

Educating the Public

Research into flushable products

Report for Consumer Council for Water

In association with WRc plc

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Summary

Introduction

The Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) is working in partnership with industry specialist, WRc plc, to explore the effects on the country's sewer infrastructure of consumers flushing away inappropriate items. To assist this work, CCWater needed greater insight into current consumer behaviour and the underlying rationale behind inappropriate flushing. The central aims of this research project were, therefore, to provide insight into:

- the types of items consumers dispose of by flushing, and why they think it appropriate to flush away;
- how the views and behaviour of people might be affected by information on what is appropriate for flushing away; and
- whether a better appreciation of the risks and/or consequences of sewer blockage, and clearer and more reliable manufacturer labelling will reduce the level of inappropriate flushing.

Through focus groups around the country we were able to gain insight into people's attitudes, and likely triggers to changes in behaviour. A carefully controlled sample design ensured participation from a wide range of different customer segments that may hold different views or have different needs, including: private-owning household residents and tenants; high and low socio-economic groups; and people looking after the home and/or with babies/young children.

Disposal of Products

The majority of participants had flushed away tissues, kitchen roll, wipes and tampons, nappy liners and cigarette stubs (of those who smoked). Items flushed by some participants included condoms, plasters, cotton buds and dental floss, and a small number had flushed cotton wool and pads, and contact lenses.

The main reason participants flushed these items was because they consider them to be 'flushable'. That is, participants did not consider that the items they were flushing risked causing a blockage. In the case of wipes, kitchen roll and tissues the basis of this conclusion is due to their texture and size being perceived to be similar to toilet paper. A number of participants also flushed items simply because they were in the bathroom and it was more convenient to do this than use a bin in another room of the house.

"It (tissue) is the same material as toilet roll, so it will break up in the toilet." (Tenants)

"It depends on where you are using things at the time. If you are in the bathroom and you blow your nose on kitchen roll, you will throw it in the toilet, but if you are in the bedroom, you'd just put it in the bin." (Low SEG)

Some items were flushed rather than disposed of in the bin for reasons of hygiene, especially tampons and bathroom wipes and, to a lesser extent, messy tissues and cotton buds. Discreteness also influenced disposal of sanitary items in the toilet and, for some participants, condoms.

"With sanitary towels you always have a plastic wrapper to wrap them in and throw in the bin, so you have the means to wrap them up, but you haven't with tampons. I think it's more hygienic to just flush tampons." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Summary

"If we've got colds in our house and we are blowing our nose then that tissue always goes down the loo because we don't want to spread the germs." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Around half the participants had disposed of cooking fats, oils and grease down the sink believing that doing so with hot water would prevent blockages. The majority of participants had used white spirit and washed paint brushes under the tap, and some had poured medicines down the sink. None had poured motor/car oil into the drains.

"I scrape the grill fat out into the sink and run the hot tap, I should use a tissue but I guess I'm just lazy." (Tenant/low SEG)

Items that none of the participants had flushed away (but have been known to block sewer pipes) include: nappies, disposable razors, bandages, tights, and cat litter. This is because participants consciously (or subconsciously) considered that these items would be likely to block their drain.

Refuse Collection

The majority of participants would not dispose of more items in the toilet if there was a reduced frequency of refuse collection, or if refuse charges were introduced.

"It's like over Christmas when they don't come for two weeks, you just end up with more rubbish. It doesn't make you think oh I'll flush that or do this or do that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Labelling

In general, people do not look at the packaging when purchasing items, nor when they consider discarding the used item. Terms like 'disposable' and 'biodegradable' are not interpreted as indications that the item can be flushed away.

The term 'flushable' has potential to mislead as most people will interpret this as confirmation that there will be no adverse effects if the item is flushed away. Indeed, many participants were angry to hear that an item could be labelled 'flushable' and could, nevertheless, cause a blockage in their sewer pipe. Participants want manufacturers to stop this practice.

"Are they not breaking the law if they put on the package that they are flushable if they are not?" (Low SEG)

There was a mixed reaction to the concept of 'flushable' products. Some participants would consider buying them if they cost the same, or only slightly more than non-flushable products. Others, however, stated that they would continue to bag and bin items, and were unsupportive of encouraging flushing – because it seemed so wasteful in terms of water and, there was a risk that, the concept of flushable products could mislead consumers into flushing items that are inappropriate.

Sewer Impacts / Flooding awareness

Participants do not associate a blocked drain with an inappropriately flushed item – instead they would assume that the problem was old, poorly maintained infrastructure.

"You just flush the toilet and take it for granted that it's gone." (Tenant/low SEG)

The risk of a blockage to their toilet, or sewer pipes within their property, is sufficient to make participants NOT attempt to flush items that might cause a blockage, regardless of who is perceived to be responsible for the toilet/pipes.

Changing People's Behaviour and Moving forward

To change people's behaviour, there must be:

- greater public awareness of the risk of sewer blockage;
- better education of the public in terms of what can, and what should not, be flushed away;
- better signage in public spaces/areas to continue to spread the message(s), and help make inappropriate disposal socially unacceptable; and
- an end to misleading manufacturer labelling.

An advertising and educational campaign should be at the heart of any proposed change. This should target all sections of society, including children. To achieve the necessarily wide audience, and to ensure visual impact, the campaign should be predominantly a television campaign (building upon the effectiveness of certain TV programmes that have changed people's attitudes and behaviour). Messages on water bills, and via leaflets will complement the TV campaign, and help to maintain an on-going message.

"There are always going to be some people who don't care, but I think a lot of people just don't know that we are not supposed to be doing this." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think there should be more emphasis on public education films to educate people, about what you can and can't flush. Similar to government adverts about road safety." (Private-owning/high SEG)

The most effective messages will be those with a 'shock' factor. Images of sewer flooding in someone's living room, for example, would give the advert the necessary impact. Images of inappropriate items in our local water-ways causing a danger to wildlife and an eye-sore to the public, was also encouraged.

"They could do a very graphic advertising campaign to get the message across. You know, with loads of nappies in the back garden, something really shocking." (Private-owning/high SEG)

We recommend that CCWater works with the water industry to pilot the effects of an 'information and shock tactics' leaflet campaign in specific hot-spots, such as estates where blocked drains are very frequent. If successful then the water industry may be prepared to support, and indeed finance, wider information campaigns.

The water industry should be encouraged to take action to ensure that manufacturers do not continue to mislead the public with their labelling. Specific wording concerning sewer blockage (in association with an industry-approved toilet symbol) – such as 'can be flushed with NO risk of drain blocking', would be sufficient in their view. Manufacturers who persisted in labelling unsuitable items as flushable could possibly be taken to task under the Sale of Goods Act for misleading descriptions.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 The Consumer Council for Water (CCWater) represents the interests of consumers in the water industry in England and Wales. The body came into being on the 1st of October 2005 and operates through four committees in England and a committee for Wales.
- 1.1.2 CCWater's remit is to provide water consumers with a voice at both regional and national levels, and to inform and educate consumers. Research carried out in 2006 by ENCAMS¹ found that:
- there is a general lack of understanding about the sewer system and how items that are disposed of down the toilet are dealt with; and
 - the toilet appears to be viewed simply as a bin for the disposal of bathroom items.
- 1.1.3 CCWater's concern is that the low level of consumer awareness on issues relating to sewerage and what is appropriate to flush away is a cause of sewer blockages and consequential flooding.
- 1.1.4 The past 50 years has seen a number of changes in personal and household products and associated changes in disposal habits. The way in which households dispose of household waste has altered with fewer open fires or stoves available to dispose permanently of sanitary and other waste items. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number and variety of disposable items; sanitary protection, nappies, cotton buds, face wipes, household cleaning wipes and razors. Increasingly, people are 'disposing' of these items by flushing them – but many of them, such as synthetic wipes, are non-degradable in drains even though they are the same size as toilet tissue.
- 1.1.5 Public awareness of appropriate disposal methods for these items was raised in the 1980's and 1990's through a series of campaigns aimed at reducing the quantity of items such as sanitary products that were ending up on beaches or in rivers. More recently, the significant investment from rises in customers' bills has led to improvements in waste water treatments, screening and solid retention, leading to a reduction in such items being found on beaches and in rivers. This has significantly reduced the profile of sewerage litter.
- 1.1.6 Although there has been a decrease in the number of items appearing on beaches and rivers, there is still a large gap in consumer knowledge in terms of what happens to products once they are flushed away. Technical research is currently underway into whether flushed products will cause blockages in sewers and drains, if their presence will make clearing blockages more difficult, whether they are bio-degradable, and the wider impacts of a continuing rise in the use of some newer hygiene products such as wipes, especially in combination with the use of low water toilets and other domestic appliances.
- 1.1.6 Current research being undertaken by WRc plc will develop a draft test protocol that will enable a product to be assessed for its suitability for disposal via the sewerage system. This will mean that clear guidance can be given about what can, and cannot, be flushed and other routes for appropriate disposal can be identified.

1.2 Research Objectives

- 1.2.1 In order to complement the work currently being carried out by WRc plc, CCWater needed greater insight into current consumer behaviour and attitudes relating to flushable products. The central aim of this research project was to provide a greater understanding of:

- the types of items consumers dispose of by flushing and consumers' understanding of what is appropriate to flush away;
- whether changes in refuse collection will adversely impact on the level of inappropriate flushing;
- how the views and behaviour of people might be affected by information on what is appropriate for flushing away; and
- whether a better appreciation of the risks and/or consequences of sewer blockage, and clearer and more reliable manufacturer labelling will reduce the level of inappropriate flushing.

- 1.2.2 It should be noted that, in this report, we use the term 'flushing' to cover disposal of items via the toilet **and** via the sink or straight down the drain.

1.3 Report structure

- 1.3.1 In the following chapter, we outline the methodology that was adopted to meet these objectives. Chapters three to seven detail the research findings and chapter eight provides our conclusions and recommendations.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

2.1.1 Our approach was to develop a qualitative research programme to test consumers' perceptions concerning:

- the suitability, or otherwise, of items for flushing;
- the underlying rationale for why some items were deemed flushable, whilst others were not;
- ways in which consumers could be better educated about the impact of flushing inappropriate items; and
- other actions that should be taken to reduce the level of inappropriate flushing.

2.1.2 Through focus groups we were able to gain insight into people's attitudes, and the sorts of *things* that would trigger a change in behaviour.

2.1.3 In total, we carried out six focus groups, two in Birmingham, two in Swindon, one in London and one in Manchester.

2.2 Sample structure

2.2.1 The sample design for this survey was structured to ensure participation from a wide range of different customer segments that may hold different views, including private-owning household residents and tenants; and high and low socio-economic groups (SEGs). Many items found to be the cause of sewer blockages relate to looking after babies and keeping the home clean – therefore, two of the groups consisted of participants who had young families at home.

