

# GOVERNING SUSTAINABLE WASTE MANAGEMENT

*Promotion of Cloth Nappy Use  
in County Durham*

**Kye Askins and Harriet Bulkeley**

Department of Geography  
Durham University

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since *Waste Strategy 2000*, municipal waste policy (MWP) has undergone considerable upheaval. Local authorities which until recently had to concern themselves with little more than the collection, planning and disposal of waste, and a relatively narrow range of regulations, today have a radically broadened agenda with progressive statutory performance targets for recycling and composting, as well as responsibilities for diversion of waste from landfill, recovery from waste and waste minimisation. In the wake of these developments, the *Governing Sustainable Waste Management*<sup>1</sup> project seeks to examine what facilitates, and what prevents, the development and implementation of sustainable MWP in the North East of England, and the wider lessons which can be learned across the UK. The project involves an overview of MWP across the region, and the analysis of three case-studies: Durham County Council; Newcastle City Council; and Stockton Borough Council. In each case, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with local policy-makers and stakeholders, and a range of policy documents have been analysed. Six initiatives which aim to reduce, re-use or recycle waste have been selected for further research, involving semi-structured interviews with relevant actors, documentary analysis, and interviews and participant observation with those communities involved in the particular waste management initiative. These research 'snapshots' are intended to illustrate the range of good practice taking place across the region and the challenges facing the development of sustainable waste management policy and practice.

This report focuses on the promotion of cloth nappies (also called 'real' or 'reusable' nappies) across County Durham. The research involved semi-structured interviews with cloth nappy promoters and service providers, both within and beyond the local authorities, informal interviews (in person and by telephone) with cloth nappy users and members of the public at events promoting cloth nappies, and participant observation at 'parents and toddlers' and ante-natal groups regarding the decision-making process surrounding cloth and disposable nappies. The report discusses the on-going debates surrounding 'cloth versus disposables', details the complex motivations behind, and explanations given for, nappy choice, assesses the roles of government and the private sector in cloth nappy promotion, and considers the implications of these factors for sustainable waste management. We hope that in highlighting the positive lessons and the challenges that our research has uncovered, the report will be of interest to local authorities and the community and business sectors, as well as to national government.

The report is structured in the following way. Section 2 offers an overview of cloth nappy promotion, including the drivers for change, broader context surrounding research into 'the nappy debate', and the ways in which initiatives are being funded and structured. Section 3 discusses how such initiatives have been implemented and are being developed. Section 4 highlights the good practice found through the research across County Durham, while Section 5 considers the main challenges facing the promotion of cloth nappies, at the practical scale of everyday lives and at a policy level. Section 6 identifies the implications of these findings for sustainable waste management, and Section 7, in conclusion, places this report within the broader framework of the findings from the research project as a whole.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 DCC municipal waste policy

With a two-tier local authority structure in County Durham, waste management responsibilities are split between Durham County Council (DCC) as waste disposal authority (WDA) and the District Councils as waste collection authorities (WCAs). DCC also has those responsibilities associated with being the Waste Planning Authority. The main waste contractor in Durham is Premier Waste Ltd, originally established as the County's arms-length waste disposal company. Together with the WCA and Premier, in January 2001 DCC produced a

<sup>1</sup> *The project team acknowledges the support of H J Banks & Co. Ltd. funders of the project through the Landfill Tax Credits Scheme, facilitated by Entrust. We are also grateful for the support of the International Centre for Regional Regeneration and Development, University of Durham. Finally we wish to thank our many respondents for the time and support they have given to the project. For more details, visit the project web pages via [www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/).*

Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy. The JMWMS demonstrates long range strategic thinking extending beyond immediate targets. Whilst recognising the uncertainties attached to emerging technological alternatives to landfill and incineration, it nevertheless commits to pursuing them in recognition of the ongoing necessity to manage that waste which is residual to reuse and recycling efforts. In addition, DCC has identified waste as one of its corporate priorities and has a dedicated Cabinet Member for Waste Management, a level of political support which is unusual amongst local authorities<sup>2</sup>.

In terms of basic municipal waste management infrastructure, the County has seventeen Household Waste Recycling Centres and Civic Amenity sites, three waste transfer stations and five operational landfill sites. Districts manage an extensive network of recycling 'bring' sites. The whole county is currently served by kerbside recycling schemes, and there are a range of other waste initiatives in place – including the development of new technologies, such as aerobic digestion, and waste minimisation initiatives.

## 2.2 Drivers for change

Since *Waste Strategy 2000*, and in response to the 1999 Landfill Directive, the ways in which municipal waste is managed has come under critical scrutiny and legislative pressure. The introduction in 2001 of statutory performance targets for recycling and composting waste for each local authority under the Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) framework has had a significant impact on levels of recycling and composting across the UK. In 2002/03, 8% of municipal waste generated in County Durham was recycled or composted and in 2003/04, DCC exceeded their target of recycling and composting 10% of total municipal waste by achieving a rate of 17%, placing the target of 18% by 2005/06 firmly within reach. While waste reduction initiatives such as cloth nappy promotion do not 'count' towards these statutory targets, performance indicators for household waste collected per head are included within the best value framework. In addition, the implementation of the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) in April 2005 requires local authorities to reduce the amounts of biodegradable waste sent to landfill. Given the content of used disposable nappies, increases in cloth nappy use arguably come within the LATS framework. However, to date there is no agreed system as to how to quantify the impacts on biodegradable waste figures of cloth nappy use, thus such use is not 'countable' within the current auditing system.

