

**Sustainability of the Fashion Industry Inquiry
Environmental Audit Committee**

Written evidence submitted by

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1. Our submission to the committee is drawn from research that we are conducting as part of our AHRC-funded grant entitled '*Designing a Sensibility for Sustainable Clothing*' (S4S). In this project, we conduct a series of workshops in Cornwall and Wolverhampton, engaging participants in making fabric, and making mending and modifying clothes. We use multiple social scientific methodologies to understand the effect these workshops have on participants' attitudes and behaviour in relation to clothing and fast fashion. Over 140 persons have so far been a part of this project, with 50 of these participants regularly attending workshops or other events (Jan-August 2018). Our social scientific methods consist of an exploratory opening symposium; participant wardrobe audits, accompanied with qualitative interviews; reflective diaries; surveys; and short reflective videos and blogs. These methods allow us to trace how our participants' thoughts, feelings and actions have changed since they have been involved with the project. In our project, we seek ways to better facilitate behaviour changes towards more environmentally and socially sustainable practices. For more information and to view the blogs, please follow <http://sites.exeter.ac.uk/s4s/home/>. The project films can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCISPU0KuQXLMtSoLKRSE8Eg>
2. Our research helps us to better understand the Inquiry's questions regarding the **incentives that can be put in place to make fashion more sustainable; and how consumers can be encouraged to buy fewer clothes, reuse clothing and think about how best to dispose of clothing that they no longer want**. Counterintuitively, it is our contention that the interests of the fast fashion industry, and the environmental need to reduce clothing consumption are not mutually exclusive, but contain marketable opportunities for the fashion industry to shift attitudes toward a more sustainable approach to clothing.

Headline Arguments:

- **Pro-environmental behaviour change can be facilitated by community based co-created craft workshops (rather than an 'information' approach).**
- **Embedding pro-environmental behavioural change into clothing practices requires availability of long-term spaces in the community, where individuals can share knowledge and skills about making and modifying clothing. This enables new 'meanings' to be generated about personal relationships with, and attitudes towards clothing.**
- **We recommend incentivising high street clothing retailers to provide creative making spaces for customers to mend and modify clothing to provide a long-term, sustained service. We also recommend for provision of community space for independent**

workshops to provide opportunities for making, mending and skill sharing to become normalised.

3. In our opening symposium, participants understood that clothing has become 'disposable' in the minds of the general population, and that this disposability raises challenges to environmental sustainability. A frequently expressed response to this was that there needs to be more education of the public in sustainable practices. We feel that as an approach to create behavioural change, this is antagonistic and problematic because it implies that those who follow unsustainable practices are wrong, and need to change. One of our participants described this approach as being about "*preaching*" and "*shaming*", which does not necessarily help people to make informed decisions. An 'educatory' approach risks phenomenon such as the value action gap ([Kollmuss & Agyeman 2002](#)), wherein individuals *know* what kinds of activities they should be doing, but still they choose not to do them, pursuing easier, or more popular options. Our preliminary analyses however, show that it is important to provide a non-judgemental space for individuals to learn about the clothing industry, experiment with intervention strategies, including mending/upcycling and repurposing clothes, and to think more deeply about their clothing habits in a supportive environment.
4. S4S contends that it is more constructive to follow a **co-creative** approach, allowing members of the public and experts to share perspectives and create new knowledges together. In our research, this has become crucially important for the ways that our participants have **generated new and different types of meaning** about clothing, which has led them to question their purchasing habits. In so doing, it has meant that participants have been able to better embed new knowledges into how they already understand the world. In the next few weeks, we will be conducting follow up wardrobe audits to discuss with participants the specific impact that the project has had on how they make their clothing purchases. Our preliminary analyses however, show that **it is important to provide the non-judgemental space for individuals to learn about the clothing industry and to think more deeply about their clothing habits in a supportive environment.**
5. In their development of Social Action Theory, [Shove, Pantzar and Watson \(2012\)](#) claim that three things are needed for behavioural changes to happen. Material Things (such as equipment, or spaces); Skills and Competencies; and Meaning Making. We have seen the importance of each of these elements in our research: we have provided equipment and space as well as facilitated the teaching of skills and competencies. But it is in the meaning making that we have been able to observe- the impacts of prolonged exposure to all aspects of making, mending, and modifying clothing; and questions about how contemporary western culture views clothing and fashion.
6. It is important that these meaning-making activities are conducted in a group environment. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, meanings are generated through discussion with other people. In group discussion following the viewing of the film *The True Cost*, it emerged that participants found that **collective viewing activity was more powerful than watching the film individually**. The subsequent discussion would also have enabled individuals to make better sense of what they had seen, and to consider more fully what it might mean for their own personal practices. Secondly, research that seeks to circumvent the value action

gap shows that having **long term group activity to embed behavioural changes, helps to normalise new behaviours, and ensure their sustainability** (Howell 2013). Part of the reason for this is that it is very easy for new behaviours to be dropped if an individual feels that few other persons have also made this change (and so therefore by implication, their effort is pointless).