2.2.2 Table 2.1 shows the composition of each group and the location where it took place. At each group there was a mixture of gender and age.

Table 2.1 Sampling frame

Region	Group Composition
Thames (London) - pilot	People looking after the house and/or babies
Thames (Swindon)	Low SEG householders
Thames (Swindon)	Tenants
Severn Trent (Birmingham)	Private-owning, high SEG householders
Severn Trent (Birmingham)	Tenant, low SEG householders
United Utilities (Manchester)	People looking after the house and/or babies

2.3 Group recruitment

- 2.3.1 Each group was recruited by a trained recruiter local to the area where the group took place. A variety of methods were used to populate the group including door-to-door calling, on-street recruitment and telephone recruitment. For each group we recruited ten participants in order to get the target eight participants at the group.

2.4 Topic guide

- 2.4.1 The topic guide was drafted following discussion at the inception meeting. The guide included the following:

- Flushable products / disposal of items – We explored whether consumers had any experience of using and disposing of the items listed in Table 2.2. The order that items were discussed in each group was varied, and visual props were presented for the majority of items. For each item, perceptions regarding the most appropriate disposal route were explored, along with which items participants felt were acceptable to be flushed via the toilet.
- Refuse collection – Current methods of disposal for other items were looked at, as well as the potential impact of reduced frequency of refuse collection or refuse charges on disposal habits.
- Hygiene considerations – We explored whether hygiene considerations influenced how they disposed of items, and what participants understand by the term 'hygiene considerations'.
- Labelling – We explored whether consumers read the labels on products before deciding on an appropriate disposal route, and whether they read labels on other products in general. Participants' understanding of the terms 'disposable', 'bio-degradable' and 'flushable', were also explored.
- Sewer impacts / flooding awareness – This section explored whether consumers consider the risk of causing problems with drains and sewers when/if they flush items down the toilet. Awareness of responsibilities for drains was examined.
- Changing people's behaviour – Having discussed the impact of inappropriate flushing, we asked participants about ways in which people's behaviour could be changed.

Table 2.2 Items covered on topic guide

Paper handkerchiefs/tissues	Cotton buds	Dental floss
Disposable nappies/nappy liners	Cotton pads/wool	Bandages
Baby wipes/baby potty training wipes	Condoms	Tights
Face wipes/cosmetic removing wipes	Disposable razors/blades	Cigarette stubs
Hand wipes	Cat litter	Kitchen towel/roll
Antiseptic bathroom surface wipes	Toilet duck wipes	Sanitary towel/tampon
Contact lenses	Plasters	
Cooking fats, oils, grease	Paint thinner/white spirit	Motor/car oil
Medicines		

2.5 Pilot

- 2.5.1 The pilot focus group represented a crucial stage in the survey process and design. We undertook one pilot group with nine participants in London on the 8th January. The pilot group was also viewed by a member of the CCWater project team.
- 2.5.2 As a result of the pilot, slight alterations were made to the topic guide for the remaining focus groups. A final version can be found in Appendix A.

2.6 Main fieldwork

- 2.6.1 The remaining focus groups took place between the 22nd to 24th January. In total, 50 participants attended the 6 focus groups (with a minimum of eight attending each group). Participants were a mix of gender, age and socio-economic group unless the sample structure determined otherwise.
- 2.6.2 Each group was moderated by a member of the project team; all moderators had experience of facilitating group discussions within a range of communities and settings.

2.7 Analysis and reporting

- 2.7.1 In the following five chapters, we present the main findings. Where appropriate we have made comparisons between the different group types and also the regions.

3 Disposal of Products

Summary of chapter

The majority of participants **had** disposed of tissues, kitchen roll, wipes and tampons, nappy liners and cigarette stubs (of those who smoked) via the toilet. Items flushed by **some** participants included condoms, plasters, cotton buds and dental floss, and a small number had flushed cotton wool and pads, and contact lenses.

The main reason participants flushed these items was because they consider them to be 'flushable'. That is, participants did not consider that the items they were flushing risked causing a blockage. In the case of wipes, kitchen roll and tissues the basis of this conclusion is due to their **texture** and **size** being perceived to be similar to toilet paper. A number of participants also flushed items simply because they were in the bathroom and it was more **convenient** to do this than use a bin in another room of the house.

Some items were flushed rather than disposed of in the bin for reasons of **hygiene**, especially tampons and bathroom wipes and, to a lesser extent, messy tissues and cotton buds. **Discreteness** also influenced disposal of sanitary items in the toilet and, for some participants, condoms.

Around half the participants had disposed of cooking fats, oils and grease down the sink believing that doing so with hot water would prevent blockages. The majority of participants had used white spirit and washed paint brushes under the tap, and some had poured medicines down the sink. None had poured motor/car oil into the drains.

None of the participants had flushed away nappies, disposable razors, bandages, tights or cat litter, and very few had disposed of sanitary towels in the toilet. This may partly be because participants did consider that these items would be likely to block their drain but may also be because it simply hadn't occurred to participants to try and flush these items i.e. rather than them thinking about it and then reasoning that they wouldn't flush them because there was a risk of a blockage.

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 This chapter focuses on the first section of the topic guide. The analysis in this chapter includes:

- identification of items that participants have/have not flushed away (including down sinks and drains);
- reasons for (or for not) flushing items;
- products that participants have used when faced with no toilet paper; and
- hygiene considerations.

3.2 Disposal of products

- 3.2.1 Participants were presented with visual props of items that sometimes get flushed away down the toilet (other than the "usual" bodily functions which sewers are designed to carry). For each object, participants were asked if they had ever disposed of it by flushing.

3 Disposal of Products

- 3.2.2 Participants discussed each item in turn, identifying those that they had, and had not, previously flushed away, and the reasons why. Items were presented in a random order within each group.
- 3.2.3 Table 3.1 below summarises the items participants are most and least likely to flush away via the toilet, or down a sink / drain.

Table 3.1 Disposal of items in the toilet, sinks and drains (Amongst Focus Group Participants)

Very likely	Fairly likely	Fairly unlikely	Very unlikely / Never
Tissues	Dental floss	Contact lenses	Nappies
Kitchen roll	Cotton buds	Sanitary towels	Disposable razors
Wipes	Condoms	Cotton wool, pads	Cat litter
Tampons	Plasters		Tights
Cigarette stubs (in public toilets)	Cooking fats, oils and grease		Bandages
Nappy liners	Medicines		Motor / car oil
Paint thinner / white spirit			

Paper handkerchiefs and tissues

- 3.2.4 Almost all of the participants had experience of flushing away paper tissues although they do not always flush them away.

"I have flushed them, occasionally." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Not as a general rule, but sometimes I have flushed them." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.5 The majority of participants had disposed of tissues via the toilet for reasons of convenience as they were in the bathroom when they used them.

"It's just convenience, if you are in the bathroom and have used a tissue, then it's easier to just put it in the toilet, rather than the bin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I've flushed them down the toilet and put them in the bin, it would depend on where I was. If I was in the bathroom then I would put them in the toilet but if I was in the kitchen I'd put them in the bin." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I don't throw tissue down deliberately, I've just done it because I'm in the location at the time." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.6 Several participants disposed of tissue in the toilet as they felt it was more hygienic to flush away tissue than to put it in the bin.

"I do it because I feel like I'm getting rid of the germs, by flushing them down." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"If we've got colds in our house and we are blowing our nose then that tissue always goes down the loo because we don't want to spread the germs." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.7 None of the participants considered that tissues would cause blockages. They felt that tissues were a similar texture and size as toilet roll and therefore was appropriate for flushing. Participants felt confident tissues would dissolve in water.

"It's the same material as toilet roll, so it will break up in the toilet." (Tenants)

"It's just like toilet paper to be honest, I can't see the problem." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It's degradable." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.8 Other than in the pilot group, none of the participants felt that the different textures and types of paper tissue would affect whether or not they could be flushed. Most people thought that all types of paper tissue would be appropriate. However, a couple of participants in the pilot group felt that as Kleenex tissues were stronger and more absorbent, then they should not be flushed away.

"Well Kleenex – they advertise it on the telly don't they? Absorbing water, so it's not going to degrade. I wouldn't throw it down the loo anyway." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.9 Several participants noted that they had often flushed paper tissues in public toilets when used as a substitute for toilet roll.

"I carry a pack of tissues around in case you get into a cubicle and there is no toilet paper and you have no choice." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I would in a public toilet [flush tissues], as I always carry them around in case there is no toilet roll." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Kitchen roll

- 3.2.10 More than half the participants had disposed of kitchen roll via the toilet, mostly for reasons of convenience. This applied across the spectrum, from low SEG, tenants to high SEG private-dwellers. The messier it has become, the more likely the kitchen roll will be flushed away especially if being used in the bathroom.

"I clean my bathroom with kitchen roll so I throw it in the toilet afterwards." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's just convenience. If I'm cleaning upstairs and I'm cleaning the windows with toilet roll then I'll just put it down the toilet. Just 'cause it's easy." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I only put it down when one of my children was sick. I didn't want to put it in the bin with sick on it". (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.11 Some participants commented that as kitchen roll was thicker than toilet roll, it sometimes needed more pressure (harder push, more effort) or flushes to clear out of the toilet. Most felt that as it was a similar size and consistency to toilet paper it would not cause a blockage.

"Kitchen roll flushes ok if you put plenty of pressure on it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I've put that down, cause it's just like tissue, just a little bit thicker. But I know it does take longer to flush." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I've not thought it's a problem, it's just tissue isn't it." (Low SEG)

- 3.2.12 Some participants felt that kitchen roll would **not** break down as easily as toilet paper in the sewers.

"I've used kitchen roll to clean things and then flushed it away, but I'm a bit more conscious these days. I think we should be more aware that certain paper products are very absorbent and may cause problems. It's not like tissue paper that breaks up with water." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Cotton pads and cotton wool

- 3.2.13 Of those who use cotton pads and cotton wool, only three participants had previously flushed them down the toilet. One felt that the size meant they were suitable to flush, one did for hygiene reasons, whereas the other highlighted that they did so when under the influence of alcohol.

"I have, because they are small. It's easily disposable." (Low SEG)

"Cotton wool I have. Not very often but I have, if it was messy." (Tenants)

"If I've gone out and had a few drinks, and I've come back and taken my make-up off, I've thrown them in the toilet without thinking. But normally I would put them in the bin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.14 The main reason participants had **not** flushed cotton pads or wool was that they felt it would not disintegrate, although one participant stated it was because they did not use it in the bathroom.

"Cotton wool tends to expand and get heavier so I wouldn't think it should go down the toilet. It might just sink down." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think they would block the toilet." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Cotton buds

- 3.2.15 In the Birmingham private owning/high SEG and tenant/low SEG groups, most participants had flushed cotton buds down the toilet on a regular basis, often for convenience due to location of use (i.e. the bathroom), or for reasons of hygiene and discretion.