Despite the lack of statutory drivers for waste minimisation, it is generally acknowledged that increased levels of waste arisings represent a significant barrier to local authorities achieving future targets. For example, between 2000/01 and 2002/03, municipal waste collected in County Durham increased by 2.5%<sup>3</sup>. This increase, roughly in line with the national average, was below the trend North East (almost 7% in the same period<sup>4</sup>). Although this is encouraging, the need to slow the increase in waste produced remains a driver pushing DCC's waste management activities. Moreover, waste minimisation is at the top of the waste hierarchy – roughly translated as reduce, reuse, recycle – to which local and central government are committed. Waste reduction initiatives, therefore, cannot be ignored within broader waste strategy frameworks.

## 2.3 The wider context of cloth nappy use

There has been some controversy regarding the environmental benefits of using cloth nappies for several years. Most recently, the Environment Agency (EA) commissioned the environmental consultancy Environmental Resources Management Limited (ERM) to provide an independent life cycle analysis (LCA) of nappy use in the UK<sup>5</sup>. Reporting in 2005, the study concluded that overall, no system (disposable nappies, home laundered flat cloth nappies and commercially laundered prefolded cloth nappies delivered to the home) "clearly had a better or worse environmental performance, although the life cycle stages that are the main

<sup>2</sup> For more information about MWP in Durham, see Watson and Bulkeley (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Audit Commission (2004) "Inspection Report: Waste Services, Durham County Council." London: Audit Commission.

<sup>4</sup> DEFRA (2004) "Municipal Waste Management Survey 2002-03." London: DEFRA.

<sup>5</sup> Aumonier, S. and Collines, M. (2005) *Lifecycle Analysis of disposable and reusable nappies in the UK*, report by ERM Consultants for the Environment Agency. Environment Agency. The full report is available at: [www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk).

source for these impacts are different for each system". The study was widely critiqued among environmental bodies/organisations - most notably by the Women's Environmental Network (WEN), who have been campaigning for cloth nappy use for over a decade<sup>6</sup> - in particular for the omission within the LCA of the impacts of disposables on the UK waste problem and of the assumptions concerning environmentally detrimental laundering behaviour (washing at high temperatures, using inefficient energy washing machines and tumble drying) based on a small sample of cloth nappy users.

However, in the foreword to the report, the Director of Environmental Protection for the EA states that 2-3% of household waste is estimated to be disposable nappies, approximately 400,000 tonnes of waste each year. As such, cloth nappies were described the day after the report as central to good environmental practice by WRAP<sup>7</sup>. However, the disposable nappy manufacturers trade body, Absorbent Hygiene Products Manufacturers Association (AHPMA) concurrently claimed that the LCA report laid to rest "many of the exaggerated and misleading claims made by some organisations about the environmental impact of disposable nappies"<sup>8</sup>. As we relate below, the controversial context within which decisions about cloth nappy use take place has a significant effect on users, the business sector, and on the potential for delivering a 'joined up' approach across government.

### 3 IMPLEMENTING CLOTH NAPPY PROMOTION

#### 3.1 Establishing cloth nappy initiatives

Although funding for cloth nappy initiatives is available from WRAP (see 3.3), within DCC funding has to date been limited and has come from within core waste management budgets. The promotion of cloth nappies falls within the remit of DCC's waste minimisation officer, who has been active in developing partnerships with the two key small businesses in the area who undertake the bulk of cloth nappy promotion in Durham (see 3.1). While the DCC work is relatively recent, Sedgfield Borough Council (SBC) have a longer history of involvement with the issue, and have been the most proactive of the District Councils in County Durham in terms of cloth nappy promotion. In 2001, SBC set up the Cottontails Campaign through their Local Agenda 21 team<sup>9</sup>, which offered a 20% discount on the purchase of cloth nappies directly from the District Council and also developed partnerships with small businesses and other authority bodies. This work has since been taken forward by SBC's waste minimisation officer.

#### 3.2 Local partnership working

In a context of a lack of dedicated funding or a statutory remit to address waste minimisation, partnership working has been a central part of the process of encouraging cloth nappy use. There are two main small businesses promoting cloth nappies in County Durham. Lollipop are a national company encouraging cloth nappy use through local agents, who are self-employed cloth nappy (and associated products) sales people<sup>10</sup>. Inherent within the organisation's ethos and embedded in day-to-day work, Lollipop agents offer advice and support to parents opting for cloth nappies – whether they buy Lollipop products or not. That is, the agents act to encourage people to understand the environmental impacts of cloth and disposables, with a central focus on the waste implications of the latter. The Lollipop organisation provides agents with educational material in the form of generalised leaflets and videos as well as samples of a wide variety of cloth nappies. At time of research, the former Durham agent had left the post several months earlier, and a new agent was starting – in the gap Durham had been covered by an agent in Stockton, though to a limited degree. The new Durham and longstanding Stockton agents were thus interviewed for the research, and both described their role as proactively promoting the benefits of cloth nappies, through presence at a range of public events and engagement with a variety of social groups: environmental/

<sup>6</sup> See [www.wen.org.uk](http://www.wen.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> Environmental Data Services (2005) 'Agency in hot water over nappy LCA' ENDS Report 365, June 2005, pp 26-28.