7. **The need to encourage networks and like-minded communities to support sustainable clothing practices has been a strong theme in many of our participant discussions.** Part of the reason for this is that it is very easy for new behaviours to be dropped if an individual feels that few other persons have also made this change (and so therefore by implication, their effort is pointless). One participant in the West Midlands who attended all workshops and events, including a weekend intensive run by sustainable designers [Antiform](#), cited being part of a creative community of like-minded individuals as a major motivation. It not only helped embedded and sustain more sustainable thinking/clothing behaviours, but also shaped ambitions, in her case to: 1) run 'peer-to-peer repair workshops' at a local low-income estate; 2) set up a consultancy advising on sustainable clothing practice; 3) work with others to establish 'making spaces' in collaboration with local charities/businesses to support creative upcycling of garments and reduce waste. She reported that project research tools (wardrobe audit and clothing diary) helped her absorb, reflect, rationalise her thinking and focus ambitions now that her children are growing up.
8. One of our participants comes from a background where appearance is incredibly important. However, in a recent workshop she stated that the experience has been *"a great way to challenge ones flaws. For example, I was always obsessed with perfection and this obsession was stopping me from getting involved with crafts: they are almost by definition flawed! The participation in the workshop has taught me to accept (maybe not love - yet) that imperfections are not always bad as they give items their unique character."* Another participant described shopping for clothing as a hobby, and at one point in her life she had regularly spent several hundred pounds monthly on clothes. She had started to challenge her use of fast fashion as she got older, in part because of knowledge she had acquired years earlier, and in part because she grew to appreciate decent quality clothing. This formed a basis for her to pursue an emerging interest in more sustainable approaches to fashion, and the environment of the workshops has allowed both participants to have complex and in-depth discussions with other group members. Interestingly, whilst both individuals are very different characters, a motivation for learning fabric making skills is drawn in part from a desire not to finally dispose of items of clothing that they had kept for many years, or that had come to have an important set of meanings for them. One participant spoke of how she had repurposed a beloved top into bunting. This illustrates how **even persons who at a surface glance do not seem to be of a 'type' to be considering more sustainable clothing practices, have prior knowledges or feelings which through meaning-making activities can encourage more sustainable clothing practices.**
9. **For environmental policy, this means that one way to encourage people to buy fewer clothes, to re-use clothes, and to think about how to best dispose of unwanted clothing would be to encourage people to learn the skills to make, mend, and modify clothing in a group environment.** This could entail working with and supporting the activities of a range of creative clothing organisations that have started operating throughout the UK, such as [Stitched Up](#) , in Manchester, or [Jo Bloodworth's Little Shop of Joy](#) in Shropshire. Further, there is a body of academic literature which documents a growth in interest in recent years, towards making activities and crafts ([Hackney, 2013](#)) ([Von Busch, 2009](#)). **This indicates that**

there is a societal base, or movement, on which groups and networks making, mending and modifying clothing; and discussing questions related to their use of clothing, might be built. There are lessons here for education (school, FE and HE) in raising resilient young people who can build future businesses. A number of younger girls (aged 13-16) attended the West Midland's workshops with their parents. Many want to pursue a career in sustainable fashion design and while few came with prior dressmaking experience (as no longer part of the school curriculum), once supported by our designers, all learnt sufficient skills/design, and were able to think quickly about transforming/upcycling/repurposing outfits. The young participants clearly loved the process, and the pleasure of creating their own clothes helped develop confidence and autonomy. One in particular, who is so severely dyslexic, who her mother prefers to home school, thrived on the supportive ethos of the workshops, and created multiple garments, and took great pleasure and pride in modelling them. Her ambition is to run her own business teaching upcycling/repurposing skills.

10. In addition to supporting independent groups and networks, **policy can work with high street fast fashion retailers to provide supported making spaces and workshops where customers can modify or mend items of clothing from these stores.** This idea sounds counter-intuitive. After all, why should retailers support customers to buy fewer of their clothes? However, the benefits are two-fold. Firstly, it helps to buy brand loyalty from consumers, who value ethical companies. An example of this is Cornish children's clothing company Frugi, who operate a Facebook page where customers can [buy and sell pre-loved Frugi clothing](#). Extreme clothing manufacturer Finisterre also challenge retail orthodoxy, offering a [repair service for worn items of clothing](#). Incentivising fast fashion retailers in this way **has the potential to visibly encourage and support individuals to explore new ways of thinking about clothing; learn skills to repurpose and modify their clothes, creating unique pieces; purchase fewer clothes; and see and feel that other people are also changing their approach to fast fashion.** This visibility will help to embed a more environmentally sustainable approach to the fashion industry amongst broader society. As an additional benefit, **developing high street shops as making spaces, as well as consuming places provides an opportunity to challenge the rise in internet shopping, whilst supporting the local high street.**