

Launch of Valuing our Clothes report

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Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this official launch of our new report: Valuing our Clothes.

This ground-breaking report offers a fresh look at the financial and environmental aspects associated with the whole journey of clothing – from raw material, through manufacturing, to purchase, use and disposal.

This marks new territory for WRAP and reveals some astonishing facts.

But first, let me address the question of why WRAP thinks the area of clothing is important, and worthy of focus.

We think clothing matters because resource security matters. The clothes we make, buy, wear and discard are resource intensive. Before they even reach the shops, never mind our wardrobes, the manufacturing process means huge amounts of raw materials, water and energy are used.

As consumers, we don't 'see' the carbon or water footprints and naturally, we're not really aware of them.

But we know from recent headlines, including those to emerge from the Rio+20 Summit, that the issue of resource security is high on the agenda for countries across both the developed, and developing, world.

Having been privileged enough to be invited to speak at some of the fringe events at Rio about our own experience, I can tell you that resource security really is a priority for many, and they are beginning to wrestle with the myriad issues it raises.

It isn't just headline hype: across the world people are beginning to realise that continuing to consume resources at our current rate (a rate which we know is forecast to grow) is not sustainable.

So, what does that mean for clothing, here in the UK?

Our research shows that between us, we have in our collective wardrobes an astonishing £30 billion-worth of clothes that have hung there, un-used, for a year or more. Consumers tell us the two most common reasons these clothes are no longer worn is simply that they no longer fit, or are suffering from general wear and tear.

If we could only make more use of these clothes, through alteration, repair, multiple re-use and recycling, there's great potential for consumers to realise both financial and environmental savings. At the same time, there's significant opportunity for businesses to develop new offerings and grow.

Increasing the life of the clothes we buy and wear presents the most significant opportunity for us to make those savings. For example, our research shows that if we were to increase the active use of our clothes by just nine extra months, we could reduce the water, carbon and waste impacts by up to 30%, and save £5 billion pounds!

We've also discovered that around a third of the clothing we no longer want ends up in landfill each year. This is a valuable resource, currently fetching around £400 a tonne, because the textiles can be processed for re-use in multiple ways in a range of industries, from mining to motoring.

At around 350,000 tonnes a year, this is worth £140m - money that is currently lost to the economy.

You'll hear more of this detail later, I'm sure, both from Lord Taylor, who I am delighted is able to be here with us today, and from WRAP's Richard Swannell.

But what this detail demonstrates most vividly is that we could all benefit from getting more out of our clothing: releasing untapped potential and unlocking the value.

It isn't only at the 'wardrobe' stage of clothing's life that there are opportunities. Our research shows that at each stage of the journey, there are considerable environmental impacts, and therefore, there is potential to identify and implement changes that will reduce these.

For example, more than 90% of the water footprint of an item of clothing occurs during fibre and garment supply. While the opportunity to reduce this is likely to be restricted as UK retailers have limited influence over global suppliers, we do believe there is 'room' to encourage suppliers to adopt more sustainable and efficient processes.

Interestingly, our research shows that consumers think there's too little environmental information about the clothes they buy, and a third said they'd value an indicator of durability. This suggests that not only factoring in 'design for durability' but also sharing it with the consumer could have further benefits.

We know from our research that businesses and retailers are already taking steps to address these challenges.

M&S, for example, with its recently-launched 'shwopping' initiative, is enabling customer to donate items of still-wearable, but unwanted clothing in store. It has already been running a successful scheme in partnership with Oxfam which incentivises people to take unwanted M&S clothes to their nearest Oxfam shop, in return for a £5 M&S voucher.

And each of us as individuals too, can have a role to play. Just think what we could do if we dug out all those unwanted clothes from the back of the wardrobe. We could sell them on Ebay, pass them on to friends – perhaps hold a swishing party! – or pass them on to Freecycle or a charity shop.

Or if we're attached to the items, perhaps it's time for us to brush up our sewing skills, and repair or alter them so we can continue to wear and enjoy them. Not everyone is good at sewing, so maybe there's a real opportunity here for those who are good, to set up in business and provide a really valuable service?

Of course, as our research shows, there is a place for recycling. But if we're really going to extract the maximum value from the clothes we buy, then this will only take place at the very end of a garment's life, when it really can't be worn again, repaired or re-used.

The findings of our research, and the opportunities we've identified represent a fundamental rethink about the whole way in which we view and value our clothes. This is not tinkering at the edges, but about very real change, along every step of a garment's life.

And let's be clear: this throws up a whole host of challenges for us all, for business and consumers alike. It requires us to be brave and to embrace new business models that can help fuel the green economy.

It requires us to move away from a linear process of resource extraction, manufacture, consumption and disposal towards a system where resources can remain in use almost indefinitely

We've proved in other sectors that fundamental rethinks can and do happen, and deliver desired effects. The work WRAP has done on reducing food waste – with consumers through Love Food Hate Waste; through the successive Courtauld Commitments, and most recently, the Hospitality and Food Service Voluntary Agreement, is evidence that this can, and does happen.

The way in which the industry has already come together to share data and ideas, and identify a common desire to work through this and take the Sustainable Clothing Action Plan to the next phase bodes well for the future, and gives me confidence that together, we can find new ways of thinking.

And not only of thinking, but importantly, of acting.

This report we're launching today draws together these many threads and presents a range of information on how we design, use and dispose of our clothes.

It sets the scenes, for all of us, as partners in SCAP, to identify the areas for action, and begin to implement changes.

I am delighted that WRAP has already been able to work with so many textiles-related organisations to help us arrive at this point , and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank each of you for all your contributions, and for helping demonstrate the true power that exists in partnership.

As I said at the outset: this is exciting new territory for WRAP, and indeed, for us all, and I'm delighted that we're able to continue to play a pivotal role in working with you all.

We're very much looking forward, not only to continuing to work closely with you all, but also to helping you unlock the potential of the clothes we make, buy, wear and throw away.

Thank you.