

Real Nappies for London (RNfL), a project launched by the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) in July 2007 and funded by 11 local authorities is a London-wide real nappy incentive scheme.

London boroughs can sign up to the scheme which publicises and informs their residents about reusable nappies and issues vouchers that their residents can use towards the cost of the purchase of nappies or a nappy laundry service trial. The 11 London boroughs that have subscribed to the scheme in this financial year 1 April 10-31 March 11 are Bexley, Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Hounslow, Islington, Lewisham, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark and Tower Hamlets along with the North London Waste Authority.

### **Introduction – waste prevention**

I am specifically addressing the opportunity, posed by this review to reduce the quantity of nappy waste the UK sends to landfill/incineration.

Over the last decade modern washable nappies have become easier to use and eco-friendly detergents have been developed that allow nappies to be washed at low temperatures. This means that reusable nappies are a viable alternative to the single-use nappy. RNfL has been bringing real nappies to the attention of London parents since July 2007 and has gained a lot of experience and data from dealing with local authorities, real nappy businesses and individual real nappy users.

*Question: What roles should (i) national and local government; (ii) businesses; (iii) voluntary organisations; and (iv) individuals take in order to prevent waste from arising, and to reduce the hazardousness or environmental impact of waste?*

#### 2.4 (i)

At the moment the disposable nappy companies have 95% of the market. It is often assumed that this is because consumers prefer this product and choose to use it. It is then assumed that disposable nappies are an inevitable waste stream. Actually the marketing and easy availability makes it very difficult for washable nappies to compete. In addition everyone pays for the disposal of single-use nappies. The cost is not specifically paid for by the manufacturers and consumers of single-use nappies but is met by all residents.

There are currently plans for a plant for recycling/reprocessing disposable nappies in the UK. However where this has been tried abroad it has frequently been abandoned. Not only has it proved uneconomic it has also has a negative effect in that if people know they are paying for the separate collection and 'recycling' of disposable nappies in their council tax, they are less willing to choose washable nappies. The building of this plant should be stopped immediately.

Leadership in the endorsement of reusable nappies by national and local government should become embedded at an institutional level. It should lead to maternity units and nurseries using cloth nappies and nappy laundry services. Not only does this reduce the waste from these institutions but it also has a strong role to play in influencing the public.

This is an idea put forward by a real nappy user:

*“If someone applies for Maternity Allowance, an information pack could be sent out at the same time explaining the financial savings of using real nappies”.*

Another way to reduce nappy waste is to decrease the length of time children spend in nappies. The Department of Health must be linked into this.

*While growth in disposable diapers has tempered thanks to market saturation and declining birth rates, a higher average toilet training age has allowed growth to continue in developed countries. "The average age of toilet training children is going up in many developed countries," Magdalena Kondej, research manager for Euromonitor International, said. "Many parents are reluctant to push their children earlier than around three years of age. Two years was the optimal age in the past and continues to be the norm for much of the world. However, the popularity of products with enhanced features such as greater absorbency absorbent has allowed parents to delay this developmental necessity."*

Source: The Baby Diaper Story, Karen McIntyre, publication Nonwovens Industry, Jan 2009.

What this means is that many children are spending approximately a year longer in nappies than they used to/need to. This is a considerable amount of waste and it is also a child poverty issue. Parents are spending a lot of money on single-use 'nappy pants' which are acknowledged by health visitors and other childcare professionals to delay potty training. In September RNfL added a page to their web site with potty training links including one to the Department of Health's excellent potty training guide lines. It received 420 visits within a 3 week period. This indicates a real demand for information among the public.

There are effective ways in which Local authorities can create an environment in which real nappy use can thrive. When the frequency of refuse collections is reduced complaints arise about nappy waste. A London resident recently wrote to RNfL about the reductions in collections in their area: *"In response to your request for feedback ... on the East Dulwich Forum, I thought I'd get in touch about the waste disposal pilot currently going on in our area (whereby waste collections are now fortnightly, with food waste and recycling being collected weekly). This is fantastic and I sincerely hope it goes well and is rolled out.*

*On the forum a few people raised concerns about nappies (disposables only being collected fortnightly under this new arrangement). This is a real opportunity to push a few more people towards reusables and I felt that all the Southwark leaflets about the new waste arrangements would have been the perfect place for RNfL to have promoted the voucher scheme etc - and include some stats about the number of disposable nappies going in to landfill. Is this something that councils could be encouraged to collaborate with you on? I hope so - the impact on the borough's waste volume of just a small number of people switching to reusables would be significant. It is only a pilot for now, but should it be rolled out, I hope that RNfL could be included in some way."*

This email indicates a growing awareness of nappy waste but also the massive potential of the ideas and will of **individuals** to push forward change.