"I tend to do everything like make-up off, or nail varnish, in the bathroom, so everything I use like that goes down the loo." (Tenant/low SEG)

"If your bin isn't covered, it's quite visual, it's not like the loo where you put it in and don't see it again." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.16 For some participants, there is an indication that they are unsure of their suitability for flushing. They then apply the 'trial and error' technique before concluding that if the item ultimately disappears then it is 'flushable'. Some indeed seem to go to great lengths to dispose of them via the toilet.

"I have. They do flush." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"If they don't go I wrap them in tissue." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I break the stem up, wrap them and then flush them. In retrospect though, I guess being a stick type of thing it would have things attached to it. But generally they do flush first time with some tissue round them." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.17 Some participants commented that cotton buds float in the toilet, but despite this some still flushed them anyway (sometimes with considerable effort), whereas others chose not to put them in the toilet for this same reason.

"They do float in the toilet so you have to flush them a few times." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I have put them down the toilet and noticed that they do float, so I am generally careful with those and don't tend to put them down the loo." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I don't but my other two [partner and child] do. It really irritates me because they don't flush down, they float." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.18 Other participants explained that they did **not** flush cotton buds away because they had caused a blockage or were concerned that they might do so. Others simply had not considered disposing of them anywhere other than a bin.

"I'd think that they would get stuck round the u-bend and cause a blockage. If you put two or three down, then next time you put a wet wipe down it would block." (Tenant/low SEG)

"...my seven year old ... was sitting in the bath, and I thought he was ever so quiet, and he'd taken the big box of them off my dresser, and put them through the hole in the bath. And the bath, toilet and sink all blocked up. It blocked all the way through the house."

Nappies and nappy liners

- 3.2.19 None of the participants had ever disposed of nappies in the toilet as they all believed they were too big to flush without causing a blockage. Indeed, some participants were incredulous that anyone would do so. This demonstrates that if people associate a 'big' risk of sewer blockage then they will NOT attempt to flush away, regardless of the additional inconvenience or unsightliness, etc.

"I think everybody would know not to do that, surely?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"They are much bigger and heavier than wipes, they wouldn't flush." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I can't believe that anyone would flush a nappy." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.20 However a few participants stated that they were aware of people who had tried to flush nappies down, often with severe consequences.

"I'm conscious that people do though. I had a blockage about five years ago at my house, and I found that my neighbour was flushing nappies down." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I've heard of people putting nappies down, I think that's atrocious." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.21 Despite not flushing nappies, some participants had previously flushed nappy liners, believing that they were designed to be disposed of in the toilet.

"I thought that you could flush those down? I thought that's what they were designed to do?" (Tenants)

"I used to use Terry's and I would flush it, 'cause I presume that's what they were for." (Tenants)

- 3.2.22 As well as for convenience, participants felt that it was more appropriate to flush nappy liners rather than bin them due to the smell.

"I won't go into detail, but you have to throw them. You don't have an option. When your child has used the nappy, the Terry nappy has got to be washed, so you have to get rid of the contents, and you wouldn't really want to empty that in to the bin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"My sister-in-law used Terry nappies on her children and she used to hold the nappy in the toilet and flush it, so if there was anything dirty it would go." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Baby wipes

- 3.2.23 Almost all of the participants who used baby wipes stated that they disposed of them in the toilet - in particular in the Birmingham private owning/high SEG and tenant/low SEG and Swindon tenant/high SEG groups. Most cited convenience due to location as the reason, whilst some also mentioned hygiene and mess, and by association – since they used the item to wipe their baby’s bottom, i.e. as a substitute for toilet paper.

"I wouldn't usually, but we're potty training at the moment and she's learning to wipe herself rather than me do it for her so, if they are dirty, I do put them down the toilet and I do give the toilet two flushes, but I wouldn't normally do that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"My little girl is two and I'll often wipe her bottom with a wipe rather than tissue and then put it straight in the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Being responsible for the maintenance of my house, and drains especially, if I thought there was anything that could block the drain, I wouldn't flush it. But anything paper product I would flush, as I've got grandchildren so use baby wipes and often flush them down the downstairs toilet." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"When I use these [wet wipes] they always go down the toilet, 'cause they are generally with the kids, and ... usually ... someone's thrown up, ... so its gone and its flushed and away. If you have cleaned them up, I don't want them to get back at it in the waste paper basket." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.24 Some participants noted baby wipes have a thicker consistency than toilet roll and sometimes required more than one flush for them to clear the toilet (so, again, indicating a degree of determination).

"Just to make sure that they go, as they are thicker than toilet rolls and tissues, so I'd give it two flushes to make sure it's gone." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"If they don't flush the first time they do the fourth time." (Tenants)

"Them potty training wipes you can flush, but you can only do five per flush. That's normally enough anyway!" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.25 Only a small number of participants do **not** flush baby wipes, one due to a previous blockage, and one because they were aware they would not break down in the sewer system.

"I had a really bad blockage and when it came out, it was the children's wipes. Even though they do say that they are flushable." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I don't flush them, I'm sure they say on the package that you are not meant to. They don't break up so I just don't flush them, I just put them in the bin. It's not that I think they would cause a blockage, I just don't tend to put things in that I think they might have to scoop out at the other end." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Facial wipes

- 3.2.26 Most of the women in the Birmingham private owning/high SEG and tenant/low SEG groups flushed away facial wipes, as did one woman in Manchester. All stated that this was due to the convenience of being in the bathroom when they used them. That is, they put them in the bin if they used them in their bedrooms where the bin is nearer than the toilet. Most felt that the consistency was similar to toilet roll and so there would be no problems disposing of them in the toilet.

"I've never flushed baby wipes, but I do with facial wipes. I'm not sure why as they are similar. Probably because I'm in the bathroom using the facial wipes." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"They are so thin I presume they would go down fine." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"If I'm taking my make-up off in the bedroom, then I'll go and put them in the bin in the bedroom, but if I'm in the bathroom, I just drop them in the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.27 Participants who do **not** flush facial wipes were reluctant because they believed they would not dissolve. Some had learnt this only through experience.

"I used to flush them before my toilet was blocked." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Bathroom wipes/Toilet Duck

- 3.2.28 A large number of participants had flushed bathroom wipes down the toilet.

"The toilet ones I put down the toilet." (Tenants)

"I put face wipes in the bin, but if I was using anti-bacterial wipes to clean the bathroom and the toilet I would put those in the toilet and flush it away." (Low SEG)

- 3.2.29 Participants mostly felt that household wipes, such as Toilet Duck, should be disposed of in the toilet for hygiene reasons, as many used them to clean the toilet itself.

"It's more hygienic to put it down the toilet than in the bin, if you've been cleaning the toilet with it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I like [the fact] that they are more hygienic, because you can just flush them." (Tenants)

- 3.2.30 Several participants commented that the advert for the Toilet Duck showed someone flushing them down the toilet and they therefore presumed this was how they were to be disposed of.

"I use them and flush them down the toilet all the time. They do it on the advert." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"A lot of them say flushable on there [packaging] - the toilet cleaning ones." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Cause that's what I think they are for, to wipe your bathroom and throw it down the toilet. That's the perception that I get off the advert, that you are ok to do that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.31 Others felt that the consistency and size of bathroom wipes probably made them suitable to flush.

"It's not again dissimilar to toilet roll. Its paper isn't it? It's just that it's wet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's the size of it too, it seems very small." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.32 A small number of participants that used bathroom wipes chose **not** to put them in the toilet. A few were concerned that they might cause a blockage, whereas another highlighted that they simply found it easier to put them in the bin.

"I use Kandoos but wouldn't put them down as I would think they would get stuck." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I just take all my waste straight out [to the outside bin] when I have cleaned my bathroom. It all just goes into like a nappy sack, like the kitchen towel I use to dry off, and goes straight out into the bin outside. I think I probably do that because it's thicker and may not go down." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Sanitary towels and tampons

- 3.2.33 Only one participant would currently dispose of sanitary towels in the toilet, although others had in the past.

"I used to rip them [sanitary towels] and flush them, but now I put them in the bin. I think I'm just more conscious of putting things down the toilet really." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think that my mum always taught me not to put those down the toilet so it's just stuck with me." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.34 The reason that participants would, or had, flushed sanitary towels was due to hygiene and discretion.

"Flushing them is more hygienic." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I've got a young child and I wouldn't want him finding something like that in the bin." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"If I was at somebody's house and they didn't have a bin, I would probably tear it in half and put it in the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.35 Most participants stated they would **not** flush sanitary towels due to the size, and some due to the material.

"I use them but I never put them down the toilet, they are too thick." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's not just the size, it's going to soak all the water in too, cause that's its job, so I would imagine that it would cause a blockage." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I wouldn't flush towels, cause of the plastic backing and they are water proof." (Low SEG)

- 3.2.36 The majority of female participants do flush tampons down the toilet.

"Tampons I would flush yes, but not sanitary towels." (Low SEG)

"I put them down the toilet, which is quite strange because I don't put other things down the toilet. It's just habit." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.37 The main reason participants chose to dispose of tampons in the toilet is hygiene.

"It's too messy to put them in the bin." (Tenant/low SEG)

"With sanitary towels you always have a plastic wrapper to wrap them in and throw in the bin, so you have the means to wrap them up, but you haven't with tampons. I think it's more hygienic to just flush tampons." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"If you put them in a bin, after two days you will not be able to empty that bin without being sick." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.38 Most felt that the size of tampons meant that they would not cause a blockage. Several commented that the packages actually stated that they were 'flushable'.

"I do because they are much smaller than sanitary towels. It's not going to have a problem getting through the toilet is it?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"They say that they are flushable on the packaging anyway." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.39 Although participants mostly flushed tampons, they disposed of the applicators in the bin. Some had tried to flush them in the past and found that they did not flush.

"If I was somewhere where there isn't a bin, or if I was at a friends, then I would wrap the applicator in tissue and then it flushes. I've done that before." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Tampons down the loo, but not the applicator. 'Cause they float to the top." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.40 All, bar one female, stated that when the facilities are available in public toilets, they would use sanitary bins to dispose of sanitary towels and tampons, whereas the other did not as they did not want to touch the sanitary bins.

"I still put them down the toilet, I would never touch one of those bins." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I use the bins in public, because we don't have to empty those bins." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.41 A small number of female participants did **not** flush tampons or sanitary towels down the toilet. One had changed their behaviour following a blockage, whereas others had stopped when informed of the consequences to the sewer system.