<sup>8</sup> Environmental Data Services (2005) 'Agency in hot water over nappy LCA' ENDS Report 365, June 2005, pp 26-28.

<sup>9</sup> Smout, L. (2002) Final Report: Sedgfield Borough Council's Cloth Nappy 'Cottontails' Campaign, SBC.


<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.teamlollipop.co.uk/> for further information



**Keep it real Mum.  
Real nappies are cool!**

Real nappies come in lots of practical and funky styles so there's plenty to choose from. Go on, try them out. It's the really cool thing to do!

To find out more contact us on:  
INSERT YOUR CONTACT DETAILS HERE



INSERT YOUR LOGO HERE

Or contact the Real Nappy Helpline on **0845 850 0606** or [www.realnappycampaign.com](http://www.realnappycampaign.com)

**the real nappy campaign**  
WRAP

sustainability fairs, ante-natal and post-natal sessions, and parent and toddler groups. In addition, they aim to work in partnership with their local authorities and other organisations to “get the cloth nappy message across”.

Durham Happy Nappies is a nappy laundering service based in County Durham, which operates beyond the county borders in response to demand. The business sells cloth nappies as well as operating a laundry service to customers' homes. Since its start in January 2004, the business has had variable success, with a customer base of between 6 and 36. Initial interest was boosted by a DCC press release during Real Nappy Week 2004 (June), but the number of customers dropped away over the summer, rising again at the end of 2004 and remaining steady through 2005: at time of research, Durham Happy Nappies had 16 customers. The business attends similar public events as the Lollipop agent, and proactively engages with ante-natal

groups within and outside County Durham, in particular National Childbirth Trust groups in Newcastle. In addition, Durham Happy Nappies have a stall at Durham city centre Saturday market once a month.

DCC and SBC work in partnership with Lollipop and Durham Happy Nappies, in two key ways. First, through maintaining close communication links, the businesses are invited to relevant DCC/SBC events and the authorities kept up to date with Lollipop/Happy Nappies activities. Second, more practically, DCC and SBC support both services via assistance with promotional leaflets, specifically including Lollipop/Happy Nappies details on authority waste minimisation literature. Both businesses reported that the help with promotional materials was vital, since they did not have the economies of scale to afford such literature production themselves.

Furthermore, SBC have facilitated joint ‘nappuchino’ mornings with the commercial organisations, in which pregnant parents and parents of young children can meet, ask questions and discuss nappies in an informal setting. These events are held regularly across the borough, in community halls and other public spaces, and importantly have focused on linking the events with the work of Sure Start programmes in the District<sup>11</sup>. DCC are currently looking to develop the ‘nappuchino’ model across the County.

### 3.3 Waste and Resources Action Programme

In addition to the activities aimed at promoting cloth nappy use locally, activities across Durham are also influenced by WRAP, a centrally funded government agency, which promotes the use of cloth nappies through its ‘Real Nappy Campaign’. The initiative works predominantly at the national level, by:

<sup>11</sup> *Sure Start is a government programme aiming “to deliver the best start in life for every child, bringing together early education, childcare, health and family support to achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities”. See [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk).*

- developing and distributing promotional materials;
- sponsoring 'Real Nappy Week';
- hosting a website, which includes practical tips and relates individuals' experiences of using cloth nappies as well as factsheets for parents, local authorities, midwives and community health officers;
- managing a database of cloth nappy incentives across England;
- operating an advice 'hotline'; and
- campaigning for the inclusion of information on cloth nappies within materials presented to new parents, specifically 'Bounty Packs'.

WRAP have also administered a grant scheme specifically aimed at cloth nappy promotion, open to bids from initiatives managed by local authorities, the community and voluntary sectors. DCC, SBC and Durham Happy Nappies were all unsuccessful in the first round of grant giving, and it was unclear during the research whether the intended second round of funding, would take place, since the first round had been over-subscribed.

## 4 GOOD PRACTICE IN COUNTY DURHAM

### 4.1 'Hands on' service delivery

The research found that 'hands on' activity is vital in the promotion of cloth nappies. In order to dispel the many myths around cloth nappy use (see 5.1 below), parents need to see, touch and generally 'fiddle about with' cloth nappies to fully appreciate the wide range of designs that now exist, which incorporate technological improvements from old-style flat 'terry squares' and plastic pants in terms of fitted 'prefold' shapes, Velcro and popper fastenings (no safety pins), fleece liners and waterproof material outer pants. The large variety of cloth nappies available not only offers consumer choice in terms of style and cost, but prefolds are generally easier to use than terry squares and safety pins - which can really only be demonstrated *in practice*. There is no verbal substitute to physically putting a cloth nappy on a doll/baby, or watching someone else do so, to appreciate/understand what using cloth nappies will actually involve. Equally, seeing and handling liners, outer pants, nappy buckets etc. is crucial for people to believe that they *can use* – they are physically capable of using - cloth. Furthermore, the physical presence of cloth nappies enables people to ask questions that may never have occurred to them in theoretical abstraction, and, crucially, for answers to be given *and demonstrated*. Lollipop and Durham Happy Nappies encourage such physical handling through all of their promotional work, allowing people to make informed choices based on experience. This is particularly critical as many types of cloth nappy are only available 'on-line' and hence consumers have limited opportunities to physically interact with them before purchase.

