



**BUYING LESS
BUYING BETTER.**

**What Happens to
Our Clothes**



GreenFridays.org

Where Do All Our Clothes Go?

From Wardrobe to... Where?

There are more possible routes than we might imagine:

KEEP & REWEAR



REPAIR



SWAP / RESALE / RENTAL



DONATE



EXPORT



RECYCLE / DOWNCYCLE



INCINERATION / LANDFILL



And the further down that list a garment travels, the more of its original value is generally lost. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates that globally, 73% of the materials used to produce clothing are landfilled or burned at the end of their life, while *less than 1% of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing*.

That's not really a circle. It's still overwhelmingly a one-way system.

What Really Happens When We Donate?

Putting clothes into a donation bank can feel like a guarantee that they'll find another home. But a fascinating Irish investigation found a more complicated picture. In their Threads of Truth report, VOICE Ireland and Global Shapers Dublin placed trackers in 23 garments donated to clothing banks and take back schemes (not charity shops) to see where they actually went. The results:

- 95% were exported, of which 60% left the EU
- Only 30% were confirmed as reused
- For 52% of the items, the final fate remained unclear.

The clothes travelled through 12 countries, including Poland, Pakistan, the UAE and Libya. The report found that clothes made of at least 98% natural fibers were most likely to be reused.

Did you Know?

Only about half of clothing donated to Irish charity shops is in good enough condition to be resold through the charity sector. Of the remainder, around 35% of the original donations are exported for reuse, 14% are turned into materials such as insulation and mattress stuffing, and 1% goes to landfill or incineration (Irish Times, 2025).



What Really Happens When We Donate?

Dead White Man's Clothes

Not all exported clothing finds another wearer. Ghana is one of the major destinations for the global second-hand clothing trade, particularly through Accra's Kantamanto Market.

Research by The OR Foundation has found that roughly 40% of the millions of garments passing through Kantamanto each week leave the market as waste, with clothing ending up in landfill, informal dumps or being burned.

In Ghana, second-hand clothes are commonly known as 'obroni wawu', an Akan expression often translated as 'Dead White Man's Clothes.'



The Global Trade in Used Clothes

Ireland isn't alone.

Europe collects more used clothing than its domestic second-hand and recycling markets can absorb, so large quantities are exported.

The EU exported around 1.44 million tonnes of used textiles in 2025, almost three times the amount exported in 2000 (European Environment Agency).

These clothes enter a complicated international system of sorting, resale, re-export, recycling and disposal.

Some provide affordable clothing and support livelihoods. But when garments are damaged, poor quality or simply exceed local demand, they may end up landfilled, burned or dumped, particularly in countries without the systems to deal with large quantities of textile waste.

Giving clothes away doesn't make their environmental impact disappear.



The Rise of Pre-Loved Fashion

Can Resale Keep Clothes in Circulation?

Not every unwanted garment needs a donation bank.

Platforms such as Vinted and Depop have made buying and selling pre-loved clothes easier than ever. And that's potentially good news.

Resale can extend the useful life of clothes, allowing someone else's unwanted dress, jacket or jeans to replace the purchase of something new.

But there's an important catch: Second-hand fashion only reduces our impact if it helps us buy less new clothing and keep garments in use for longer.

If cheap resale simply encourages us to buy even more clothes, we're back to the same problem: **Volume.**



Why Can't We Just Recycle Our Clothes?

Textile Recycling Is Harder Than It Looks

A cotton T-shirt sounds recyclable. But what if it's 60% cotton, 35% polyester and 5% elastane?

Modern garments frequently combine different fibres, alongside dyes, finishes, buttons, zips, labels and stitching. Separating those materials while preserving fibres of sufficient quality to make new clothing is technically difficult and can be expensive.

Much textile recycling today is therefore actually downcycling, where old clothes become lower-value products such as insulation, stuffing or cleaning cloths. The EEA says most textile fibres in Europe are currently downcycled into products such as rags and insulation.

The result? Less than 1% of material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation).



Can Old Clothes Become New Clothes?

There are promising signs. Swedish company Circulose has developed technology that turns discarded cotton-rich textiles into recycled cellulose pulp.

Old textiles are shredded and de-dyed, contaminants such as polyester are removed, and the remaining cellulose becomes CIRCULOSE®, which can be used to produce fibres such as viscose and lyocell.

Following restructuring, Circulose announced in February 2026 that it planned to restart commercial-scale production at its Swedish plant in late 2026, backed by commitments from fashion brands.

It's an exciting example of textile-to-textile recycling. But technologies like this need to move from innovative exceptions to solutions that can operate at enormous scale.



What About Renting?

Borrow It Instead of Buying It?