Local Authorities also need to be careful that contracts with waste collection companies do not disincentivise waste prevention. It should be more economical for a nursery to use a nappy laundry service as there are no additional collection and disposal costs. However if the institution does not bear the cost of the waste collection or it is too cheap, then the disposable nappy industry receives a hidden subsidy making the nappy laundry service unable to compete on price. The Gower School, Grove Nursery and Archway Children's Centre are three Islington nurseries, (the former two are private, the latter a local authority nursery) that use a local not-for-profit social enterprise nappy laundry service, Nappy Ever After

#### **2.4 (ii)**

There is potential for local entrepreneurs to establish businesses selling real nappies face-to-face and giving information and support to ensure retention of real nappy use through the spread of great 'word-of-mouth'. There is also the potential for more nappy laundry services, serving private

households in densely populated areas, nurseries and maternity units.

In terms of tackling child poverty launderettes may be established where nappies can be washed at low price. These could also provide a social hub for parents of young children. Real nappy businesses have a record of tackling barriers, such as the initial up-front cost by offering the opportunity to 'try-before-you-buy'. There is scope for businesses to work with credit unions as a way of overcoming this barrier.

The type of people who run real nappy businesses are ethically minded. They tend to only sell what the customer needs and try to ensure the customer is happy. The sellers understand that successful conversion and retention of reusable nappy use depends on great 'word-of-mouth', peer support and peer advice in these early stages of developing the market.

In terms of **environmental protection**, businesses can be encouraged to stock organic cotton nappies. Small businesses with a close relationship with environmentally aware customers have to consider how products they sell/distribute are transported, where they come from, who makes them and how they are made.

## 2.4 (iii) and (iv)

RNfL is an example of a project run by a **third sector** organisation that gives local authorities the opportunity to send a waste reduction message to their residents, indeed a specific target market – expectant parents and parents with babies under 18 months.

### Achievements to date

- 4,743 vouchers redeemed up to 30 Sep 2010.
- 11 London boroughs currently participating.
- 7,185 vouchers issued (up to 30 Sep 2010).
- ~18 calls to information helpline per day.
- ~3,481 tonnes diverted as a result of the project to date (based on 734 kg per child over their time in nappies).
- Estimated landfill charges avoided ~£295,885 at £85 per tonne.
- Voucher value £30-£54.15 (paid by borough).

RNfL has established a trusted brand and information hub. Midwives, health visitors and staff in children's centres promote the vouchers in boroughs where the scheme is operating. From our data base we know how people heard – number one is word of mouth (14%), but 'ante-natal class' and 'hospital' combined is even higher (19%).

The midwife is the main influencer of first time parents. At ante-natal classes across London midwives are telling parents that they should expect to change their baby's nappy up to 10 times a day. They are telling them to use cotton wool and water to clean their baby's bottom. The parents are listening. In boroughs where the RNfL scheme is operating many of these midwives are telling parents to apply for a voucher and try washable nappies. We know this from the feedback that comes to us on the application forms. This is a very effective way of reaching expectant parents.

One of the benefits of the scheme has been measuring the interest/uptake of the voucher. Our data shows that of all the babies born in those boroughs where the voucher scheme is now operating between 2.5 and 8% of those babies had real nappies bought for them using RNfL vouchers. What is interesting is that the 3 boroughs with the highest percentages; Hackney (8%), Camden (6.4%) and Islington (8%) are boroughs that have operated real nappy incentive schemes most vigorously for the longest. Council endorsement seems to be important to residents and health professionals. The RNfL scheme acts to drive customers to local businesses selling real nappies such as Born, Green Baby and Nappy Ever After.

Here is one voucher recipient's view of real nappies and the RNfL scheme:

*“I can't emphasise enough how great they have been. Saving money was crucial, so was the environmental factor and convenience. The first child was totally out of nappies at under two, the second at just over two: brilliant! This is a very important scheme and should be made even more widely available - now that almost everyone has access to good laundry facilities in their own homes and with the quality of modern reusable nappies, there is no reason for buying single-use throw-away nappies in my opinion.”*

The RNfL web site has proved a valuable source of information. We can see that not only are people visiting our site (2,453 visits in September 2010) to apply for a voucher but they are spending time on it, seeking out shops and places to buy nappies. They are also looking for information on the benefits of real nappies and help with choosing which ones are right for them. We can tell by attendance at events that the information is acted upon. Sales events in Hackney and Tower Hamlets have been well attended with frequently more than 20 people at each event. A small piece of research carried out recently for RNfL by intern Naa Adorkor Sackeyfio showed that the social background (age and occupation/ income) of respondents had no influence on how often they used real nappies. Ethnicity however did affect how often respondents used Real Nappies. 88% of Black Africans, 70% of Asians and 57% of White British use Real Nappies 50 to 100% of the time.