### 4.2 Trusted actors and informal networks

Connected to the importance of 'hands on' promotion, it was clear throughout the research that people are significantly more responsive to information from 'trusted actors' than from disembodied sources. In the main, parents described converting to cloth nappies on the advice of friends/family members – partly because they saw friends/family using the nappies at an everyday, practical level, but also because they knew the advice givers and believed their recommendations. The majority of users surveyed described 'word of mouth' as their introduction to cloth nappies. Important within the 'word of mouth' system was on-going contact within local informal networks, such that, having started to use cloth nappies, new users were reassured that should problems arise they could ask for more advice/help.

Our research found that Lollipop agents and Durham Happy Nappies successfully endeavour to become trusted actors and enable informal networks for people without friends/family already using cloth nappies. This is achieved by attending local, informal, small group sessions as well as offering one-to-one meetings in a home environment, and, vitally, being at the end of a phone line at any point in the future should the parent need further advice. Moreover, locally focused cloth nappy promotion is able to respond to the very



*emotional process* of having and caring for a baby with which choosing nappies is inherently connected. Indeed, parents reported contacting Lollipop agents and Durham Happy Nappy staff ‘more for a chat’ on occasion, revealing the personal relationships developed through the individual approach these businesses offer. This example shows that private sector actors are critical in shaping sustainable waste management futures not only through their ability to change market dynamics, but through engaging within social networks and personal relationships, particularly at the local scale.

### 4.3 Partnership working

Effective partnership working at the local level was shown through the research to be vital to the promotion of cloth nappies. Both small businesses in the area praised the work of DCC and SBC, in particular valuing help with the production of promotional materials and “being kept in the loop” regarding public events. Indeed, the development of such local partnerships has benefited all partners: the local authorities gain access to the good practice undertaken by the Lollipop agent and Happy Nappies, with minimal core budget expenditure, while the commercial actors access a broader range of groups through local authority connections than would be possible within their own resources, for example Sure Start projects. In particular, SBC’s help with the promotion of, and finding accommodation for, ‘nappuchino’ mornings has widened cloth nappy awareness, and at such events SBC’s waste minimisation officer is present alongside the nappy agents to promote sustainability issues.

## 5 KEY CHALLENGES

Despite the good practice which has been achieved across County Durham, with minimal resourcing, cloth nappy use remains low and the research has found several key challenges which face their promotion and wider uptake in the region and elsewhere.

### 5.1 Perceptions of cloth nappies

Among the members of the public interviewed for the research, the image of cloth nappies remains a considerable challenge to their use. Current and prospective parents raised several key concerns based on their perceptions of cloth nappies:

- initial upfront costs for nappies, liners, outers, etc;
- amount of work attached to using cloth versus disposables;
- additional concerns attached to such work (e.g. getting nappies dry, having a nappy bucket present in the home);

**Real choice**  
Did you know that by the time their baby is potty trained most parents will have completed between 4,000 to 6,000 nappy changes? The good news is that mums and dads now have real options with nappies; we're talking REAL Nappies.  
Real nappies are an easy-to-use, practical alternative to disposables and they are cheaper and reduce rubbish going to landfill, which is why more and more families are choosing them. It's official, real nappies are really cool!

**Real easy to use**  
There's not a safety pin in sight with real nappies, so they're simple to use. They come in lots of modern and funky styles that fasten easily with poppers, velcro or nifty little plastic grips so the nappy fits your baby snugly. A liner goes inside the nappy to keep baby dry and catch solids. Many liners are biodegradable and can be flushed away. Washable liners are also available. To prevent leaks - most real nappies are covered with a breathable waterproof cover available in colourful designs.

**Real savings**  
The total cost of using real nappies can be half that of using disposables. Further savings can be achieved by using the same real nappies for your second or third child.  
Home washing offers the greatest savings - costs can be as low as £1.00 a week including the price of detergents and energy. There is no need to soak or pre-wash nappies, just wash at 60°C. For extra convenience, local nappy laundries offer weekly services that collect used nappies and provide a fresh supply, laundered to the highest standards, for the next seven days - these services cost between £6-10 per week.

**Real rubbish reduction**  
Eight million disposable nappies are thrown away every day in the UK and mostly go to landfill. Cut your household rubbish by up to half and help the environment by choosing real nappies.