"I used to flush them, but I had a blockage in the toilet about 12 months ago so now I don't flush anything apart from toilet roll. Everything else goes in perfumed nappy sacks." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Until I saw a programme on sewer blockages I always used to throw Tampax down the toilet 'cause that's how I thought you do it." (Tenants)

"In most public toilets you have that thing next to you telling you not to flush them, so you know those types of things should go in the bin and not down the toilet." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Condoms

- 3.2.42 Several, but not many, participants had disposed of condoms in the toilet, and found that by wrapping them in toilet paper they would flush. They had chosen the toilet over a bin for reasons of hygiene and discretion/embarrassment.

"I've wrapped loads of toilet roll round them to make sure they go." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I wouldn't put them in the toilet now I'm a bit more wise, but I did in the past, so my dad didn't find them. The wrapper used to go in and everything." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"To be honest, I wouldn't fancy going to empty a bin with condoms in." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.2.43 Other participants did **not** feel that condoms would flush easily, and a couple were concerned about them entering waterways.

"They would float I would think." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"But where do they end up though?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Plasters

- 3.2.44 Some participants disposed of plasters in the toilet, in particular in the Birmingham tenant/low SEG group. Most stated it was for reasons of convenience, although one said it was due to hygiene.

"I have occasionally, when I wasn't thinking. It's just convenient." (Low SEG)

"I put it in the loo even though I have a bin, it's just laziness." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I have flushed them, I wrap them in tissue first though, from a hygiene point of view." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.45 Most participants however stated that they dispose of plasters **in the bin**.

"I think it just depends how your mind works, 'cause I would never dream of putting a plaster in the loo. Surely it wouldn't flush? It wouldn't cross my mind to put it in the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I don't think they would flush. They would just float." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Dental floss

- 3.2.46 A small number of participants, or their family member, had disposed of dental floss in the toilet. They did not feel that it would cause an impact to the sewer system due to its size. Some relished advising others on how easy it flushes.

"Dental floss is annoying when people haven't put it in the bin properly, and then its on the side, or on the floor, so I'd rather it went down the toilet than stick out the bin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"My husband does, and it never flushes." (Tenants)

"I've flushed that, it goes down fine. There is hardly anything to it." (Low SEG)

"My other half puts that down, and that's another one that doesn't disappear once you have flushed." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.47 Other participants however disposed of dental floss **in their bins** instead. Some as they didn't want it entering the water system, whereas others found that it floated in the water and didn't flush.

"It floats, so I wouldn't do that again." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I use dental floss but make a point of not putting it down the loo, not because it will block anything up, but 'cause its going to end up in the ocean eventually." (Low SEG)

Cigarette stubs

- 3.2.48 A number of participants who smoked highlighted that they have disposed of cigarettes in the toilet but this was mostly when in public toilets, particularly nightclubs and bars in the past, rather than their home, for reasons of convenience. None were concerned about them causing a blockage (particularly when away from home), but some were aware that they did not always flush.

"I used to smoke and yes I have done that. Not particularly at home, more so if I was out. It was just convenient. If you are in a pub you would put it in an ash tray, but if you are in the loo it's just easier to put it in the toilet." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I never really thought they may cause blockages, as it wasn't my toilet, and I'd usually had a few drinks." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The times I remember I was in a public loo. If you've got a fag what are you going to do, stomp it out on the floor?" (Tenants)

"I used to do that, but they don't flush." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.49 Others, the non-smokers, found the image of floating cigarettes disconcerting.

"My dad used to do it at home, and they just float there. I hate it, it's horrible." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"There is nothing worse than when you see that in toilets." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Contact lenses

- 3.2.50 Most participants did not use disposable contact lenses. Two commented that their husbands wore them and did dispose of them in the toilet.

"My husband throws them in the loo." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"They do flush, 'cause they are more bio-degradable." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.2.51 Most participants however presumed that they would **not** flush because of their consistency, and felt they would float.

"I use them but I have never flushed them down the toilet, I think maybe they would float. I just put them in the bin." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I can't imagine that they would flush that easily, as they are like plastic." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Bandages

- 3.2.52 None of the participants had disposed of bandages in the toilet, and were alarmed and surprised that people had. There was mutual agreement that the size and material made them unsuitable for flushing.

"It would block I would have thought." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Bandages are too big." (Tenants)

Disposable razors

- 3.2.53 Participants were also surprised to discover that disposable razors had been disposed of in the toilet. Some felt that they would sink and not flush away, due to the weight and material, or not dissolve.

"I would think that they would be too heavy to flush, and that they would just sit at the bottom." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It's not like paper products where you think oh they will dissolve in the course of time, but plastic isn't going to do that." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.54 Safety concerns were also expressed concerning the disposal of razors in the toilet.

"Ooh no, 'cause somebody could cut themselves having to remove blockages." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think that's stupid, it's dangerous." (Tenants)

Tights

- 3.2.55 None of the participants had ever disposed of tights in the toilet, and all found it unbelievable that anyone would. Two participants in the Birmingham tenant/low SEG group had disposed of tights in a public sanitary bin, but never a toilet.

"I wouldn't put them down the toilet, 'cause they are like clothes, and you wouldn't put a t-shirt down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's got to block that hasn't it?" (Tenant/low SEG)

"I've taken my tights off when I've been in a nightclub and put them in the Tampax bin, but never down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

Cat litter

- 3.2.56 No participants had disposed of cat litter in the toilet, and most found the idea unimaginable. Participants highlighted how the gravel like consistency of cat litter would presumably sink and not flush in the toilet.

"It would block up your toilet, it's just like sand, it would sink." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It's just like gravel isn't it, it would sink to the bottom of the toilet. It would just lie in the bowl." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I wouldn't dream of it, it wouldn't flush. Why would you put a solid in your toilet." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.2.57 However, a small number of participants stated that they could imagine people putting cat litter in the toilet if the toilet was downstairs, and near the cat litter tray, and a couple had witnessed people doing so.

"Unless you had a downstairs toilet it wouldn't even be convenient." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"If you had a cat litter tray in the bathroom, it wouldn't be an unreasonable thing to put it in the toilet, but most people wouldn't have the tray there." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I've watched other people scoop it out and put it down the toilet." (Tenants)

3.3 Liquids

- 3.3.1 The disposal of liquid items in the toilet, sinks and drains was also explored amongst the groups.

Cooking fats, oils and grease

- 3.3.2 Around half of the participants across the groups disposed of cooking fats in the kitchen sink, or toilet, and the majority had in the Birmingham tenant/low SEG group. Most of these participants were vaguely aware that it could cause a blockage, or that it had, but still continued to do so anyway as they felt it was the most convenient way of disposing of fats and oils.

"I've put it down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Not down the kitchen sink but I have flushed it, cause it blocks the sink. As soon as it meets cold water it solidifies, but when you flush it, it never really occurs to me that it might block the drain." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I pour it down the sink." (Low SEG)

"I used to pour fat into empty jars, and throw it in the bin, but because I recycle glass now, I tend to pour the fat down the drain." (Low SEG)

"I know I shouldn't be doing it, but it's the easiest way to get rid of it." (Low SEG)

"I do if there is just a bit when I'm washing up." (Tenants)

- 3.3.3 Most of those participants who disposed of cooking fats and oils in their kitchen sink explained that they did so whilst running hot water as they felt this prevented blockages.

"I have done, but I do always run hot water." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"When I'm doing the washing up I always put hot water in the pan and keep the water running. There is never a lot of fat in it in any case." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I pour it down the sink with the hot tap running. I just think that's different to the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I scrape the grill fat out into the sink and run the hot tap, I should use a tissue but I guess I'm just lazy." (Tenant/low SEG)

"As soon as the roast potatoes are done it goes down the sink, with some hot water." (Tenants)

- 3.3.4 Participants who did **not** dispose of cooking fats and oils in the drains were aware that it could cause a blockage. This conclusion was drawn from direct experience or through the actions of others, or being educated through television programmes.

"I have done in the past, but it blocked the sink so I wouldn't do that again." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"The reason I don't put cooking fat down a drain now, is that I watched a programme where they went down to the sewers, and there was like three or four hundred kilos of fat that they had swept out the pipes to unclog it. These guys came out and they had great big buckets full of fat, and were explaining the problems that it causes, and since that day I won't put fat down the drain." (Low SEG)

"A lady who lives across the road from me has been caught putting grease fat down the drains and its caused problems where they have been blocked but she carried on doing it." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.3.5 However, some participants had previously experienced blocked drains due to pouring cooking fat down them but they still carried on regardless.

"Well, I have had a few sink blockages, but we still do it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I have too." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.3.6 Alternative disposal options for cooking fats included pouring it into containers and then into the refuse.

"I tend to scoop it out and put it in the bin." (Tenants)

"I used to have a fryer, as the daughters were into their chips, and I would put the old oil into milk bottles." (Tenants)

"Pour back in the bottle and in the dustbin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Paint thinner/white spirit

- 3.3.7 All participants who had used paint brushes had washed them out under a running tap and with white spirit. Most participants did not think this would cause a problem as white spirit was diluted, and none were aware of any alternative method for cleaning paint brushes.

"I wash brushes under the tap, and I have poured it down the outside drain too. I've put plenty of water with it though." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I do when I'm washing the paint brushes under the tap, but that's diluted, I wouldn't just pour it down. 'Cause you are running the water aren't you." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think there isn't an alternative in a lot of cases, like if you are doing your paint brushes, there is no other way to dispose of it." (Low SEG)

- 3.3.8 One participant highlighted how their local tip had recently stopped accepting tins of paint, and they were therefore concerned that people would use drains as an alternative disposal method.

"Our local tip has just stopped taking tins of paint, so I can see more people sending that down the drain." (Low SEG)

Motor/car oil

- 3.3.9 None of the participants would pour motor oil into drains, the majority highlighted that they would take it to the local tip to dispose of it.

"I take motor oil down the Council tip." (Low SEG)

"Cooking fat and motor oil I would take to the tip." (Tenants)

"Don't you have to take that kind of stuff to the tip?" (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think I would have put it down the drain 15 years ago, but not now." (Tenants)

- 3.3.10 One participant stated that they would let their garage dispose of motor oil, however, another highlighted that they were aware that their garage was pouring oil into public drains.

"No I'd let the garage get rid of it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I took my car recently to the garage and had the engine cleaned, and all the oil was draining down into an ordinary drain, not their drain, and I asked him where it was going, and he said 'oh plenty of detergent down with it and into the ordinary drains'." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.3.11 One participant had witnessed someone pouring oil into public drains.

"I've seen people doing that in the street." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Medicines

- 3.3.12 Approximately half the participants, and the majority in the Birmingham tenant/low SEG group, had disposed of medicines by pouring them down the sink or toilet. Some highlighted that they did this to ensure that children did not access the medicines; others had done it to avoid it leaking in the bin, and some to allow them to recycle the glass bottles.

