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Building a Circular Europe

From workshop findings to practical action on circular construction

A POSITION PAPER

European Week of Regions and Cities 2026



The circularity gap shows the high cost of our current linear economy. We continue to use more resources than the planet can replace, creating waste, increasing emissions, and damaging nature. This system also contributes to poor working conditions in resource extraction and harms local communities. At the same time, an estimated €25.4 trillion in economic value is lost every year through inefficient use of materials[1], highlighting the need to speed up the transition to a circular economy.

The case for practical implementation

Europe's transition to circular construction depends on decisions taken across the construction value chain: whether buildings remain in use, whether materials can be identified and recovered, whether businesses can make reuse commercially viable, and whether public authorities and market actors

[1] Circularity Gap Report 2026: The Value Gap

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can coordinate delivery. Local and regional authorities encounter these questions directly in planning, procurement, construction, and partnerships. The European Commission is expected to publish its legislative proposal for the Circular Economy Act (CEA) by Q4 2026.

The "Building a Circular Europe" workshop, held on 13 October 2026, during the European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels, brought together perspectives from across local and regional governments and the wider construction ecosystem. Its recorded contributions point to circular construction as a coordination challenge involving economic incentives, material flows, knowledge, regulation, and cooperation. Rather than treating any single measure as a universal solution, future action should address identifiable barriers with clear responsibilities and practicable implementation routes.

1. Develop markets and infrastructure for material reuse
2. Use economic instruments to make circular choices attractive
3. Create clear rules, standards and verification systems
4. Strengthen competence, data and knowledge sharing
5. Mobilise public-sector tools: Planning, permitting and procurement
6. Enable delivery through partnerships and governance

What the workshop evidence shows

A thematic review of 91 registered written contributions from six workshop tables found these recurring themes at every table: economics and incentives (26 notes), material flows and circular processes (26), knowledge and practical learning (23), regulation and quality assurance (20), and cooperation, governance and scaling (19). These figures describe the content of written notes, not the number of participants supporting a position or the effectiveness of a policy measure. Some notes were assigned more than one theme.

Together, the contributions suggest a need to connect financial decisions, material services, usable evidence, and delivery capacity. They also reveal important distinctions: more demanding quality assurance and greater regulatory flexibility were both raised; digital matching is not the same as physical collection or storage; and reusing an existing building is different from recycling its materials.

1. Develop markets and infrastructure for material reuse

Workshop contributions identified gaps in access to reusable materials, matching supply and demand, storage, collection, logistics and distance to markets. Digital information can improve visibility, but a digital marketplace alone cannot move, store or verify materials. Equally, creating physical capacity does not generate demand by itself.

Recommended direction: Local and regional actors should map selected material streams and assess the services already available before choosing additional infrastructure or platforms.

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European-level cooperation should examine ways of sharing workable approaches and making material information more compatible across territories.

2. **Use economic instruments to make circular choices attractive**

The notes distinguish between processing costs, reuse versus disposal prices, project investment risks, coordination costs, and the incentives facing owners of reusable materials. These are different economic problems, borne by different actors. Workshop evidence does not establish comparative prices or the effectiveness of a particular subsidy.

Recommended direction: Authorities for developing financial support should specify which actor faces the cost or risk, which behaviour an instrument is intended to change, and how its performance will be evaluated. Relevant European funding approaches could be examined for their treatment of coordination and process costs as well as physical investments.

3. **Create clear rules, standards and verification systems**

Participants raised quality certification, reuse requirements, testing and material documentation, alongside bureaucracy and calls for more municipal flexibility. These contributions should not be read as an overall preference for either stronger regulation or deregulation. They instead reveal a practical need to establish whether reused products are acceptable and how compliance can be demonstrated.

Recommended direction: Policy development should focus on clearly specified materials and decisions, including appropriate safety and performance requirements, proportionate evidence, and predictable procedures. Before proposing harmonization or exemptions at EU level, policymakers should identify the concrete regulatory or administrative barrier and determine the responsible level of government.

4. **Strengthen competence, data and knowledge sharing**

Education, experience-sharing, study visits and small practical projects were recurrent workshop themes. Other notes referred to missing information about materials already in buildings and wider information asymmetries. Skills and decision information are related but distinct: training does not replace missing material data, and databases do not ensure adoption.

Recommended direction: Regions, municipalities, industry and education providers should connect practical pilots to explicit learning objectives, document results, and exchange experience in a form that can be reused elsewhere. Any shared information tools should be designed around real construction decisions and verified data needs.

5. **Mobilize public-sector tools: Planning, permitting and procurement**

Public procurement, municipal planning, permitting, and reuse of existing buildings were raised in contributions, but they address different choices. Reusing an industrial building or adapting a factory for a new purpose is not equivalent to recovering products or recycling materials after demolition.

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Affordable housing was also raised, without evidence of establishing whether circular measures increase or reduce affordability.

Recommended direction: Public authorities should assess building retention and adaptation early, alongside material-reuse options. Where procurement criteria are used, they should target defined outcomes and be tested for feasibility. Any recommendations should distinguish between building reuse, component reuse, recycling and remanufacturing, while assessing costs, affordability and environmental performance rather than assuming effects.

6. **Enable delivery through partnerships and governance**

Cooperation was a recurring theme, but notes also pointed to fragmented responsibility, limited trust, collaboration risks and insufficient local resources for pilots or coordination. A general commitment to partnership is therefore not sufficient to describe how an initiative will be delivered.

Recommended direction: Collaborative initiatives should identify a coordinator, participating in organizations, decision rights, practical tasks, resources, and expected outputs. Interregional cooperation can usefully exchange approaches to coordination and implementation capacity, while evaluating whether arrangements work in their local context.



A focused agenda for European and regional action

The workshop points towards a practical division of work. Municipalities and regions can map material streams, test procurement and asset-management approaches, coordinate local actors, and turn pilots into transferable learning. European institutions and cross-regional networks can examine opportunities to improve the usability of material evidence, support practical cooperation, and address specific cross-border obstacles where these are demonstrated. Any proposed EU-level intervention should be subject to legal, economic, and implementation of assessment.

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For every proposed measure, the responsible actor, targeted barrier, intended result, and means of monitoring progress should be made explicit. This would help move circular construction from broad ambition towards interventions that are operational, proportionate, and open to evaluation.

Conclusion

Circular construction cannot be scaled by legislation, finance, procurement, or technology in isolation. The workshop contributions underline the importance of aligning incentives, the movement and verification of materials, practical knowledge, reliable rules, and the capacity to cooperate. A credible circular construction agenda should begin with the specific decision or obstacle it aims to change and build an implementable response around it.

Europe's cities and regions are important places to test these approaches and share lessons. Their contribution will be strongest when local experience informs well-defined policy choices, while claims about costs, legal constraints and expected impact are independently tested.

On behalf of the organizers and participants,

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All photographs used in this publication are courtesy of the event organisers.