**Real cool!**  
Taking the real nappy option is all about exercising your right, as a consumer and a parent, to make an informed choice between real nappies and single-use disposable nappies. It reduces rubbish going to landfill and helps your pocket.  
Of course, real nappies don't have to be an 'all or nothing' option. You may still prefer to use disposables when travelling or away from home. Most people find, however, that once they've made the change they want to continue to 'keep it real!'

**Go on, give them a try, it's the really cool thing to do.**

- increased instances of nappy rash;
- impracticalities of cloth nappies while out for the day/on holiday;
- dirt and mess connected to dealing with cloth nappies.

Overall, cloth nappies are conceived as ‘old fashioned’, hard work at a difficult and emotional time when parents ‘have enough to deal with’, and generally connected to levels of hygiene below those acceptable in modern society. Such perceptions, as evidenced in the research, are unlikely to be shifted through promotional literature or national campaigns, but need to be addressed at a practical and local level: people responded to ‘seeing cloth nappies in action’ – their ease of use, the limited mess involved - rather than being told about these realities. Indeed, many people were surprised at the range of cloth nappies available at promotional events, and especially at the lack of safety pins!

In particular, the issue of cost appears commonly misunderstood, with many respondents linking the expensive initial outlay on cloth nappies with cloth costing more overall. The financial differences between washing cloth nappies at home, using a nappy laundry service and using disposables were not usually appreciated – indeed, many respondents were unaware that laundry services even existed. Moreover, while cloth nappies were seen as costly, parents using disposables generally accepted the ongoing cost implications as part of a wider ‘child rearing expense’.

## 5.2 Environmental values and practices

Among cloth nappy users, environmental values were predominant in parents’ decisions. In particular, cloth nappy users were very well informed about all aspects of the environmental implications of nappy use, including energy use (disposable nappy production, washing temperatures, impacts of tumble drying), and chemical use (type of detergent used, disposable nappy constituents), but the main environmental factor in choosing cloth was avoiding waste production. Respondents talked about the shock of seeing the volumes of waste produced by using disposable nappies<sup>12</sup>. In addition, issues concerning the baby’s health and future well-being were also important motivators in opting for cloth, and were related to environmental concern - the avoidance of chemicals next to the baby’s skin and reducing waste were often directly cited as improving children’s future environments and prospects.

The majority of respondents using cloth had spent some time and effort researching cloth nappies, mostly over the internet. However, as stated above, most described ‘word of mouth’ (from friends, followed by family) as their initial recommendation to use cloth, gathering information later. All cloth nappy users stated that ‘hands on’ sessions/advice – whether with friends/family, at an ante-natal group or through the Lollipop agent/Happy Nappies service – were important in enabling them to choose cloth. For many, realising that cloth nappies were not as onerous as they had expected was necessary to make their decision. This ‘manageability’ works both ways, however. The research also uncovered some mothers who had switched from cloth to disposables, especially with second/subsequent children or when they received less support from the male partner in the household than expected. Other individuals used a combination of cloth and disposables: disposable use was common for parents taking children out of the house, and several respondents outlined cloth use at home but that disposables were used in childcare provision. There was some confusion between members of one ‘parents and toddlers’ group, some of whose nurseries/childminders were happy to use cloth, some whose childcare provision would only use disposables, and some who *presumed* that nurseries would not use cloth. Nappy choices, then, are involved in a complex set of decision-making processes, tied up with issues around returning to work and childcare provision as well as environmental and future well-being factors.

<sup>12</sup> It is possible to purchase a device which compresses and wraps disposable nappies at home, reducing the volume which this waste stream takes up, and potentially easing parents concerns about the amounts of waste which are being produced without addressing the underlying environmental problems.

### 5.3 Socio-economic issues

The evidence related above is complicated by socio-economic issues. Local authority and commercial sector nappy promoters commonly described an increased trend towards cloth nappy use among middle class parents, attributing this to, among other factors, higher levels of education and environmental awareness, access to the internet and ability to research cloth nappy options for themselves, being in a financial position to afford the initial outlay for cloth<sup>13</sup> and – not least – rising social pressure to use cloth. In particular, the experience of SBC has been that ‘nappuchino’ events held in areas of greater socio-economic deprivation attract far fewer parents/expectant parents than those in middle class areas.

The research found higher numbers of parents using cloth than anticipated (given national average figures) among respondents at the ‘parent and toddler’ and ante-natal groups, and the majority of these parents were indeed middle class. The predominant reason given for cloth use was environmental concern, particularly around the detrimental impacts of land-filling disposables, while cloth nappies were not perceived as old-fashioned, onerous or especially ‘dirty’ among those using them. Interestingly, there was a certain sense among parents at these groups using disposables/planning on choosing disposables that they needed to *justify their decision* not to use cloth. This indicates a high level of social expectancy amongst these groups that cloth nappies are now, if not quite ‘the norm’, certainly the moral option. As such social pressure increases, it is possible that the development of a ‘critical mass’ will see cloth actually become the norm among middle class families.

