



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the waste management of absorbent hygiene products

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Dear Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the waste management of absorbent hygiene products.

My first experience with reusable hygiene products was using cloth nappies on my daughter in 2018. Since then I have researched, advocated and educated on the benefits of using cloth nappies and reusable menstrual products. I created the 'Canberra Cloth Bums' Facebook group to bring together a like-minded community. I have previously worked with the Canberra Environment Centre to deliver information sessions. As my daughter is no longer using cloth nappies and I have returned to fulltime work, I am no longer able to commit the volunteer hours required to grow this community and support even more parents to consider reusables. A systemic change, rather than relying on the unpaid work of (primarily) women, would ensure a better uptake for years to come.

I believe the two main obstacles of encouraging the use of reusable hygiene products is in education and cost. As the cost of living rises, the upfront cost of reusable nappies becomes ever more daunting (despite potential longer term savings). Over 2.5 years, disposable nappies will cost over \$1000, whereas reusable nappies can cost under \$500, including the cost of water and electricity to wash these.

Below, I have outlined some of my research into the environmental impacts of disposable hygiene products and ideas to potentially increase the uptake of reusable options.

Volume of waste

The most recent domestic waste audit in Canberra was in 2014 where it was found disposable nappies made up 6.1% of the general waste stream¹.

In a Choice survey of 500 parents of children under 2, it was found that 95% of babies in Australia wore disposable nappies². With over 6000 babies born in the ACT each year³, most children toilet training being between 18 months to 3 years, and using 4-6 nappies per child per day, this adds up to a lot of nappies (95% of children in disposable nappies using 5 nappies per day = 20.8 million nappies per year in the ACT).

Environmental impacts

In a 2009 study on the life cycle assessment of reusable and disposable nappies in Australia, disposable nappies were found to use 20-30x more land for raw materials, 4-5x more energy and produced around 78x more solid waste than reusable nappies per year. The water used (to produce disposable and to produce and wash reusable) was comparable⁵.

1 https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1131840/2014-ACTNoWaste-domestic-waste-audit-report-FINAL-v2.pdf

2 <https://www.choice.com.au/babies-and-kids/baby-clothes-and-nappies/nappies/buying-guides/disposable-and-cloth-nappies>

3 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/births-australia/latest-release#states-and-territories>

4 <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/recycling-and-reducing-waste/at-home/avoid-waste/minimise-single-use-items/disposable-nappies#:~:text=The%20facts%20about%20nappies&text=This%20is%20a%20lot%20of an%20impact%20on%20the%20environment>

5 <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1061.2287&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

6 <https://www.canberraenvironment.org/wee-ones-modern-cloth-nappy-display>

7 <https://www.australiannappyassociation.org.au/cloth-nappy-services-from-councils-across-australia-2021/>

8 <https://www.australiannappyassociation.org.au/how-a-council-saved-700000-disposable-nappies-from-landfill/>

9 <https://www.australiannappyassociation.org.au/product/get-into-cloth-kit-industry-professionals/>

10 <https://www.switchyourthinking.com/>

11 <https://www.bountyparents.com.au/bounty-bags/>

While there are a number of “environmentally friendlier” disposable nappies on the market today, the sustainability is only in the creation of the nappies, rather than the disposal. Whether created with renewable resources or not, all disposable nappies end up in landfill where the anaerobic environment slows the biodegrading process. Disposable nappies are estimated to take 150 years to break down⁴.

Suggestions for education and uptake of sustainable options

While there are a number of educational resources for disposable nappies available online, these are passive sources with those interested needing to actively seek out the information. Locally, there is a cloth nappy display available to view at the Canberra Environment Centre⁶ (however a number of the brands on display are no longer manufactured and the styles are outdated) and information sessions are run intermittently (by volunteers). There is currently one local business which runs regular introduction to cloth nappy sessions.

There are a number of other opportunities to encourage reusable nappy use in practice by councils throughout Australia⁷.

Workshops/information sessions

The City of Wollongong estimates it's saved 700,000 disposable nappies through its workshops: Over 300 families attended cloth nappy workshops as part of the pre-natal classes at Wollongong Hospital and in baby health clinics. Before the cloth nappy workshop, 58% of attendees said they might/would use cloth, and 40% said they would not use cloth nappies. After the workshop, 96% of attendees said they might/would use cloth, and only 2% said they would not use cloth nappies⁸.

New parent groups and hospital run baby preparation classes would present an opportunity to include a short session on sustainability ideas with a baby. The Australian Nappy Association (ANA) has 'Get into cloth' kits which include “six to eight cloth nappies, including traditional cloth nappies, a waterproof cover, nappy fastener, several modern cloth nappies & useful accessories. Quick and easy to read information is provided on a swing tag attached to each nappy in the kit, covering details such as estimated cost, drying time, ease of use, size range & general description of the type of nappy. This enables workshop participants to process the information themselves and is also extremely useful as quick and easy guide for those running workshops or information sessions.”⁹ Cloth-using volunteers could be arranged through the Canberra Environment Centre to demonstrate and take questions.

Rebates

1 https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1131840/2014-ACTNoWaste-domestic-waste-audit-report-FINAL-v2.pdf

2 <https://www.choice.com.au/babies-and-kids/baby-clothes-and-nappies/nappies/buying-guides/disposable-and-cloth-nappies>

3 <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/births-australia/latest-release#states-and-territories>

4 <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/recycling-and-reducing-waste/at-home/avoid-waste/minimise-single-use-items/disposable-nappies#:~:text=The%20facts%20about%20nappies&text=This%20is%20a%20lot%20of an%20impact%20on%20the%20environment>

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Councils across Australia are providing rebates through different methods, such as a limited dollar figure rebate for each individual on presentation of a valid receipt or allowing people to enter a ballot to win the cost of their nappies back (to a capped figure).

Nappy library

Switch Your Thinking¹⁰, an initiative of a number of Western Australian councils, ran a modern cloth nappy library trial which gave families in metropolitan Perth the opportunity to trial cloth nappies for a month. At the end of the month, the nappies would be disinfected and passed on to the next family to try.

Bounty

Parents birthing at hospitals often receive 'parent-to-be' and 'new parent' Bounty Bags¹¹. These bags contain samples and information aimed at new parents. This could be an opportunity to promote potential education and rebate options.

There are certainly other options, such as compostable nappies. These would require far more investment into the infrastructure to dispose of these. I don't believe the current rollout of FOGO bins would accept compostable nappies. Even with the infrastructure, investment in education to ensure the waste stream isn't contaminated would also be required.

I look forward to reading the outcomes and recommendations of this inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Emma Black

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