipment or event materials
- > build circular prompts into purchasing decisions
- > assign ownership

Sustainable

At this stage, circular economy is being considered in procurement and tenders, major waste reduction actions are in place, and supplier engagement has begun.

What this looks like:

- > circular criteria in tenders
- > reuse systems in place
- > suppliers engaged
- > significant reduction in avoidable waste

The next step:

- > make circular procurement standard
- > connect operations, procurement and suppliers
- > set clear KPIs and review regularly

Restorative and Regenerative

At the highest levels, reuse is prioritised, procured products and services actively support circularity, waste is extremely low or designed out, and organisations are creating wider positive impact and influencing others.

What this looks like:

- > circularity embedded into core operations
- > very low reliance on single-use systems
- > leadership beyond the organisation
- > environmental and social benefits across the supply chain

What good practice looks like

Good circular practice in sport usually has a few things in common.

- It starts upstream.
- It focuses on priority material categories.
- It changes procurement as well as operations.
- It involves suppliers.
- It creates clear ownership.
- It measures progress honestly.
- It often creates social value alongside environmental gains.

We found a number of resources helpful in compiling this guide. [The ACCESS compendium](#) brings together practical examples from sport and cities, especially around reuse, equipment redistribution, resource efficiency and cross-sector collaboration. It can offer inspiration for sports organisations and public authorities.

[UEFA's guidance translates circular economy](#) has been helpful because it translates circular economy into the day-to-day realities of elite sport: food and beverage, apparel and football equipment, event materials, and energy and water. It is written as a practical tool for clubs, leagues and event organisers rather than a general theory document.



What to do first

For organisations at an early stage, the best approach is not to try to do everything. It is to make a solid start in a few areas that matter.

Start with a baseline

Review what you buy most often, what you throw away most often, and which waste streams or materials are most costly, visible or avoidable.

Run a simple waste and materials audit

Not just what ends up in the bin, but also:

- > what gets bought repeatedly
- > what gets replaced too early
- > where there is no repair or reuse route
- > where single-use has become the default

Pick three to five priority actions

A strong first-year mix might include:

- > one visible quick win
- > one procurement change
- > one reuse or redistribution initiative
- > one supplier conversation
- > one KPI or measurement action

Put someone in charge

Circularity needs ownership. Without it, it becomes a general aspiration rather than a delivered programme.

The most useful first actions

The most practical circular actions in sport usually fall into a few categories.



Buy less

Challenge default purchasing. Avoid over-ordering. Stop buying things that add little value. Share assets across teams or departments where possible.



Buy better

When you do buy, prioritise durability, repairability, reusability, refillability, reduced packaging and take-back options.



Extend product life

Repair equipment before replacing it. Maintain assets better. Store them properly. Standardise components where possible.



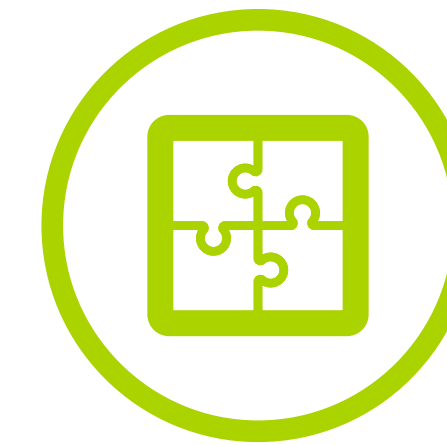
Reuse more

Move from single-use to reusable systems where practical. This may include cups, bottles, food service items, crates, event materials and some forms of fit-out.



Redistribute surplus

Create routes for used kit, equipment, apparel, furniture or materials to go to schools, clubs, charities or community partners.



Work with suppliers

Suppliers need to be part of the shift. Ask them to reduce packaging, support take-back, improve repair options and help you find better circular solutions.

Sustainable procurement: a key enabler

Circular economy and sustainable procurement are closely linked, but they are not the same thing. Procurement is one of the main ways circular thinking becomes embedded.

A circular procurement approach asks:

- > is this purchase necessary?
- > is there a lower-material option?
- > can we rent, reuse or refurbish instead?
- > what is the product's expected lifespan?
- > can it be repaired?
- > what happens at end of life?
- > does the supplier offer take-back or reduced packaging?

Sport England's Maturity Tool makes procurement central once organisations move beyond the early stage. It refers explicitly to buying less and differently, then later to embedding circular economy as a key procurement and tender criterion.

That's as far as this guide will go on procurement - a Sustainable Procurement Toolkit which goes much deeper into policy, templates, specifications and examples can be found in the Resources section on [Page 18](#).

Common mistakes to avoid

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3



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One common mistake is treating recycling as the strategy. Recycling is part of the picture, but it sits lower down the hierarchy than reducing and reusing.

Another is focusing only on the most visible waste while ignoring upstream purchasing decisions. In many organisations, the biggest gains sit in procurement, packaging, maintenance, replacement cycles and event design.

A third is switching to a supposedly “greener” disposable product without changing the underlying single-use model. That may improve the optics without solving the problem.

A fourth is doing pilots with no route to scale. A one-off trial is only useful if it helps answer what would be needed to make the change normal.

A practical checklist

A good circular economy programme in sport should be able to answer yes to more and more of these questions over time:

- > Do we understand our main material and waste hotspots?
- > Do we challenge unnecessary purchasing?
- > Do we prioritise reuse before recycling?
- > Do we have repair and redistribution routes for equipment and kit?
- > Do our tenders ask for circular outcomes?
- > Are suppliers helping us reduce waste and extend product life?
- > Have we moved away from avoidable single-use systems where practical?
- > Are we measuring progress with clear KPIs?
- > Is someone clearly accountable?
- > Are we creating social value as well as environmental benefit?

UEFA's current event checklist is useful here because it is written as a practical self-assessment tool for clubs, leagues and associations, is designed to be used by non-specialists, and even though the focus is professional football the principles are more widely applicable.



The key message

Circular economy in sport is not about making rubbish slightly better - it is about redesigning how sport uses materials.

That means buying less, buying better, using things for longer, creating less waste in the first place, and getting more value from the products and materials already in the system.

The opportunity is bigger than waste reduction alone. Done well, circularity can help sports organisations reduce costs, cut emissions, strengthen resilience, improve access, support communities and show practical leadership.

That is why it belongs at the heart of how sport thinks about supply chains, products and waste - and why it is now part of the sustainability journey outlined by Sport England.

The closing message

Sport uses a huge range of products and materials, but waste is not inevitable.

A circular approach helps organisations rethink what they buy, how they use it, and what happens next.

The process starts with simple steps: understanding your material hotspots, reducing single-use items, extending the life of equipment, reusing more and involving suppliers earlier. But over time it can become something much more powerful: a smarter, more resilient, lower-waste model for running sport.

You do not need to do everything at once. Start where you have the biggest footprint and the clearest influence. Build from there. Measure progress. Share learning. Keep going - and move beyond thinking about waste to building real, long-term value.

Key Resources

- > [WRAP](#)
- > [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#)
- > [UEFA Circular Economy Guide](#)
- > [Sustainable Procurement Toolkit](#)

Case Studies

- > [Leeds Kit Foundation](#)
- > [MCC questionnaire](#)
- > [Kitround](#)
- > [Action For Sport](#)



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