"I pour them away to keep them away from the kids." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"We have regular medication in our house and we always rinse the bottles out, for safety reasons." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I pour it down the sink. In case it leaked in the bin." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I put tablets and medicines down the toilet. They don't flush very easily but they do go, but they will break up on the second or third flush." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Well yeah I might even do that [pour remainder of contents away in order to recycle the bottle] now I'm a bit more conscientious. I might pour it away down the sink." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.3.13 Participants who did **not** dispose of medicines in the sink either put them in the bin or took them back to the chemist. Those who took them back to the chemist did so mainly to avoid them impacting on the environment and animals, or people.

"Not antibiotics I wouldn't, 'cause I wonder what it would do to the environment." (Tenants)

"I put it straight in the bin with the top on. I've never thought about doing anything else with it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I take it back to the pharmacy. I just think about the poor animals if they ever got hold of it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I take them back to the chemist, I don't like the thought of putting them in the bin, in case anyone gets in, or even an animal." (Private-owning/high SEG)

3.4 Other items disposed of in the toilet

- 3.4.1 Participants were asked if there were any items, other than those already mentioned, that they had disposed of in the toilet, sink or drains that, in retrospect, they feel may have been inappropriate. Frequently mentioned items included food and hair. Food was often put in the toilet if it was too large to fit down the sink, or if it had 'gone off'.

"I do put some food down the toilet, like milk that has gone off, so I put that down the loo, rather than the sink, 'cause you can flush it away." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Food and all sorts go down my sink." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Food that's gone off. 'Cause if I put that in the bin there is a chance it could leak through, and the bins are only picked up once a week so it would smell." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I have put dog food down there but it's dry food. Sometimes I do it if there's a little bit in the bowl, it'll squash up to nothing." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Soups with lumps, as it won't fit in the sink." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I've thrown my fishwater, and the stones go down as well." (Tenants)

"I've got a plant on top of my toilet, and it's one of those long green ones, and sometimes the end of the leaves go brown, so I get the scissors and they go straight down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I use periodically industrial strength cleaners to get rid of the limescale but they're designed specifically for cleaning so I assume it [flushing] not an issue. But it is some form of acid, I guess!" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I was clearing the cement mixer, and all the water. I didn't know my husband would let it settle, and then pour the water out. So I thought I was doing him a favour, and just poured it all down the grid outside, and it actually blocked the drains up. They had to actually come out and do something to the drains." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

3.5 Overall reasons for flushing items

- 3.5.1 Participants summarised the main reason why they flushed some items and not others. The main factor that participants based their decision on appeared to be the **size** and **consistency** of the product. In particular, those items that appeared 'similar' to toilet paper, such as tissues and wipes, were considered appropriate to flush.

"It's consistency, and also the convenience." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Size." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Depends on if it looks like toilet paper." (Tenants)

"I wouldn't put anything plastic down." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.5.2 Participants also highlighted that they would flush items that they felt would '**break down**' in the sewer system.

"For me, its whether I think its going to break down, so paper based things are fine." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"If they are soluble." (Low SEG)

"I'll put anything down that will eventually disintegrate." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 3.5.3 **Convenience** was also a large factor in determining how participants disposed of items. Participants explained how they were more likely to dispose of an item in the toilet if they were in the bathroom when they used it.

"It depends on where you are using things at the time. If you are in the bathroom and you blow your nose on kitchen roll, you will throw it in the toilet, but if you are in the bedroom, you'd just put it in the bin." (Low SEG)

"It's where you are, if I'm in my bedroom using facial wipes I will put them in the bin, whereas if I'm in the bathroom I'll flush them in the toilet." (Low SEG)

- 3.5.4 Most participants do have bins in their bathroom, but several found it easier to throw things in the toilet because the bins had a 'lid' on them. This was particularly the case of those in the Birmingham tenant/low SEG group.

"Mines got a lid so it's easier to just throw things down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think a lot of it just comes down to laziness, 'cause I've got a lid on my bin so I tend to use the toilet instead. Whereas if it was an open bin I'd probably use that. But you need a lid on bathroom bins." (Tenant/low SEG)

"My daughter would never use the peddle bin in the bathroom so I've now had to put an open bin in so she'll use it." (Tenants)

- 3.5.5 Success rate of previously flushing items appeared to have a big impact on the majority of participants. Once they were aware that **an item would or wouldn't flush easily**, it often impacted on whether they tried again. Most participants did not appear to consider the impact of flushing an item if it had successfully flushed away previously. However, those who had had blocked toilets were generally more wary of flushing items.

"Success rate of flushing in the past." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think if you'd ever had a toilet blocked you would think twice, but I've never had a toilet blocked so I don't think about it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I wouldn't throw anything in the toilet other than tissue as it would block it." (Tenants)

"I don't think people think about it unless it's caused them a problem." (Tenants)

- 3.5.6 For most participants, the sheer unpleasantness of a blocked drain, in terms of smell and hassle, would make them reluctant to try to flush anything they were unsure of. Furthermore, some participants explained that the potential **cost** of fixing blocked toilets or drains was enough to deter them from flushing items other than toilet roll.

"A four hundred pound plumbing bill made me think about it." (Tenants)

"Cause I don't want to incur the charges if they come out and tell me it's my fault the pipes are blocked." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think its psychological, anything that's thicker, and got more bulk, you think that you are going to have a problem having it blocked up, and then it's two things, it's the cost of getting it cleared, but also what do you do whilst it's blocked?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"The other thing perhaps at the back of people's minds, is that blocked drains are quite expensive to unblock aren't they. I mean if it were a free service you'd probably think well [shrug] why not?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 3.5.7 **Location** sometimes influenced what participants did and didn't flush away. Some would be more inclined to flush products when there was no risk to their own pipes, whereas others were more careful for this reason.

"I think I'd be more inclined to flush things, as I don't have to pay the plumber there. I wouldn't at friends, but maybe elsewhere." (Low SEG)

"If I went to my friend's house and had a sanitary towel, I'd ask for a bag so I can put it in the bin. I wouldn't flush it." (Tenants)

- 3.5.8 Some participants highlighted how they had greater awareness of which items could not be flushed away after staying in **hotels**, and several commented on toilet systems in **other countries**, or locations, and how some do not even allow tissue to be flushed.

"I think it is a bit of a wake up call when you stay in a hotel, and they have a list of things that can't be flushed. It lists things that you may not have thought about." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It's like when you go abroad as well, and you can't even flush toilet paper. So that becomes habit when you are on holiday." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think in rural locations you have more restrictions where you have septic tanks." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.5.9 The majority of participants did dispose of toilet paper in the bin when in countries where it was a requirement, but a few would still flush toilet paper away as they felt it was not hygienic or visually acceptable to throw used paper in a bin.

- 3.5.10 Some participants had **Saniflo** or smaller toilets which had made them more conscious of what they flushed.

"I've just become more aware, since having the Saniflo, of what you can and can't put down the toilet." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"A lot of the newer toilets are quite small, not like the older ones, so I think you could flush even less down them." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"We've got an upstairs toilet which is a normal toilet, but downstairs one is a Saniflo, I've never put stuff down, but my mum put a baby wipe down, and our kids have put wipes down, and they don't go through it, they get caught in the blades 'cause they are that thick they don't break up. So that's why I generally wouldn't put things down the toilet, because I've seen what they do to a Saniflo." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think the type of toilet. We have two, a conventional one and then we have got one like that they have on planes, where the exit pipes are very small, so I tend to think more about what I flush in that one." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 3.5.11 A couple of participants highlighted that they chose not to flush items because of the **waste of water**.

"I wouldn't flush them because it seems a waste of water more than anything." (Private-owning/high SEG)

3.6 Hygiene considerations

- 3.6.1 Participants were asked to what extent hygiene considerations influence their choice of disposing of different items. They felt that they did for certain items, such as tampons, condoms, tissues, cotton buds and very messy items such as tissues used to wipe up sick. Participants felt disposing of these items in the toilet was more hygienic.

"It's cleaner to flush things down the toilet." (Tenants)

"This month all of my family have had colds, so I've made more of a conscious effort to put tissues and things down the toilet, 'cause every time you lift the bin up the germs are there." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Absolutely it plays a big part, I don't want to put sanitary products and things in the bin." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think that it's a big influencing factor, the fact that you may have women's sanitary hygiene products, I wouldn't want to see those in my bin. Especially if you have guests using your bathroom." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I wouldn't want to see cotton buds with ear wax hanging out the bin either." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Or plasters with blood on them." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Durex, or anything like that I'd put down the loo, it's more hygienic." (Low SEG)

3.6.2 Participants found it difficult to respond with words they associated with hygiene.

"Germ free." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Clean." (All)

"Cleanliness." (All)

3.6.3 The phrase 'hygiene considerations' was used by participants as a reason for flushing to cover a wide range of considerations, from controlling the spread of germs to hiding away unsightly or potentially embarrassing items.

4 Refuse collection

Summary of chapter

Items that are not flushed away are generally disposed of in the bin, with some items such as nappies, typically bagged first.

The majority of participants **would not** dispose of more items in the toilet if there was a reduced frequency of refuse collection, or if refuse charges were introduced.

There was a mixed reaction to the concept of 'flushable' products. Some participants would consider buying them if they cost the same, or only slightly more than non-flushable products. Others however stated that they would continue to bag and bin items, and were unsupportive of encouraging flushing – because it seemed so wasteful in terms of water and, there was a risk that, the concept of flushable products could mislead consumers into flushing items that are not appropriate.

4.1 Introduction

- 4.1.1 In this chapter, participants' likely response to changes in refuse collection, and their inclination to purchase 'flushable' items are explored.

4.2 Refuse collection

- 4.2.1 Those items which participants do **not** flush away are generally disposed of via the bin, or by taking them to the local tip. Items that were seen as 'messy', such as nappies and sanitary towels, were generally bagged before going in the bin.

"There are that many plastic bags knocking about these days that you can put things in bags and tie them up." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Nappies and sanitary towels I always bag." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Nappies come with nappy sacks, and you can get the same things with sanitary towels now." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 4.2.2 Participants were asked whether they would still dispose of items in the bin if there was a reduced frequency of refuse collection in their area (e.g. from weekly to fortnightly), or if they would be more inclined to flush them away. Overall, most participants would **not** be more willing to flush items away in such circumstances. Most would either accept a great pile-up of rubbish, or dispose of items themselves at the tip. Participants also felt that many of the discussed items that one might consider to be flushable are small and, hence, would not impact on the amount of refuse to be collected.

