

2020

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STATEMENT

**Response to Assembly Resolution of 31 July 2019 -
Nappies and Personal Hygiene Products – Sustainable Products**

**Presented by
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I am pleased to report back to the Assembly and the community today on the important issue of sustainable sanitary products in the ACT, including cloth nappies and reusable personal hygiene products. For those unfamiliar, reusable personal hygiene or sanitary products can include a range of items such as sanitary pads, menstrual cups, or leak-proof underwear.

Before delving into the requests of the Resolution, I would like to acknowledge that we are operating in unprecedented circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has only served to underline how complex this topic is and how important it is for consumers to have a choice in what products they use – a point I made in response to the original motion in 2019. More than ever, hygiene is at the front of people’s minds when making purchasing decisions.

While a reusable sanitary product may have a lower lifecycle impact than a disposable, when dealing with health crises consumers may prefer to dispose of materials after their use to reduce risk of contamination. However, reusable alternatives may provide consumers with a greater sense of control over the materials they are exposed to, as they know exactly the materials they are made of and how they have been cleaned. Further, reusable products may support greater self-sufficiency in times of product scarcity. Indeed, there have been reports of people making and distributing reusable menstrual pads in light of the disposable product shortages during this pandemic¹, highlighting this point.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-humber-52093442>

The ACT Government will always support the use of more sustainable alternatives to reduce the volume of disposable products entering our waste systems. We also recognise, however, that the use of nappies and personal hygiene products is a personal decision that individuals will arrive at. These decisions can involve consideration of a range of factors including hygiene, convenience, price, availability, self-sufficiency and dignity. Each of these factors presents a unique challenge which consumers need to be aware of when deciding which product they use.

I have here some confronting statistics about the use of disposable nappies and sanitary products. As outlined in the 2019 debate on this topic, an astounding 3.75 million disposable nappies are used each day in Australia and New Zealand, with each taking one cup of crude oil to make². In other words – that’s over 900,000 litres of oil we use every day to make nappies. This is a significant amount of material input and eventual landfill, with conventional disposable nappies estimated to take up to 150 years to break down in landfill². An audit undertaken in 2014 showed that in the ACT nappies make up around 6% of the household waste stream, and show up regularly in our local recycling collections alongside other single use or disposable products. You see, these products have become so integral to our daily lives that we may use them without realising their negative impacts on society and the environment.

Research overseas has shown that disposable nappies can contain a range of chemicals, some of which may even present a risk to human health.³

Nappies, incontinence and sanitary products are complex composites of a

² <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/You-and-Your-Home/Live-sustainably/Single-use-items/Nappies>

³ <https://www.anses.fr/en/content/disposable-nappies-consultation-stakeholders-regarding-europe-wide-restriction-chemicals-are>

range of materials, including synthetic polymers, wood fibre, elastic, adhesives and inks. These are often by-products of other chemical industries⁴, and risk leaching or breaking down into microplastics when sent to landfill and contributing greenhouse gases from their decomposition. These emissions are exacerbated by the fact disposable nappies are often thrown out with faecal matter attached, which should in fact be separated and flushed down the toilet for sewerage treatment.

The complexity of these disposable products also makes them difficult to reprocess or recycle, and a lack of sustainable funding and end markets for outputs has made it difficult for nappy recycling companies to establish themselves locally⁵ and internationally⁶.

Noting the numerous issues these disposable products can present, we have looked at what other governments have been doing to increase uptake of their alternatives locally and internationally. A range of jurisdictions are implementing policies and programmes to address the issue of single-use nappies and personal hygiene products.

At the more extensive end of government intervention, Vanuatu announced in 2019 its intention to ban the use of disposable nappies by 2020. This met significant pushback from parents and carers in the nation⁷, and it remains to be seen what the final impact of the ban will be considering the current pandemic. Closer to home, a range of Australian councils and governments have focused on producing educational material,

⁴ <https://www.canstarblue.com.au/family-gifts/what-nappies-are-made-from/>

⁵ <https://waster.com.au/can-you-recycle-nappies/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-diapers/waste-not-want-not-pg-venture-aims-to-squeeze-new-life-out-of-italys-dirty-diapers-idUSKCN1MR26E>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/22/vanuatu-to-ban-disposable-nappies-in-plastics-crackdown-we-had-no-choice>

running workshops, and funding rebate programs for the purchase of cloth nappies and reusable sanitary items. Some examples are Sustainability Victoria's freely available factsheet on nappies⁸, or the NSW Northern Beaches Council's free cloth nappy workshops⁹. Brisbane City Council's Sustainable Nappies Cashback Program allows residents to enter a lottery to win back some of the money spent on cloth nappy products, up to a value of \$300¹⁰. Similarly, the City of Casey in Victoria provides a one-off rebate per household of 50% of the purchase price of cloth nappies and reusable sanitary products including menstrual pads and leak-proof underwear¹¹, up to a value of \$150 and \$100 respectively.