In contrast, informal interviews at public events, where respondents from a wider cross-section of socio-economic backgrounds were present, showed that those in lower income brackets are in general using disposable nappies. While many in this group stated that they lacked knowledge of cloth nappies (what to buy, where to buy, how to use cloth), the majority related that knowledge was unlikely to persuade them to use cloth because of their perceived inconvenience, and the ‘old fashioned’ and ‘dirty’ stigmas associated with their use. These factors outweighed the cost-savings argument often advanced by promotions which seek to encourage the use of cloth nappies. Environmental concern and the impacts of disposal figured very rarely in low income households’ considerations around nappy choice.

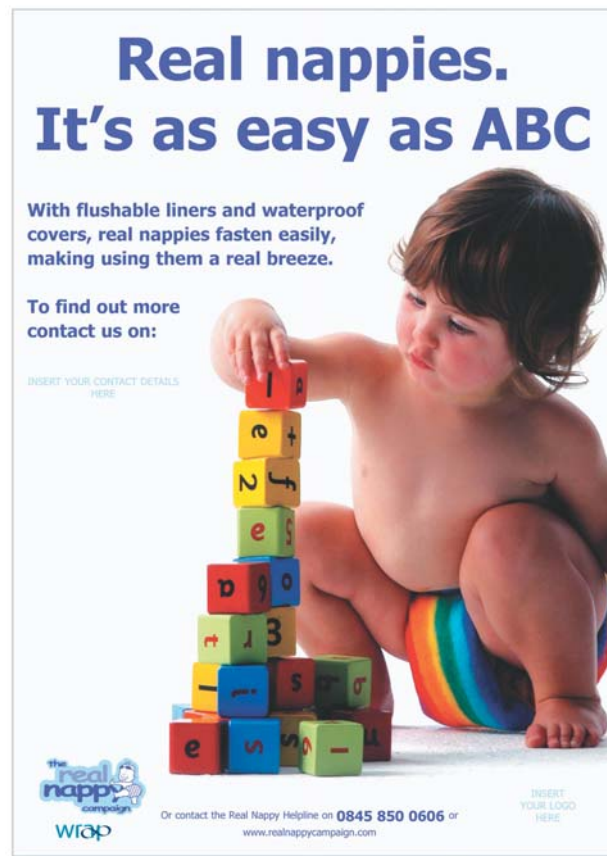
### 5.4 Lack of partnership between national and local actors

The research found an almost complete lack of active communication between WRAP and local government and business sectors. The WRAP model for promoting the use of cloth nappies is successful in that it is accessible for those who look for information, but ineffective in proactively building the sorts of local/regional networks and links which this research suggests are significant in achieving action on the ground. For example, a WRAP sponsored public event was held in the centre of Newcastle, but local nappy actors reported that they were not advised of the event by WRAP, but rather heard about it from each other only days prior to it taking place. Only one local authority in the region was able to organise a member of staff to attend (the event was on a Saturday), along with Durham Happy Nappies. While DCC and SBC managed to get their relevant promotional leaflets to the site to be distributed by the WRAP team, neither of their waste minimisation officers, nor the Lollipop agents, were able to be present at such short notice. From the list of projects funded under the Real Nappy Support Fund, it is clear that WRAP are aware of the importance of local networks and initiatives and are indeed promoting them in some places<sup>14</sup>. While efforts are clearly made to link some local initiatives to the national campaign – through the distribution of marketing material, for example - the absence of a consistent means for achieving this may be detracting from the overall impact of promotion activities, and the effectiveness of WRAP’s cloth nappy promotion in the North East could be improved by including local actors to ensure that specific information regarding cloth nappy provision and incentives relevant to local people is available.

<sup>13</sup> This figure varies widely depending on the type of nappies purchased, but using prefolded nappies is unlikely to cost below £300 from birth to potty training.

<sup>14</sup> See: [http://www.wrap.org.uk/waste\\_minimisation/the\\_wrap\\_real\\_nappy\\_programme/index.html](http://www.wrap.org.uk/waste_minimisation/the_wrap_real_nappy_programme/index.html)

In addition, lack of local networking by WRAP means that the local expertise and knowledges available is not drawn upon to improve broader promotional activities. For example, those involved in local networks practically engaging (prospective) parents about the use of cloth nappies frequently stated that white nappies are far more popular than bright colours, and in particular that 'rainbow' and 'hippy' styles do not attract parents in the North East. In its current advertising campaign, WRAP uses infants wearing several brightly coloured cloth nappies/covers. While this is an improvement on the 'floating nappy' which was used locally with no child in sight, and the messages behind the campaign regarding the ease of use, positive environmental impacts and cost savings are all valuable, the physical appearance of the nappies may serve to put people off. This kind of practical experience of how cloth nappies are encountered is just one of the valuable forms of knowledge that better partnership working would bring to the table.



## 5.5 Lack of integration across government

A further challenge to increasing cloth nappy use surrounds conflicting policy and practice within both central and local government structures. Concerns emerged through interviews that the public receive 'mixed messages'. At a local level, there is particular anxiety around health authority provision, and the information given to (expectant) parents by midwives and community health officers. For first-time parents especially, these are highly trusted professionals, and a general dominance of disposables at ante-natal classes and on maternity wards was argued to circumvent consideration of using cloth. For example, all expectant parents receive a 'Bounty Pack', which includes free samples of disposable nappies but no literature about cloth options, while maternity wards stock disposables for use after birth. While 'reusable nappy booklets' are currently being introduced to 'Bounty Packs' as part of WRAP's work, the overall lack of balanced information/experience of both cloth and disposable options at a crucial time in parents' decision-making was lamented by waste minimisation officers and independent nappy agents.

