**Waste 2024 Conference Abstract Submission**

**(for face-to-face Conference which includes live broadcast)**

Circular Food Courts: Reusables and Food Waste Avoidance

*My presentation is relevant to the following topic area(s).*

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| [ ]  | **Aboriginal community waste management** (projects, results, planning, what else to be done) | [ ]  | **National waste policies & programs** (new schemes, opportunities & recent results) |
| [ ]  | **CDS** (new schemes, new containers, innovations) | [ ]  | **Organics** (food only vs FOGO, implementation strategies, new services) |
| [x]  | **Circular economy** (case studies, right to repair, trials, new materials targeted) | [ ]  | **Plastics** (plastics recycling, plastics recovery schemes, small and large scale plastics projects) |
| [ ]  | **Climate change** (new innovations, strategies & policies) | [ ]  | **Problem & hazardous waste** (asbestos, clinical & medical, illegally dumped hazardous waste, systems for managing hazardous materials) |
| [ ]  | **Collections** (innovations, new systems, vehicles, challenges) | [ ]  | **Procurement** (recent process developments, case studies, planning) |
| [ ]  | **Disaster waste management** (bushfires, floods, pandemic) | [ ]  | **Project Planning** (projects currently planned, challenges and barriers, planning controls and conditions, project management) |
| [ ]  | **Economics** (business cases, data gathering, planning for financial impacts, reviews & analyses) | [ ]  | **Product stewardship & extended producer responsibility** (current & planned schemes, new materials to be captured by schemes, local schemes for recovery) |
| [x]  | **Education** (behaviour change, community engagement, social media, planning FOGO education) | [ ]  | **Recycling & resource recovery** (post China Sword, and export bans, market insights & updates) |
| [ ]  | **Energy from Waste** (projects, case studies) | [ ]  | **Regional issues** (regional responses to waste settings, collaboration, joint projects) |
| [ ]  | **Grants** (major waste grants, outcomes & processes) | [ ]  | **Social enterprise** (new entrants, recent endeavours, case studies) |
| [ ]  | **Infrastructure & planning** (FOGO capacity, new material recovery planning) | [ ]  | **State based issues** (policies, strategies, responses & challenges, border transitions) |
| [x]  | **Innovative projects** (sustainability innovations, artificial intelligence, case studies) | [ ]  | **Strategic waste planning & policy** (stakeholder engagement, strategy development, waste policy impacts and opportunities) |
| [ ]  | **Landfill & facility management** (facility operations management, strategic planning, facility budgeting) | [ ]  | **Technology** (innovations, must haves, how technology will improve or assist with waste responsibilities, AI) |
| [ ]  | **Legislation, regulations & levies** (major updates, monitoring & enforcement, response to changes in regulations) | [ ]  | **Tenders & contracts** (planning, implementation, contract management, innovations, systems & approaches) |
| [ ]  | **Litter & illegal dumping** (prevention, new management systems & innovative & smart initiatives, surveillance) | [ ]  | **Waste projects** (planned waste infrastructure, how to plan & scope, budgeting, understanding what is required, governance & process planning, case studies) |
|  |  | [ ]  | **Other** |

[ ]  **Proposed Panel Discussion** -Proposed topic & participants suitable for key issues that may be addressed by a Panel of presenters. For this category suggest your topic & who you will arrange to attend and present (maximum of 5 panel members).

**Presenter information**

**Presenter name:** Karen Davids

**Presenter position:** Environmental Consultant

**Presenter organisation:** MRA Consulting Group

**Presenter email address:** Karen@mraconsulting.com.au

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**Presenter mobile number:** 0431 916 369

**Biography**

Karen has expertise in upstream circularity, notably avoidance, reuse, and repair. She has conducted in-depth research into the barriers and opportunities for council-community driven circularity, which has won academic awards. Since working at MRA, Karen has gained invaluable experience in the Circular Economy team. She has led economic modelling, stakeholder engagement, waste assessments, and behaviour change workshops for commercial and government clients.

Her recent project experience has involved designing circular food courts in shopping centres across Sydney under the current round of Bin Trim. Karen has developed a method for effective retailer engagement and circular economy education, ensuring a high participation rate across shopping centres. She is a strong advocate of product stewardship and is actively incorporating this circular economy focus into the current project to explore the potential for businesses, especially franchises to phase out single-use packaging as their customers seek out reusable options.

**Abstract Summary**

This presentation will offer practical advice to circular economy educators in Council and industry who are seeking to encourage upstream circularity, including avoidance, reduction, and reuse. It will focus on what effective business engagement and education looks like in the circular economy. To achieve this, MRA’s Circular Food Courts project: Reusables and Food Waste Avoidance that is part of the NSW EPA Bin Trim Networks Program will be discussed. This project involves working with retailers in shopping centre food courts across Sydney to avoid food waste, reduce single-use packaging, and pilot a reusable system of tableware/takeaway tupperware.

**Abstract**

The circular economy is often simplified to mean improved recycling outcomes when, by definition, it prioritises upstream interventions such as avoidance, reduction, and reuse. This presentation will offer practical advice to Councils, waste educators, and businesses on how to encourage upstream circularity by discussing key learnings from MRA’s Circular Food Courts project: Reusables and Food Waste Avoidance, funded by the NSW EPA as part of the Bin Trim Networks Program.

The Bin Trim Networks Program is designed to enhance business circular economy networks where businesses have commonalities relating to location, supply chain, industry sector or specific waste materials. MRA’s project achieves this by working with retailers in shopping centre food courts across Sydney to avoid and recover food waste, reduce single-use packaging, and pilot a reusable system of tableware/takeaway tupperware. Food courts are a strategic location to pilot upstream interventions as businesses can closely work together, learning from each other’s challenges and successes. For example, these businesses often generate similar waste streams, have limited operational space, and their waste contracts are managed by the centre. Additionally, this whole precinct approach to reusables and food waste avoidance/recovery helps businesses to feel a part of a larger sustainability movement which encourages them to participate.

This presentation will discuss how it has been crucial for MRA to work with centre management and their cleaners to understand past as well as current levels of retailer engagement in waste recovery initiatives. MRA has built on this understanding by designing workshops for food court businesses that educate them on achieving upstream circularity rather than solely improving current recycling rates. Other key learnings from the project that will be discussed, include how to:

* Design out waste and keep materials in-use at their highest value;
* Recruit businesses and maintain strong relationships; and
* Liaise with retail centre management to facilitate changes to waste processing and service arrangements shared by the food vendors.

This project not only emphasises the importance of Bin Trim as a driver of large-scale behaviour change among businesses, but also highlights how the program helps to reshape customers’ understandings of waste and ways to avoid it. Data collected by MRA has shown that customers in frequently visited food courts across Sydney do often think about where their waste goes but are unsure how to reduce it. Additionally, many are interested in a reusable tableware and tupperware system although believe there need to be greater incentives offered by businesses and shopping centres to participate. Hence, there is appetite from customers in addition to retailers within food courts to pilot reusables, suggesting that upstream circularity could be scaled up in shopping centres across Sydney with effective education and collaboration.

It is crucial to consider the role that businesses play in propelling a circular economy in Australia. The Bin Trim Networks Program provides a powerful platform to realise this goal and MRA’s project offers key learnings that can be applied to Council or independent business projects seeking to encourage upstream circularity.