

the nappy alliance

Key Issues

The Nappy Alliance welcomes the House of Lords Science & Technology Sub-Committee's Inquiry which looks at sustainable approaches to waste reduction. Disposable nappies currently account for around 4% of all household waste, a percentage which is likely to increase as recycling rates for other waste streams go up. Real nappies are the only alternative to disposable nappies when it comes to waste reduction. Environmental claims made by manufacturers of disposable nappies with regards to the reduced weight of their products and the fact that some of their nappies are now 80% decomposable are irrelevant given that the vast majority of disposable nappies will end up in landfill, where it will take approximately 500 years for them to decompose. In addition, landfill sites create methane, a greenhouse gas which is an even more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

The Alliance

The Nappy Alliance was established by independent providers of real nappies to act as the trade body for the commercial market of re-usable nappies, to promote their use amongst new parents and to address the on-going issue of the 400,000 tonnes of disposable nappies which go to landfill in the UK every year. The Alliance promotes awareness of the key benefits of reusable nappies such as a wider consumer choice, a cheaper option for parents than disposables and environmental benefits and cost savings to waste disposal authorities.

The scale of disposable nappy waste problem

Nappy waste currently accounts for 3-4% of all household waste and constitutes the largest identifiable category of household waste. With increasing levels of recycling of other waste streams, this percentage is likely to increase even more. Currently, nearly 3 billion nappies are thrown away in the UK every year - 8 million nappies a day. The Environment Agency estimated that the decomposition timescale for some of the materials and chemicals currently used in disposables is more than 500 years. The paper-fluff and faeces should take approximately 100 and 10 years respectively to degrade. Given that 38% of all UK methane emissions are accounted for by landfill, reducing the amount of disposable nappies going to landfill could have a significant impact on the UK's greenhouse emissions.

Changes in real nappy design

Real nappies have come a long way from the "terry towels" which many people remember to the extent that real nappies are now as convenient to use for most parents as disposable nappies. Real nappies come in lots of modern shapes which fasten easily with poppers, Velcro or plastic grips so the nappy fits a baby snugly. Parents have a choice of Flat Nappies, Shaped Nappies, all-in-one nappies or one-size-fits-all nappies.

Two types of liner are generally available: washable or flushable biodegradable type. To prevent leaks most nappies are covered with a breathable waterproof cover also known as a "wrap".

In addition, modern washing machines are so effective that real nappies no longer need to be pre-soaked or boiled as used to be the case. By using energy efficient washing machines, washing at the right temperature and line drying, young parents can help to significantly reduce the environmental impact of nappies, particularly the creation of landfill.

Changes in disposable nappy design

Manufacturers of disposable nappies have trumpeted recent technological improvements such as a reduction of the average weight of an unsoiled disposable nappy by 40% and claim this will greatly reduce the amount of nappy waste going to landfill. In fact, given that most of the weight of disposable nappies is constituted by baby waste (with the average weight of an unsoiled nappy of 44.6g and the average weight of a soiled nappy of around 150g¹), reducing the weight of an unsoiled disposable nappy will have little effect once the soiled nappy ends up in landfill.

In addition, and whilst we welcome the fact that some manufacturers of disposable nappies have increased the level of compostable materials in their nappies, the fact remains that in an anaerobic environment such as a landfill where the vast majority of disposable nappies will end up, it will still take many decades for these materials to decompose, whilst creating harmful methane emissions.

Life Cycle Assessment of nappies

The Environment Agency which published a Life Cycle Assessment on the environmental impact of both reusable and disposable nappies in 2005, concluded that there was little overall environmental difference between the two products. The Environment Agency has since acknowledged that the study was seriously flawed from the outset. A revised Life Cycle Assessment has been commissioned and after considerable delay is now expected to be published in December. This flawed assessment has obviously caused considerable negative interest amongst certain media but the Nappy Alliance expects this revised Report to reflect the overall environmental benefits of reusable nappies much better than the original report did.

Regardless of the anticipated positive conclusion for real nappies of the revised LCA report, certainly in terms of landfill reduction, real nappies remain the only viable option to disposable nappies.

Government policy

The Nappy Alliance welcomes the efforts made by the government in its recent revised Waste Strategy and its aims to put more emphasis on prevention and re-use, as well as providing stronger incentives for businesses, local authorities and individuals to reduce waste. However, we are disappointed and surprised that its recent consultation on *Incentives for Recycling by households* actively encouraged local authorities to shy away from taking action on the amount of disposable nappies going to landfill. The consultation document encouraged local areas essentially to give up on what is the one single biggest identifiable source of household waste by explicitly stating that young parents ought to be given more leeway to produce waste because of their dependency on disposable nappies.

There is a viable alternative to disposable nappies in the form of reusable nappies which offer similar levels of convenience as disposable nappies and which do not create any landfill. By not incentivising young parents to use real nappies, the department appears to be missing an opportunity to significantly reduce the 3-4% of household waste going to landfill which consists of nappy waste.

¹ Environment Agency, Life Cycle Assessment of Disposable Nappies and Reusable Nappies in the UK, 2005, p22

In addition, the enormous cost of disposing the 3 billion nappies a year to landfill currently falls exclusively on local authorities and therefore indirectly on local taxpayers. The government urgently needs to start looking into ways in which manufacturers of disposable nappies cover part of the cost of disposing their products, by means of a levy or an environmental tax on disposable nappies.

Summary

The Nappy Alliance believes that better design and materials can play a key role in the reduction of the amount and volume of waste going to landfill every year. It is however clear that the government's top priority in reducing landfill should remain waste prevention. For the reasons stated above, we remain skeptical about some of the claims made by manufacturers with regards to changes made to the weight and composition of their products and the effect this will have on landfill reduction. Given that disposable nappies account for 3-4% of all household waste going to landfill and given that a reduction in weight of an unsoiled nappy will have little effect on the tonnage of disposable nappies going to landfill, real nappies are the only viable option for parents who wish to reduce their impact on landfill significantly.

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