"Well I'm a big re-cycler so I don't have much rubbish anyway." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"You'd just have to go to the tip yourself more." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It's like over Christmas when they don't come for two weeks, you just end up with more rubbish. It doesn't make you think oh I'll flush that or do this or do that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think that people only flush things if it's like toilet roll, they wouldn't flush for any other reasons." (Tenants)

"I'd still put things in the bin." (Low SEG)

"I'm a child minder and I go through wipes and nappies like you wouldn't believe, and I would never consider flushing them, I would just bag them, bin them and take them to the tip." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"But for every person like you, there are another thousand that just doesn't care, who will just go on flushing and flushing." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I certainly wouldn't, and I'd make the effort to go to the recycling dump myself." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Most are not bulky items. Cat litter obviously could be pretty bulky ... if your cat's been left indoors all the time ... but the rest of them are very small, aren't they?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

4.2.3 However, three participants stated that they would flush more items, especially food.

"I think it would [encourage more things in the toilet]." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I'd put more things in the toilet, especially food items." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"We don't even have bins in our area in Four Oaks, we have to put bags out, and I wouldn't want anything that smells in there." (Private-owning/high SEG)

4.3 Refuse Charges

4.3.1 If charges were introduced for refuse collection, again the majority of participants stated that this would definitely not encourage them to flush more items away in the toilet, and most would take items to the tip themselves.

"I wouldn't be happy about it, but I wouldn't flush it." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I wouldn't flush things, I just think its one of those lines you don't cross. It's just a bit low-life really to think that." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I wouldn't flush more, I wouldn't dream of putting a nappy down the loo." (Tenant/low SEG)

"You can get rid of lots by composting." (Low SEG)

"I personally wouldn't change the way I do things about what should and shouldn't be flushed, just because I have to pay for my refuse collection." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 4.3.2 A small number of participants however felt that charging for refuse collection would encourage them to flush more items, again, particularly food.

"I would flush more food." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think people would do that, they would flush more." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Especially nappies and things, you get through loads." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think a lot of people would like to say they wouldn't flush more, but if push came to shove they would." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 4.3.3 Participants would not be happy to see a reduced frequency of collection or refuse charges, but most felt that these would encourage greater fly tipping than it would more flushing of items.

"I'd fly tip." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It would encourage fly tipping, and how much would it cost them then to go round picking it up." (Tenant/low SEG)

"People might just walk down the street and put rubbish outside your neighbour's door." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The only thing it would encourage is more dumping of litter." (Private-owning/high SEG)

4.4 'Flushable' Products

- 4.4.1 Participants were asked if they would purchase items that were manufactured to be flushed away with no adverse impact on the sewer, or on the consumer. Most felt that it would depend on the cost, and that they would only consider it if they were the same price, or only slightly higher, than other non-flushable items.

"I wouldn't if they cost more." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Depends on how much more, 10 pence a packet I wouldn't think twice, but a pound a packet and I wouldn't." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Yes I would. If it cost the same." (Tenants)

"Depends on how much it is, 'cause nine times out of ten its usually more expensive." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I would if it was the same price, and same type of product." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I would especially if they were going to change the level of refuse collection." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 4.4.2 Participants were only generally interested in having flushable versions of particular products, namely those that they associated with hygiene/smell considerations.

"I would buy more expensive nappies if you could flush them, 'cause even with the perfumed sacks they smell." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think female hygiene products and nappies I would like to flush." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Female hygiene - yes." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"If it was something I used a lot of then we probably would end up getting it." (Low SEG)

- 4.4.3 Some participants however felt that they would not wish to flush more items even if they were designed to, as they felt it was a waste of water, or that there was simply no need to dispose of items in the toilet. Others who already binned the majority of items stated that they would not change their disposal method.

"It would be the water issue for me, 'cause they are always telling you to use less water, so I wouldn't want to flush more things. I would rather bag it and bin it, even if it meant taking it myself to the tip, rather than using the water." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"The bottom line is there is only so much space in the toilet to flush things away. And you are not going to get a high quantity of things going through. It's just not practical to flush things down the toilet on a wide scale." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Personally I don't think you should flush things away." (Tenants)

"I wouldn't buy flushable items, I think it's a non-starter really." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think its habit that I automatically put it in the bin so I would just carry on putting things in the bin. I don't think I would change that." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I wouldn't go looking at labels for flushable things." (Low SEG)

- 4.4.4 The issue of how the water industry and manufacturers can inform the public about whether certain items can be flushed away without risk of causing a sewer blockage is discussed in the next chapter.

Summary of chapter

In general, people do not look at the packaging when purchasing items, nor when they consider discarding the used item.

If they **knew** for certain which items were appropriate for flushing then they would choose to purchase them over others provided that they did not have to pay a premium.

The toilet logo was considered to be the most effective way of communicating to the public whether an item was appropriate for flushing or not. For some, an accompanying short message would add to its effectiveness.

A small minority of people could misunderstand the terms 'bio-degradable' and 'disposable' as confirmation that the item could be flushed away with no adverse consequences, if the item was small and had a similar texture to toilet paper.

The term 'flushable' has far greater potential to mislead as most people will interpret this as confirmation that there will be no adverse effects if the item is flushed away. Indeed, many participants were angry to hear that an item could be labelled 'flushable' and could, nevertheless, cause a blockage in their sewer pipe.

Participants want manufacturers to stop this practice. Specific wording concerning blockage would be sufficient in their view

5.1 Introduction

- 5.1.1 In this chapter we explore whether consumers read the labels on products before deciding on an appropriate disposal route, and whether they read labels on other products in general. Participants meaning of the terms 'disposable', 'bio-degradable' and 'flushable', are also explored.

5.2 Labelling

- 5.2.1 Overall, the majority of participants did not look at the labelling of products (such as those that have been found to have blocked sewers) - neither when they purchased them nor afterwards. The only things participants tended to look at were the brand, and sometimes specific things such as if items were 'sensitive', 'waterproof' in the case of plasters, or 'size'.

"It's just what you buy regular so you don't really look. You stick with what you know most of the time." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"They are everyday things; I don't really give them a thought." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I look for sensitive, when it comes to things like baby wipes. But that's the only word I'd look for." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Only if there isn't a magazine in the bathroom and I want something to look at. [would I look at the labels of bathroom products]" (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The writing is too small to really notice anything on the pack." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The only way I'd take notice is if, in the supermarket, they had a separate section [for 'flushable' items]. And it was labelled."

- 5.2.2 Overall, most participants did not look at the packaging to establish how things should be disposed of. However a few participants said they checked to see how to dispose of baby wipes, and that the packaging said it was ok to dispose of them via the toilet.

"If you look at the toilet wipes for kids they generally say only five wipes at a time in the toilet. I read those when I got them as I'd never used them before. And that does make you think that they would block up if you put more down." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 5.2.3 Participants were asked if they looked at labels to establish how to dispose of any other items. Some items people checked included batteries, printer cartridges and toys.

"I've looked at printer cartridges because the school sent letters out saying you can recycle them." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I'm very conscious about toys at the moment, you can see the labels to see if they can be binned, and batteries." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I've seen things with a skull and cross bones on saying that it is poisonous, and that sort of thing." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I check cleaning products to see if they are poisonous, or flammable or dangerous." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 5.2.4 Several participants mentioned looking at items to see if they were suitable for recycling. Some mentioned looking at plastic to see if it was appropriate for recycling, whereas others did not realise that items were marked with different numbers in reference to this.

"I look if you can recycle things." (Low SEG)

"I look at plastic to see if it's suitable for recycling. 'Cause the plastic bottles have different numbers." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Bottles have number ones and twos to say if they can be recycled." (Low SEG)

"I put all my tins into recycling, I don't check if they can be." (Low SEG)

- 5.2.5 Other items that participants have frequently checked the labels of were food - to check sell-by dates, nutritional information, and cooking instructions; and some participants checked medicines for dosage and instructions.

"I check food to see if it's microwavable." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I look for sell by dates." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I look for fat contents in food, and calories, and salt." (Tenant/low SEG)

"With food I look at calories, fat content, salt content." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The media and supermarkets have different labelling types for food don't they, so I check to see how it's been classified. You know, like the traffic lights." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I look at medicines to check if it's suitable for the age group." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

5.3 Disposable

- 5.3.1 The meaning of the word 'disposable' was explored amongst participants. Most agreed that it meant that an item was designed to be used just once or a few times before being thrown out.

"That it can go in the bin." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"'Disposable' is explicit – it means you can dispose of it in the normal way." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 5.3.2 However, there was confusion over the term for some participants. A few felt that if an item said 'disposable' it would be suitable for being flushed, but that it would depend on the item. They felt that in the case of items similar to toilet paper, such as wipes, then it would indicate it could be flushed, but not in the case of bigger items, or those made of plastic, such as disposable razors.

"I'd think you could flush it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"But if it says disposable on a wet wipe, surely it means down the toilet?" (Tenant/low SEG)

"If it was a disposable razor it means it can go in the bin, but if it was wipes of any description that it can go down the drain." (Tenants)

"With 'disposable' you don't know whether it's flushable. The 'disposable razor' – clearly that's not right [i.e. suitable for disposing down the toilet]." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"No I'd think it just means you can throw it away." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It just means use once and get rid of it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

5.4 Bio-degradable items

- 5.4.1 Participants were asked what the term 'bio-degradable' meant to them, and what words they associated with the term. Most participants felt it meant an item would dissolve.

"Breaks down." (All)

"Disintegrates" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Environmentally friendly." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 5.4.2 A minority of participants felt that if a product was 'bio-degradable' then it would be suitable to be flushed away.

"Yeah you can flush them, 'cause it's going to break-down." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 5.4.3 The majority, however, felt that it would depend on what the product was, as those that are paper-based would be soluble, but large items such as nappies, or those made of plastic, would not be.

"I think if any liquid had a label on saying it was bio-degradable I would think it would be safe to put it down the sink. But cardboard and plastics I wouldn't consider flushable." (Low SEG)

"If it's a paper-based product - yes." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"No if something was bio-degradable I wouldn't assume it was flushable." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"But some supermarket bags are biodegradable, and you wouldn't throw them down the toilet." (Tenants)

- 5.4.4 Some participants were aware that the length of times taken for items to bio-degrade varied considerably.

"But it may not break-down tomorrow; it may take 10 years, so I wouldn't presume you could flush it." (Low SEG)

"But it might mean it breaks-down in two years time, not right away." (Tenants)

"Nappies are bio-degradable, but take about 500 years." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It doesn't give a time-frame. 'Biodegradable' can be misleading. Because it implies it breaks-down easy. But [even] a plastic bag is biodegradable ... because it breaks-down after 200 yrs or something." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 5.4.5 The conclusion drawn by participants was that if the manufacturer wanted to inform people that their product could be flushed away then they should use the word 'flushable' over 'bio-degradable' or 'disposable'.

"It would have to say 'flushable' for me to think it was flushable." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 5.4.6 Participants felt that some of the products discussed were bio-degradable (in the short-term), especially tissues and wipes.