Tackling this problem is necessary at a strategic and policy level. There are individual midwives and health visitors who offer information and promote cloth nappy use: the research encountered a particular ante-natal clinic that uses cloth nappies when teaching parents how to care for babies, invites the Lollipop agent to talk at one session and promotes discussion on the issues surrounding both cloth and disposable use. Several parents at the clinic noted that this was their first and only encounter with cloth nappies. However, this situation remains unusual and relies upon the interest/concern of the midwife running the clinic, and such inclusion of balanced information is not actively supported through local health policy. The case of the Isle of Man, where one midwife succeeded in changing legislation so that up-front loans for cloth nappies are available to all families on benefits and designed the Stork Eco-Nappy specifically for use within NHS maternity wards, illustrates just how complex joining up waste and health service provision might be, but also that it has been achieved<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> For more information see: [http://www.wen.org.uk/NappyPartnerships/Nappypartnerships\\_IOM.htm](http://www.wen.org.uk/NappyPartnerships/Nappypartnerships_IOM.htm)



At a national level, the outcomes of the report commissioned by the Environment Agency can be seen to directly conflict with the work of WRAP. In the controversy following the report, the EA's head of waste strategy stated that the agency "would not recommend one (kind of nappy) or the other", stressing that it is not the role of government to dictate to parents<sup>16</sup>, while AHPMA criticised the funding of WRAP's 'Real Nappy Campaign'. WRAP responded by pointing out that the £2.6 million spent on promoting cloth nappies "is a very small figure in comparison to the amount they (AHPMA) spend on advertising disposables"<sup>17</sup>. While parents struggle to make sense of conflicting information, WRAP/cloth nappy promotion appears to have to 'battle' not only AHPMA but also another arm of central government. Caught in the middle, one North East cloth nappy promoter stated that the EA report had effectively dissuaded the "ditherers", people weighing up the environmental benefits of cloth versus the commitment/cost attached to using them, in "one fell swoop" – and that this had an immediate effect on her day-to-day work as fewer parents were opting for cloth nappies.

## 5.5 Limited services at the local level

Despite the efforts of DCC and SBC, and their partnership working with Lollipop and Durham Happy Nappies, there remains much to be done in terms of promoting cloth nappy use across County Durham more widely and consistently. Earmarking more of core waste budgets for cloth nappy promotion appears unlikely in the present/near future, given the rising financial pressures facing local authorities regarding statutory recycling and composting targets and the 'uncountability' of cloth nappy use within LATS.

In the first round of the WRAP grant scheme for projects promoting 'real nappies', only one application from the North East was funded and the research found a perception amongst cloth nappy promoters that WRAP were looking for larger schemes, elsewhere in the country, to support as such schemes offer better 'outcomes' for monitoring and 'best value' purposes. There are two issues here. The first is that there is a reading of the North East, by those in the North East, that the area lags behind other regions in terms of waste and environmental awareness and practice, and moreover that this situation impacts negatively on their chances of attracting funding for projects. This would be ironic, since it can be argued that given the region has amongst the highest rates of increase in waste arisings and lowest levels of recycling, increased and targeted funding from WRAP and other waste bodies is justified. The second issue, tied up with the first, is that auditing procedures and the need to 'prove' success for money granted within waste reduction initiatives is seen to take precedence over the need for the initiatives in their own right. This highlights the key challenge for waste minimisation initiatives more generally – whether to seek to have minimisation initiatives 'counted' through the various target and audit frameworks which channel current waste management policy, or whether to seek to make the intangible benefits of waste reduction real in other ways.

## 6 IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE WASTE MANAGEMENT

### 6.1 Changing the image of cloth nappies

Shifting the general public's perceptions of cloth nappies as an old-fashioned terry-square-plus-safety-pins system, involving hours of labour intensive washing and drying, as well as dirt/mess and smell around the house will be key to increasing the use of cloth nappies. There is a role for WRAP to play at the national level, in terms of continuing to produce leaflets, manage a cloth nappy scheme database and generally provide information on cloth nappy issues. However, our research suggests that it is critical that the 'Real Nappy Campaign' both takes on board the experiences of those involved in the day to day promotion of cloth nappies, and ensures that it is effectively linked up to local initiatives in order to have the maximum impact.

<sup>16</sup> Environmental Data Services (2005) 'Agency in hot water over nappy LCA' ENDS Report 365, June 2005, pp 26-28.

<sup>17</sup> Environmental Data Services (2005) 'Agency in hot water over nappy LCA' ENDS Report 365, June 2005, pp 26-28.

