

Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study

Towards a best practice reusable nappy program



Executive Summary

Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study ‘at a glance’

About the study

Twelve Melbourne councils led by City of Monash engaged WSP to undertake the Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study to recommend a best practice reusable nappy program.

The Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study and related research was designed to:

- explore the effectiveness of local government reusable nappy programs
- assess the performance of reusable nappy products
- understand community behaviour and attitudes in relation to reusable nappies, and
- assist in the development of a best practice model for a reusable nappy program that encourages long term behaviour change and waste reduction.

Approach and methodology

The study involved a combination of research activities including desktop analysis of reusable nappy products and council-led programs, interviews with councils and other stakeholders, plus survey, interview and focus group research involving members of the community.

Study context

Disposable nappies contribute significantly to plastic waste entering landfill. As identified in the contract specification, approximately two billion nappies¹ end up in landfill every year in Australia, comprising four percent of total landfill. According to bin audits across the participating councils, disposable nappy products make up 5 to 15% of total waste going to landfill. For councils transitioning to fortnightly waste collection, disposable nappies also present a challenge for families. Despite the environmental challenges of disposable nappies, a lack of public awareness and community education exists within the community to address the high proportion of disposable nappy waste to landfill.



Reference: 1. Sustainability Victoria, <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/recycling-and-reducing-waste/at-home/avoid-waste/minimise-single-use-items/disposable-nappies>



Key findings

The Program Review demonstrated that without related evaluation, the success of reusable nappy programs cannot fully be understood. The review was limited by the lack of available reusable nappy program evaluations and related data. However, it highlighted the importance of education as a critical attribute of successful reusable nappy programs that support long term behaviour change. While reusable nappy rebate programs were well supported in terms of uptake, there was limited evidence available to support the outcomes of rebate programs in terms of waste reduction and ongoing behaviour change toward increased use of reusables. Based on the data available, the Program Review could not conclude that rebate programs support long term behaviour change.

Product Review

The Product Review identified a number of reusable nappy brands and products available to communities in Victoria that performed strongly in relation to triple bottom line (social, environmental and economic) criteria. The accompanying Product Review report is available to participating councils for their information when considering reusable nappy programs and potential procurement decisions. Further to this, the framework established to support conduct of the triple bottom line product analysis can also be used by the participating councils to inform future decision making.

Social Research

The Social Research attracted a high level of interest and participation from more than 2,000 parents and carers who had used any variety of nappies in the past five years across the 12 council areas, well exceeding the target survey sample of 600 participants. The research indicated that:

- As many as 18% of participants were already reusable nappy users and another 34% used a combination of reusable and disposable nappies, higher than 15% within the general population in Australia*
- Parents and carers under 35 years were more likely to use reusable nappies or a combination than those in the older age groups
- The optimal time to influence decision making and encourage use of reusable nappies among parents and carers is *before the baby arrives*, with 72% of reusable nappy users choosing what type of nappy to use before their baby was born
- A major opportunity exists to influence behaviour toward increased use of reusable nappies, with as many as 90% of expectant parents and carers being open to assistance to help make the switch to reusables, through interventions such as a workshop, trial kit or advice from a trusted source

- Once parents and carers start using a particular style of nappy, they are generally consistent in their nappy choices, with 85% of survey respondents who used disposable nappies having never tried reusables, and 74% having used the same nappy type for both their first child and youngest child
- Perceptions of reusable nappies varied considerably between reusable nappy users and disposable nappy users, providing opportunities to develop targeted communications that address existing barriers to use of reusable nappies (including their absorbency, convenience, accessibility and time requirement)
- Rather than an 'all or nothing' approach, the qualitative research demonstrated the opportunity to encourage more people to use reusable nappies more of the time
- In line with the above, the research found a significant opportunity may exist to shift behaviour among members of the community across the 12 council areas, with a focus on 'more people using reusables, more of the time', rather than reusables being the territory of 'converts' and non-users.

Survey

Survey, interview and focus group research participants were asked about potential interventions to encourage reusable nappy use:

- In individual scenario based survey questions, there was no clear preference expressed by disposable nappy users across the four reusable nappy program models tested. Across all types of nappy user, reusable nappy rebates attracted the most interest of the models tested in the survey in a forced question scenario (37%). However, this option was more than twice as popular among existing reusable and combination nappy users (compared with disposable nappy users).
- While rebate programs attracted a high level of interest overall, people who were already using reusable nappies were more than twice as likely as those who use disposables to find this option appealing. With this in mind, the rebate can be seen as a reward for existing reusable nappy users (ie. with a reward being an initiative provided post-behaviour to retain behaviour).
- Analysis of qualitative responses showed that overall, removal of cost as a barrier was not a prominent reason for continued use of reusable nappies amongst current users



“Rebate(s) can be seen as a reward for existing reusable nappy users (i.e. with a reward being an initiative provided post-behaviour to retain behaviour.”

Key findings (continued)

- Qualitative research revealed that although a reusable nappy library idea could potentially be implemented by the councils through a subcontractor arrangement, this idea is not highly recommended as it is not likely to speak to mainstream audiences, at this time, due to concerns around hygiene
- Strong support exists within the community for early intervention in hospitals, or similar environments such as antenatal education, to support reusable nappy use
- As hospitals are out of councils' jurisdiction, the Victorian Government could consider or conduct 'train the trainer' activities with local hospitals, encourage use of reusables in hospitals or include product samples in the Bounty Bag or State Government Baby Bag
- Community education was identified as crucial across all audiences. This could be implemented by councils directly and in partnership with Sustainability Victoria and other stakeholders such as maternal and child health centres, First Nations services and cultural groups
- The reusable nappy program could be tailored at a local level down the track to increase participation of low income families, through a rebate-style offering, an AfterPay model or subsidised products through council or business partnerships. A targeted rebate or similar financial incentive is not recommended as a standalone initiative, rather as one that is supported by education and targeted communication.





Conclusions and recommendations

The Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study establishes best practice recommendations for a reusable nappy program model to support disposable nappy waste reduction and long term behaviour change. This report documents the findings of research and articulates how this evidence base has been used to inform development of the study recommendations.

The social research showed that program models or interventions to encourage increased use of reusable nappies should primarily target community members who are expecting a baby. Further to this, interventions should include education – to shift the stark perception gap between disposable and reusable nappy users around convenience, ease of disposal, absorbency (particularly overnight), chaffing and rashes, ease of use and cleanliness – with disposable users rating reusable nappies much lower in terms of these factors in the survey and qualitative research.

Interestingly, the research found that people generally recognise reusable nappies as being better for the environment, and most do not need to be convinced of this. Nonetheless, environment and sustainability interests are a core driver for reusable nappy interest.

While financial interventions were identified as having the potential to address the upfront cost barrier of using reusable nappies in the survey research, both the qualitative research and Program Review suggested that the effectiveness of financial interventions would be limited in the absence of community education to support the use of reusable nappies.

The Reusable Nappy Feasibility Study proposes two key recommendations for consideration and potential implementation by the 12 participating councils. It is recommended that the councils deliver:

- a joint Communications Strategy and Campaign, as a first priority
- opportunities for community members to experience and connect over reusable nappies, as a second and related priority.

Further details of the Feasibility Study – including the study methodology, findings and recommendations – are provided in this report.

A more detailed summary of potential interventions by each stage of the behaviour change model is provided over page.

Supporting information including detailed data and research tools are included as appendices. The 12 participating councils have also been provided with separate reports on the Program Review, Product Analysis and Social Research plus supporting data.