- 5.4.7 Other items such as cotton wool, cotton buds, sanitary towels, condoms and razors were not considered to be bio-degradable.

"Cotton wool has fibres in it that probably aren't." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think that anything with plastic in it wouldn't be." (Low SEG)

- 5.4.8 Participants used the same logic to decide whether a product was 'bio-degradable' as they did when deciding whether an item could be flushed away – i.e. texture and consistency based on appearance and feel. None of the participants had ever looked at labels to see if items were bio-degradable before deciding whether to flush them.

5.5 Toilet 'symbols'

- 5.5.1 Immediately after the introductions, participants were presented with two symbols: one with a green tick over a toilet (blue for the pilot group); the other with a red cross over a toilet. There was a clear and immediate consensus amongst all participants that the symbols meant one could, or could not, flush the item away.

"Safe to flush and not." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It's what you can, and can't, flush away." (Low SEG)

"It would imply that they have an agreement with the water company about if you can or can't flush them. It's implying that the Water Board have said yes this can be flushed. "
(Tenants)

- 5.5.2 Participants were asked what they felt would be more effective to put on labelling to highlight if an item was flushable or not - the toilet symbol, or the word 'flushable'. The majority would prefer to see the symbol, as they thought it had a greater impact, and would be suitable for people of all ages, or those who could not read and could not read English.

"I think the cross [symbol] is more appropriate, especially if kiddies see it." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"It stands out as well [the logo] cause when you look at packaging you've got loads of writing on it, whereas a logo would stand out, it's in your face, it's different." (Tenant/low SEG)

"A picture tells a thousand words." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It [the symbol] needs to be large too." (Tenants)

"There is that much writing on some of them that the word flushable would get lost amongst it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 5.5.3 Only a few participants would prefer to see the word 'flushable' instead of the logo, and some would prefer to see both.

"I'd rather see the word, it's easier for me." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think they should have the picture and the word." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I'd like both." (Low SEG)

5.6 'Flushable' labels

- 5.6.1 Almost all the participants stated that if an item said 'flushable' on it then they would presume it was suitable for flushing down the toilet.

"You'd take their word wouldn't you." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I would presume it was ok to flush them." (Low SEG)

"Well what else would you do but flush them down the loo?" (Low SEG)

- 5.6.2 All participants were extremely concerned, and angry, that some items were currently labelled as flushable that were not appropriate to do so and may cause blockages. They felt that it was false advertising and that manufacturers should not be allowed to label products 'flushable' if they could, in fact, cause blockages. Participants in the Swindon tenant/high SEG group were particularly incensed about this.

"Are they not breaking the law if they put on the package that they are flushable if they are not?" (Low SEG)

"It's false advertising, misleading." (Low SEG)

"Why are they allowed to get away with saying it's flushable?" (Tenants)

"I don't understand why the Water Board can't sue them for that." (Tenants)

"If I put them in 'cause they say they flush, and then I've got an £80 bill 'cause they don't, then can I sue the company for saying that?" (Tenants)

- 5.6.3 There was, therefore, suspicion over the motives of some manufacturers and some participants wanted action to stop mis-leading packaging, and thought that the threat of legal action would be sufficient. Some participants suggested that the word 'flushable' should be dropped as manufacturers could argue that their item could be flushed away – even if it then risked causing a blockage. Instead, they proposed that the words associated with the symbols should refer specifically to blocking, or not blocking, the sewer – or have default packaging that instructs not to flush unless it has an 'industry-authorised' logo or symbol confirming it is ok to flush.

"Shouldn't the packaging have a label on that says do not flush?" (Low SEG)

- 5.6.4 The feeling was that if a property-owner could prove that a blockage was caused by an item which said 'will not block' on the label (rather than 'flushable') then the manufacturer could successfully be taken to court for incorrect packaging.

6 Sewer Impacts / Flooding awareness

Summary of chapter

In general, people do not think about where flushed items go and how they end up at treatment works. Furthermore, they do not associate a blocked drain with an inappropriately flushed item – instead they would assume that the problem was old, poorly maintained infrastructure.

Most people correctly identified that they were responsible for a blockage with their toilet (or the landlord if they were a tenant), but incorrectly assumed it was the responsibility of the Council or water company/Water Board if the blockage was outside their property (including laterals). However, this misunderstanding is not important in the context of inappropriate flushing as the risk of a blockage to their toilet to sewer pipes within their property is sufficient to make them NOT attempt to flush items that might cause a blockage.

Participants had never received information about items than can, and cannot, be flushed away unless they have purchased a Saniflo toilet. But all agreed that such information was essential.

6.1 Introduction

- 6.1.1 In this chapter we explore whether consumers consider the risk of causing problems with the toilet, drains or sewers when/if they flush items down the toilet. We determine who consumers believe are responsible for sorting out problems with drains and sewers. We also highlight their reactions when presented with information regarding the impact of inappropriate flushing.

6.2 Sewer impacts

- 6.2.1 Participants were asked what they considered happens to items that are flushed away. Most confirmed that they had never given it much consideration, particularly the low SEG groups. Most participants answered that items simply *"go down the sewer."*

"I don't think about it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"You just flush the toilet and take it for granted that it's gone." (Tenant/low SEG)

"They end up in the sewage works." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"You just presume there is someone there who does their little job and sorts it out." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 6.2.2 Other participants were slightly more aware of impacts on the sewer system, usually through programmes they had seen on the television, such as "Life of Grime", or articles they had read.

"After watching the programme I started to think more about what does, or does not, get flushed down. So now the only thing I do is the face wipes." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 6.2.3 Some participants had thought about the environmental consequences of flushing items down the toilet, particularly if items entered waterways.

"I think that's why I don't flush things down a lot, because I think - where is it going to end up?." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"You don't think about it unless you go to Weston-Super-Mare." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I've still got visions of swimming into a condom when I was younger." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think more of the environmental consequences, I don't think of the sewers at all." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 6.2.4 There was mixed awareness amongst participants on the effectiveness of sewage works, and how items were removed.

"It's all processed, it goes through a series of chemicals. And they say that when it comes out, it's so pure that you could actually drink the water." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Someone has the horrendous job of sifting through it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"They have grids to take the large stuff out, but the smaller stuff makes its way through and into the water." (Tenants)

"A lot of them get caught in the traps they have in the sewerage system, and those things sieve out certain items, but other products can clog it up. I think some products get wrapped around the contraptions." (Low SEG)

- 6.2.5 Only the participants in the pilot group, and a couple in other groups (including one who was a plumber), had a good understanding of the process, and the limitations of the sewerage system in the country.

"The state of the sewers is really Victorian. And you often hear stories that there's snagging because the drains are falling apart - particularly where the joins are. So something that would normally pass through, down to the filtration plant is just backing up. Because of the state of the infrastructure, I think!" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 6.2.6 Some participants felt that the cost of removing items from water was probably passed back to them in their water/sewerage costs.

"It's more work for everybody if people flush things, and it probably pushes our charges up." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"People like Severn Trent pass the cost on to the consumer, and its costing more and more to sift out these items." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think that the cost of cleaning them out would eventually get passed on to the consumer." (Low SEG)

- 6.2.7 Approximately half the participants had considered the impact blocked drains would have on them, although very few made a direct link to items they flush. Some participants were concerned about the cost of unblocking drains, and all were aware of the unpleasantness of a blockage, as they were aware of the impact it had had on people they knew, or in some instances themselves.

"Yes because it costs quite a bit of money to fix them." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"After I found out I was coming to this group, I was talking to a friend last night, and she lives in terraced housing, and the pipes to all those houses are in her garden, and she is forever having problems." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I had a problem with my drains, and all it was, was a big clump of hair, and that gave me more food for thought about how everything comes away from your house, and where does it go." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I know that it happened to some people who lived just down the road to us. And their conservatory was flooded, and the water had come up through the manhole. You don't think about it until there is a problem." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I have a big drain in my back garden so it worries me. We've got three or four neighbours pipes coming into our garden, and we are careful but are they?" (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I do [think about it] 'cause I don't want it backing up on me, cause it stinks." (Low SEG)

- 6.2.8 Some participants felt that people would have more consideration of blocked drains, if they had direct experience.

"I think it would have more impact if you had actually had a blockage. Then you would probably be a lot more conscious of it, I would think. The trouble is we take too much for granted these days, you go to the toilet and flush it and that is it." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I think you only think about it if you have had a problem, otherwise it's out-of-sight, out-of-mind. If you have an issue with something you are always more conscious about it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 6.2.9 All participants understood that the responsibility of **unblocking** their **toilet** would lie with the property owner (i.e. them or their landlord/the Council) or, in some cases, the tenant.

"I can always remember my mum with a towel round her hand trying to unblock a toilet that had a sanitary towel blocked in it. I have such mental visions of that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Landlord, in my case." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's me, it's in my contract." (Tenants)

"My husband....he gets all the nasty jobs!" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 6.2.10 The majority of participants were aware that the property owner was responsible for the drains and pipes **within their property boundary**.

*"It's like your water pipes, and you are responsible for water pipes on your land."
(Tenant/low SEG)*

"You are responsible right to the perimeter of your garden." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I think if it's on your property then you are responsible." (Low SEG)

*"If it's anywhere but my toilet it's not my problem, it's the Housing Association's problem."
(Tenants)*

- 6.2.11 However a few participants believed that the responsibility of unblocking the drains in their garden would be the water company, as they believed that's what they paid sewerage costs for.

"It's the water company's, because I pay sewerage costs." (Low SEG)

- 6.2.12 The majority of participants were **unaware** that property owners were responsible for underground pipes from their property that were **outside the property boundary**, but before the main sewer is reached.

"Once they are outside the boundary of your property you are not responsible." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I don't know how true it is, but my sister in-law told me that if a sewer in the street is blocked, whoever made the phone call to the company to report it is the person who is responsible." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Once it's outside your boundary it's not your responsibility." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's the Council's then." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It's the Water Board's." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Probably the Council." (Low SEG)

- 6.2.13 Only a couple of participants were aware that the property owner would be responsible, sparking surprise from the other participants.

"You're responsible." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"So your waste could go 20 metres outside your property and you would still be responsible for it?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"I wasn't aware of that." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 6.2.14 Again there was confusion over the responsibility of **shared drain pipes**. Some were aware the responsibility would be shared amongst the property owners, whilst others felt it would be the responsibility of the Council or water company.

"That has to be somebody else's problem, as you couldn't tell who has caused it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The Council should have to clear that, or the water people." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Split between everyone, 'cause you can't tell whose fault it is." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 6.2.15 There was also confusion amongst participants with regards to responsibility for clearing blockages in the **main sewers**. Although the majority believed it to be the responsibility of the water companies, some felt it was the responsibility of the Council.