As I have highlighted, different governments are taking different approaches to this complex issue. The motion moved in July last year asked the ACT Government to consider coordinating a range of actions to address this issue locally. As a result, work has been occurring across ACT Government Directorates to consider how this important topic affects sectors throughout the community. This has included looking at possible points of intervention. In July 2019 I emphasised 'that we do not want to limit people's choices when it comes to these kinds of products. What we want to do is support an informed discussion and encourage Canberrans through education, to consider low-waste alternatives where relevant'. It remains the view of the ACT Government that allowing informed consumer choice through education is the key to this issue, particularly considering factors such as the current health crisis.

⁸ <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/You-and-your-home/Live-sustainably/Single-use-items/Nappies>

⁹ <https://www.northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/whats-on/reusable-nappies-workshop-collaroy>

¹⁰ <https://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/clean-and-green/rubbish-tips-and-bins/recycling-and-reducing-waste/reducing-waste-in-parenthood-through-reusable-nappies>

¹¹ <https://www.casey.vic.gov.au/apply-cloth-nappy-reusable-sanitary-product-rebate>

I outlined last year that the ACT was already providing information to help Territorians consider this issue. The ACT's award-winning Recycling Discovery Hub in Hume has exhibited cloth nappies and reusable personal hygiene products to its over 6,000 annual visitors for quite some time. Reusable sanitary products were included in the 'Unpacking the Future' exhibition at the Canberra Centre during National Recycling Week 2019, and our ongoing Recycle Right campaign continues to push the message to 'keep it clean', reducing the risk of disposable personal hygiene products entering our recycling stream. Our online Recyclopaedia entries allow anyone curious about what to do with these products and their alternatives to easily find relevant information in a single place. The ACT Government also supports ongoing workshops with the Canberra Environment Centre on cloth nappies, with extra workshops run during National Recycling Week 2019. The Canberra Environment Centre further hosts the Wee Ones Cloth Nappy Display, a freely accessible library for parents who want to look at and feel nappy alternatives before deciding whether to make a purchase.

On top of these existing programs, I am pleased to announce that the ACT Government is currently developing and will be releasing a range of factsheets on reusable sanitary items and cloth nappies. These will be added to relevant entries on the Recyclopaedia and are expected to be distributed further through ACT Government Directorates. Physical example kits of these products are also being created so Canberrans can see and feel these products before choosing which suits them best. Further, ACT NoWaste is working with Actsmart to promote the Sustainable Period Project in teacher newsletters, which is a free industry-funded initiative providing information and example kits of reusable feminine hygiene products to schools. I am happy to report that 37 secondary schools in the

ACT have already received their free education kits, and all primary schools are now able to apply for their kits. ACT NoWaste is also in discussions with the Canberra Environment Centre to increase the number and breadth of workshops on reusable sanitary products, including the possibility of exploring incontinence and female hygiene products topics into the future. Lastly, it is pleasing that a number of students from the Australian National University have elected to research this issue in their Environmental Policy unit over the course of this semester, and report back on possible further policy interventions in the Territory. This work is expected mid-2020 and will feed into our ongoing discourse surrounding this important issue.

As I have highlighted, the ACT Government considers that the most important contribution it can currently make to this space is education, rather than some of the other interventions suggested in the Assembly Resolution. I note that MACH nurses and Midwives already talk to families about the range of options available related to cloth nappies and personal hygiene products during their normal activities. Alongside disability support and aged care workers, these hard-working members of our medical community are committed to work practices to reduce waste; however, proposing further initiatives in these clinical settings could take away from time spent to deliver clinical care. Similarly, placing additional restrictions on private businesses such as early childhood centres, which have already been significantly affected by the recent natural disasters and pandemic, may not be effective at this time. Ultimately, it is up to parents, families and individuals to make their own informed product choices, and I firmly believe that the initiatives I have outlined today will assist with this and drive increased uptake of reusable alternatives moving forward.

I would like to finish by reiterating that the ACT is home to a pro-active and engaged community who are aware of the impacts their product choices have on waste generation and resource consumption. Our resource recovery rates have consistently sat as some of the highest in the nation at 70% and the ACT continues to work towards our ambitious waste recovery target of 90% by 2025. Community engagement was high with our National Recycling Week in 2019, and our trial of Green Caffein reusable coffee cups has been a roaring success with over 80 cafes signed up to date despite the current temporary pause as a result of COVID-19. The ACT Government is working to reduce waste in the Territory by acting on the findings of the Waste Feasibility Study Roadmap and Recommendations, Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation's National Packaging Targets, Council of Australian Governments Waste Export Ban, and National Waste Policy Action Plan. We likewise continue to consider the complex question of single-use plastics in the Territory, with our community consultation last year supporting regulatory intervention in this space.

This is an ever-evolving space which affects a significant proportion of our local population. Noting this, I propose the Assembly revisit possible arrangements for financially supporting the uptake of cloth nappies and reusable sanitary items in the future once we have a better grasp of our 'new normal' following the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank the Assembly for allowing me to explore this important issue and look forward to further discussions surrounding all reusable alternatives moving forward.

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