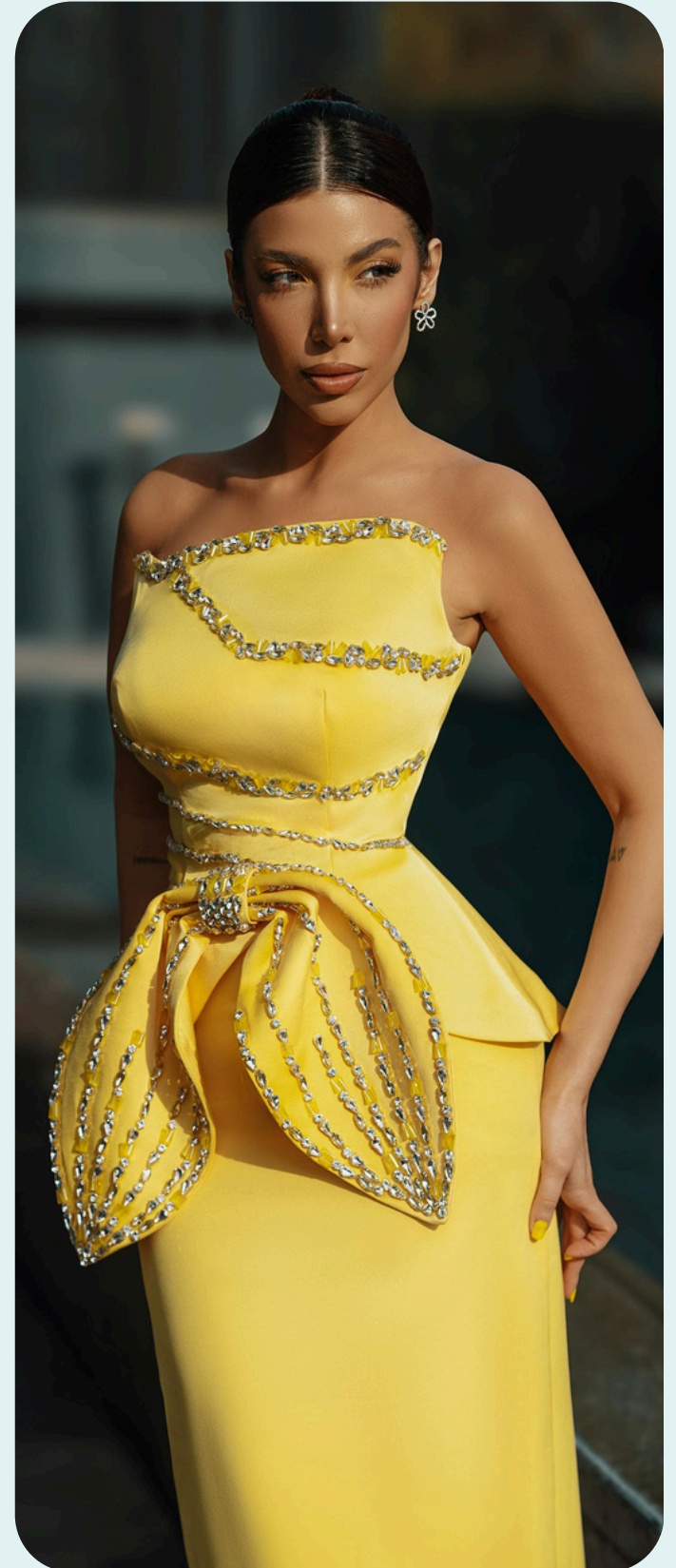
For an outfit we'll wear once or twice, renting can seem an obvious alternative to buying.

And it can work, particularly when one garment is worn many more times by different people.

But rental isn't automatically sustainable. Clothes need to be transported between customer uses, cleaned and sometimes dry-cleaned. Packaging and returns may add further impacts.

Research comparing ownership with rental found that the result depends heavily on how often the garment is worn, what type of garment it is and how it is cleaned. Rental performed particularly well when it substantially increased the number of wears of garments such as occasion dresses.

Rental works best when it genuinely replaces buying something new.



Perhaps the Best Solution Is Already in Your Wardrobe

Wear It More

Resale matters. Donation matters. Recycling innovation matters. But there's an even simpler way to keep clothes in circulation: Don't discard them yet.

Wearing clothes for longer spreads the environmental impact of making them across more wears and reduces the need to replace them.

One simple idea is the **30 Wears Challenge**:

Before buying something, ask yourself: “Will I wear this at least 30 times?”

And why stop at 30? The aim isn't to hit a magic number. It's to shift our thinking from “Do I like it?” to “Will I really use it?”



The most circular garment may be the one you already own.

Green Fridays' Top Tips: Circular Fashion Starts Before the Recycling Bin

1. **KEEP IT:** Wear what you own for longer.
2. **CARE FOR IT:** Wash carefully and repair rather than replace.
3. **PASS IT ON:** Sell, swap or give good-quality clothes directly to someone who'll use them.
4. **DONATE WELL:** Donate clothes that are clean, dry and genuinely reusable.
5. **BUY PRE-LOVED:** Give an existing garment another life.
6. **THINK BEFORE BUYING NEW:** Will you wear it 30 times? Could you borrow, rent or buy it second-hand?
7. **CHECK THE FABRIC:** Simple, durable materials can be easier to keep in circulation and eventually recycle.
8. **Read the detail on labels.** Some brands are playing fast and loose with their marketing. A big 'Natural Fibres' label may not mean that much. Check the small print.

Circular fashion isn't just about what happens at the end. It's about delaying the end for as long as possible.



Green Fridays Takeaway

When clothes leave our wardrobes, they don't simply disappear. They can be resold, donated, exported, recycled, burned, dumped or sent to landfill, sometimes thousands of kilometres from where they were first discarded.

New recycling technologies offer real hope for a more circular fashion industry. But with less than 1% of clothing material currently recycled back into new clothes, the simplest action remains an important one: keep good clothes in use for longer.

Learn more, explore the sources and discover practical ways to help at GreenFridays.org/learn.

Next in our Buying Less, Buying Better. series:

What Could Fashion Look Like in the Future?



THE GREEN ROUTE