RNfL is able to closely monitor web site activity and interact with real nappy users to find out what motivates them to use real nappies. It is important to get the marketing message right. At the moment reducing waste is the biggest motivator for choosing real nappies.

We see this scheme as a necessary intervention in the market to deal with market failure and to help kick start behavioural change that delivers a reduction in waste sent to landfill and other waste reducing attitudes.

The reason why this voucher scheme is cost effective to boroughs is because the cost of disposal and collection of disposable nappies is significant and makes waste prevention worthwhile. As the cost of disposal gets higher and higher the scheme will be even more cost effective.

□ *What can be done to encourage businesses to design and manufacture products which produce less waste – such as those which last longer, can be upgraded and/or repaired, and don't have hazardous components?*

Single-use nappies have declined in size over the last few decades. However, once ready to be disposed of, that weight saving is negligible because most of the waste in a used nappy is human waste. The reason why the disposable nappy manufacturers reduce the size of nappies is to help reduce the costs of transporting this bulky product <http://disposablediaper.net/content.asp?2>.

Not only this, when disposables get smaller it is because they use more super absorbent polymers – the long-term effects of these breaking down in landfill and the emissions from burning are not currently known. Not only this. More absorbent disposable nappies can be left on babies for longer and can result in lax changing routines that can cause serious health problems to the babies. We have witnessed a misunderstanding of the claim that disposables “can be left on a baby for up to 12 hours” to mean “leave on for 12 hours”.

□ *Which waste streams or materials should be a priority for waste prevention?*

Single-use nappies are a significant component of the household waste stream in London. The London Borough of Hounslow recently found they comprised 3% of household waste. In 2009 there were 203,281 live births in Greater London. It has been estimated that the average weight of nappy waste collected and disposed of per baby from birth to two and a half years is 734kg. If 100% of babies born in London in 2009 had worn single-use nappies then 149,208 tonnes nappy waste would have been sent to landfill/incineration at a cost of £12.5 million (@£85 per tonne).

The disposable hygiene product industry is based on a growth model. At the moment the market in North America and Europe is saturated, according to industry reports. This means that the way to grow their market is to increase the number of products: disposable pyjama trousers, disposable bed mats, disposable nappy pants, disposable wipes. The

danger is that nappy waste will continue to rise, while other waste streams are reduced, resulting in no decline in waste arising. For more on the industry growth perspective visit: <http://disposablediaper.net/content.asp?2>

▫ *How should waste prevention be measured?*

Currently we are able to measure waste prevention through issuing vouchers and monitoring use. This scheme gives us the opportunity to find out how long parents use nappies, when they potty train their child, why they stop using them before potty training.

## **Disposal**

▫ *How best to further reduce the amount of waste going to landfill?*

Currently disposable nappies are used to draw customers into supermarkets with the main manufacturers competing on price, pushing the price down further and further. This makes it difficult for the reusable alternatives to compete on price. It is unfair that this price war put up the price of other items. What can be done to prevent this?

In Germany when they wanted to discourage the use of single-use drink containers (principally beer cans) the government brought in a refundable deposit on cans that shops had to legally reimburse to customers. This had the effect of supermarkets being inundated with used cans, leading them to stop stocking cans of beer. Such creative thinking needs to be applied to the sale of single-use items in the UK.

▫ *When should we aim to be as close to zero waste to landfill as possible?*

I see no reason why we should not be aiming to replace the use of disposables with reusable nappies and thus see virtually zero nappy waste going to landfill by 2015. Introducing legislation that would mean retailers or distributors of disposable nappies are responsible for the cost of collection and disposal of single-use nappies by 2015 would mean that businesses and consumers have a clear message that the reusable alternative is better and give them time to adjust to this new environment.

I see the recession, the need to reduce the deficit, invest in green jobs and reduce public sector spending as an opportunity to accelerate change in this area. But not only this: there is a real appetite for change at the moment. Disenchantment with the convenience life style can be seen in the popularity of Jamie Oliver and Tom Hodgkinson. Their common sense approach to enjoying digging your own garden and learning about plants rather than just paying someone else to do it, enjoying cooking rather than just buying a ready-made meal which gives you too many calories and not enough energy is winning hearts and minds. The same can be said for outsourcing childcare. Parents are finding themselves in a situation where no one has taken the time to help the child make the transition to cloth pants resulting in parents having to change the nappies of 4 year old children and the wet beds of 14 year olds – a situation that the disposable nappy industry communicates as a norm rather than an unfortunate exception.

Hilary Vick, Real Nappies for London Co-ordinator, October 2010