Furthermore, the research strongly suggests that challenging the negative stereotypes surrounding cloth nappies needs to be undertaken primarily at the local, everyday level, with 'hands on' experience crucial. People need to see and handle the variety of easy to use cloth nappy designs, discuss washing requirements and how they can fit into daily routines, be able to ask questions about 'poo', leakages and what exactly goes into the nappy bucket, and importantly swap experiences and 'top tips' face to face with other people like themselves. The significance of local networks and trusted actors in breaking down nappy myths was evident throughout the study, and echoes research and recommendations made by the Women's Environmental Network for many years. As such, WRAP must also address the ways in which it enables local actors to promote cloth nappies (through funding and other support at the authority level *and* by means of smaller scale projects), and proactively link its work into local networks, including working with businesses. In addition, local authorities and the commercial sector should consider how they can better promote cloth nappies through liaising with local community groups.

## 6.2 Centralising waste reduction in policy and practice

There is a need to embed waste minimisation strategies and action not only within waste management frameworks, but also across broader areas of work at national and local government levels. The effectiveness of cloth nappy promotion is undermined by conflicting information and practices within different authority/government departments. If government is serious about placing waste reduction at the top of the waste hierarchy, it is imperative that the impacts of decisions made in other areas of government – primarily the health service in relation to the issues covered in this report – on waste production and minimisation are considered when decisions are being made. Some form of indicator or checking system – along the green, amber, red signals which are used in other areas of decisions making – might be used to allow decision makers to consider the impacts of their policy on waste minimisation efforts.

## 6.3 Targeting financial incentives/mechanisms

Waste reduction remains the 'poor relation' of waste management initiatives and policies, despite its position at the top of the waste hierarchy. In order to place increasing emphasis on sustainability, reconsideration of the ways in which funding for initiatives is granted and monitored is required in order that the often 'uncountable' benefits of waste reduction initiatives do not go unnoticed. At the same time, and recognising that existing target and audit schemes have been successful in shifting waste practices, there should also be serious thought given to finding ways to incorporate increases in cloth nappy use within local authority LATS figures. This would offer a significant incentive for local authorities to address cloth nappy promotion, encouraging new initiatives and empowering them to work more closely with the community and business sectors.

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# 7 CONCLUSIONS

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As stated in the introduction to this report, the promotion of cloth nappies in Country Durham was one of six initiatives researched for the project *Governing Sustainable Waste Management*. In conclusion, we list here the broader recommendations for managing waste sustainably that have emerged through the study in order to place this case-study within its wider context. While our comments are directed primarily to the local authority level, due to their central role in municipal waste management, we believe that they will also make relevant reading for central government, and the business and community sectors.

## 7.1 Enhancing the policy framework

- *Critical mass* – the effective delivery of MWP across any one local authority demands a certain number of people and level of resources – a 'critical mass' – to work effectively and proactively across the increasing range of responsibilities that MWP entails.



- *Institutional integration* – progress with the new waste agenda is easiest where waste management is integrated into the local authority; for example, links with active LA21 sections can integrate waste concerns into a broader environmental remit and enrol competencies, such as engagement with the public and voluntary sector, traditionally absent in many waste management sections.
- *Strategic priority* - specifically, a division of responsibilities needs to be established to free up dedicated staff time for strategic issues: identifying and pursuing funding stream; and establishing and maintaining contacts and networks across and beyond the authority. Clearly, any such 'division' needs to be done carefully to maintain suitable integration between strategy and operations.
- *Political support* - committed officers can do much in an ambivalent political environment, but with effective political support, progress can be faster and more far reaching.
- *Active networking* – locally engaging relevant partners, nationally providing links to key gatekeepers, and internationally learning from other local authorities helps to provide critical resources.
- *Embracing change* – a readiness to take on new challenges and to 'think outside the box' can yield dividends; this demands the creation of a culture in which there is a willingness to experiment and to take appropriate risks in response to a dynamic policy environment.

## 7.2 Moving up the waste hierarchy

- *Process alongside progress* – activities such as partnership building, engaging with the public, and developing new channels of communication should be valued by local authorities as much as monitored outcomes, with the recognition that these processes lead to longer term sustainable waste management. It is also important that central government actively support authorities endeavouring to put such mechanisms in place.
- *Rethinking monitoring* – the relevance of re-use and reduction need to be recognised within monitoring regimes, and the ways in which waste is 'measured' creatively re-imagined in order to make these behaviours 'count'. Unless re-use and reduction are brought within the 'target' sphere, there remains little incentive for North East authorities to seriously engage with or commit funding to them.
- *The importance of the intangible* – re-considering the social and economic benefits of re-use and reduction will enable authorities and other bodies to bring waste issues into other areas of policy and practice, and address waste more coherently and effectively.
- *Moving beyond formal mechanisms* – recognising the informal networks and deliberative processes through which waste reduction and re-use occur at a day-to-day level, there is a need to enable the social space/climate for them to develop, and encompass informality and discursive engagement within waste management.
- *Challenging waste 'norms'* – the image of waste as dirty, and secondhand as inferior, must be changed, if as a society we are to really engage with the waste debate, adopt sustainable attitudes towards waste management and alter waste habits. Such a paradigm shift in how waste is imagined may be aided by a move to considering 'materials' rather than 'waste' as the basis for policy interventions.

For further information about the research project and its findings, please follow the links from: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/>