"The Water Board." (Tenant/low SEG)

"That's the water authority's job." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Water company." (Low SEG)

"The sewage company." (Tenants)

"The Council." (Low SEG)

6.3 Sewer impacts and flooding awareness

- 6.3.1 Participants were presented with information on sewers and flooding (see Appendix B). This included images of blocked drains, and flooded gardens, and the scale of the problem was highlighted. In general, participants did not currently make a link between a sewer flood and an inappropriately flushed item. Most highlighted that they had not thought about the connection before.

- 6.3.2 In the Swindon low SEG group in particular, participants were more likely to associate blockages and floods with **poor infrastructure**.

"Not necessarily [had they considered it?], because some of the sewers round here are very old and cracked." (Low SEG)

"I think you just don't think about sewers, because of the nature of them. If you see a drain, you just don't think of it again." (Low SEG)

- 6.3.3 Participants were very surprised to learn that the items they had been flushing were not suitable for doing so, in particular **tissues and wipes**.

"Face wipes block? Really?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Do no tissues break-down in the drains?" (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"You presume the larger items are going to do damage, but I wouldn't have thought face wipes and things like that would." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I'm really surprised tissues are a problem." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I'm surprised you can't flush tissue, I thought it was just like toilet paper." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I wouldn't think for a second that wipes couldn't go down the toilet." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I'm so surprised tissues are a no-no." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 6.3.4 Participants were asked what they felt were the reasons that people flush items away that they shouldn't. The majority felt it was a lack of **awareness** and **education**.

"I think people just need to know. 'Cause I genuinely thought you could put cotton wool down the toilet." (Tenant/low SEG)

"There needs to be far greater awareness for the public, saying these are the dos and don'ts." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I'm not saying it's their fault, I mean we are to blame - but no-one has ever told us that we couldn't." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 6.3.5 Other participants felt that some people flushed items for convenience, whereas a minority felt that some people were not concerned about the consequences.

"Convenience, whatever is nearest to them, what's easiest." (Low SEG)

"If someone puts tights down it's just a disregarding attitude, there is no excuse for that." (Low SEG)

"I think most people don't care." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

6.4 Information on flushable items

- 6.4.1 None of the participants recalled having ever received information on what is, and is not, appropriate to flush away, other than one person who remembered a sticker informing them of what could be flushed in a Saniflo toilet.

"I've never seen any advertising saying that you can't flush these items." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The Saniflo toilet comes with stickers telling you what you can and can't flush away." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

- 6.4.2 But all agreed that information was essential if the water industry was serious in trying to reduce the number of inappropriate items ending up in our sewers.

7 Changing people's behaviour

Summary of chapter

To change people's behaviour, there must be:

- greater public awareness of the risk of sewer blockage;
- better education of the public in terms of what can, and what should not, be flushed away;
- better signage in public spaces/areas to continue to spread the message(s), and help make inappropriate disposal socially unacceptable; and
- an end to misleading manufacturer labelling.

To achieve this, there must be an education and advertising campaign. The message would not have to be particularly complicated - it may be that all that is necessary is to state that nothing but toilet paper should be flushed away. The main objective would be to make people link sewer flooding with inappropriate item flushing. This would help make inappropriate flushing socially unacceptable.

Television was considered to be the most effective medium – both because of its reach to a large and diverse community, and because it enables the most visually-impactful images, such as a flooded living room. Given the amount of advertising and campaigning in the world today, participants felt the most visually shocking adverts would have the greatest effect.

Environmental concerns, such as unsightly items floating in our coastal waters and rivers, should also feature in the campaign, but is likely to be a secondary motivation for behavioural change.

Signs saying 'do not flush items' in public toilet areas, and leaflet messages will help spread the word, and continue to keep the issue a current one.

7.1 Introduction

- 7.1.1 This chapter focuses on the final two sections on the topic guide – changing people's behaviour and awareness of previous campaigns.

7.2 Changing people's behaviour

Education

- 7.2.1 Participants felt that **better education and awareness** would be the most likely route to changing people's awareness. They all felt that there was little or no information being made widely available regarding what could, and could not, be flushed away. Many were flushing items they felt were suitable for doing so and were surprised and shocked to learn that they should not be.

"There's not enough education on this sort of thing. Its lack of education [that is the cause of the problem] I think." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"There are always going to be some people who don't care, but I think a lot of people just don't know that we are not supposed to be doing this." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It's education. I mean things like this, when was the last time you spoke to anyone about toilets?" (Low SEG)

"New people are becoming home-owners all the time, aren't they? So you've got to keep re-enforcing the message. It's all about education." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

Advertise

- 7.2.2 Better advertising of flushable products was felt necessary in order to educate the public.

"It wouldn't take much of an advertising campaign to inform people. You know just say - 'don't flush anything apart from toilet paper'." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Advertise in the press and it will get across to everybody." (Tenants)

"I think in light of having all these floods lately, it's a great time to have an advertising campaign. 'Cause people have had to walk around in it, and they have had it in their homes." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"You need constant advertising, 'cause if you do it once, two weeks later people will forget. You need to constantly remind people." (Private-owning/high SEG)

Television

- 7.2.3 Participants felt that television coverage of the issue, either through direct adverts or educational programmes, would target a wide range of people and raise awareness of inappropriate flushing.

"Put it on adverts, like the drink-driving ones." (Tenant/low SEG)

"TV would be the best way to do it." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Put an advert on the telly." (Tenants)

"I think there should be more emphasis on public education films to educate people, about what you can and can't flush. Similar to government adverts about road safety." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"It needs to go on decent programmes, with decent presenters for people to take notice." (Tenant/low SEG)

"No one ever talks about this, that's the problem. If you put it on the telly, then everyone will sit round and be like 'did you see it last night?'" (Low SEG)

- 7.2.4 Some participants were aware of the cost of television advertising, but felt the cost was justifiable as it could lead to a reduction in sewer repair costs and treatment.

"Even though it might be a costly exercise to do it, I think a good TV advert would work, it would have more impact, and more people would be aware of it than other ways. Although

it might cost a couple of million, it might save several million in repairs.” (Looking after the house and/or babies)

“It must be costing millions of pounds to treat, so surely a percentage of that spent in good advertising would pay off?” (Private-owning/high SEG)

Children/young people/schools

- 7.2.5 Creating greater awareness of what should, and should not, be flushed amongst children and young people was suggested, in order to ensure that correct disposal methods are taught at a young age and become habit.

“Why not do something with kids in schools, so they grow up learning not to throw things away.” (Private-owning/high SEG)

“The Water Boards should go round the schools.” (Tenants)

“You need to teach the younger generation.” (Tenant/low SEG)

“It needs to be a constant thing, because our children are seeing what we are doing, and they will do the same.” (Tenant/low SEG)

“I think if they taught it in schools as well it would be good, so people are responsible at a young age.” (Low SEG)

- 7.2.6 Many participants highlighted how their children had been taught the importance of recycling and what a big impact it had had.

“If you get people young enough, children actually tell adults what to do. Mine have with the recycling.” (Private-owning/high SEG)

“It’s my children who have encouraged me to do it [recycling].” (Tenant/low SEG)

“My little girl actually told me off the other day for putting a bottle in the bin, so they must be constantly on them at school about it.” (Tenant/low SEG)

- 7.2.7 A couple of participants also suggested using children in advertising campaigns to generate a great impact.

“It’s always good to use children in advertising campaigns, ‘cause that’s what you care about most and you worry about their health.” (Private-owning/high SEG)

Signs/public toilets

- 7.2.8 Better signage detailing items that should not be flushed away was another suggestion to help educate the public. In particular, participants felt that public toilets should have signs displayed within them.

“Maybe signs in public toilets saying do not discard of things down the toilet.” (Low SEG)

“Have signs in public toilets saying do not flush anything else but tissue down the toilet.” (Tenants)

"They do have signs already in a lot of public toilets, saying no tampons, sanitary towels or nappies." (Low SEG)

"If you saw signs everywhere you might get it in your head, like no smoking signs." (Tenants)

Leaflets

- 7.2.9 Some participants suggested that leaflets should be sent out to members of the public highlighting what they could, and could not, flush away in the toilet - similar to recycling leaflets. Some suggested sending these out with the water bills, but others felt that people would not take notice of them.

"You could have a leaflet going to people's homes, because you read those ones about what to recycle. 'Cause I've got to grips with that now and I think it's great." (Looking after the house and/or babies)

"Maybe put out a leaflet with these [show cards] pictures on." (Tenant/low SEG)

"They issue leaflets about recycling, and what you can and can't do, and how you should do it, so I think there should be something similar to that." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Why don't they put on water bills what you can, and can't, flush." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I pay by direct debit so don't tend to read the bills. I throw the inserts away" (Private-owning/high SEG)

New Houses/plumbing systems

- 7.2.10 A few participants felt that new houses should have plumbing systems installed that prevented items passing through that shouldn't be flushed.

"Maybe if all new houses had plumbing systems that blocked up if you chuck things down that you shouldn't. That would solve the problem because people wouldn't do it." (Low SEG)

Product manufacturers/labelling

- 7.2.11 Participants felt that companies manufacturing the items that were frequently flushed needed to take more responsibility and involvement in the education of the public. They felt that the government, water companies and supermarkets needed to put greater pressure on manufactures regarding labelling, particularly those who were labelling items as 'flushable' that were causing blockages.

"I think that companies who make the products need to get on board too." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"You are fighting a losing battle though with things like 'flushable' being written on that package there. You are being told that is, and it isn't." (Low SEG)

"But companies would have to get on board, they already say flushable when they are not supposed to be." (Private-owning/high SEG)

*"Manufacturers won't change it [their labels] until they are, in someway, made responsible for it because as far as they're concerned it's someone else's problem if there's a blockage."
(Looking after the house and/or babies)*

"You should get the supermarkets on board, to say they won't accept products unless they are labelled in a certain way." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The Government and Water Boards are going to have to get on at the manufacturers of these products." (Tenants)

- 7.2.12 Participants felt more visible labelling detailing if products could be flushed or not was required, but this would be necessary in addition to an advertising campaign, and that it would not work alone.

"It should be more visible on the packaging when you buy things." (Tenant/low SEG)

"It needs to be done as well as advertising though, it won't work on its own." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"There's not one answer to the problem, it's about advertising, education, suppliers." (Private-owning/high SEG)

7.3 Triggers for behaviour change

- 7.3.1 Participants discussed what they felt were the main triggers for people changing their behaviour.

'Shock' factor

- 7.3.2 Some participants felt that a graphic advertising campaign showing images of the impact blocked drains can cause would be a good way of raising awareness of the problems.

"People need to see some of the sights, like a picture of the blockages, and what can happen." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think that not everyone realises that they are responsible if it comes up in their garden, so maybe if you told people that [then] they would change. It would scare people." (Tenant/low SEG)

"They could do a very graphic advertising campaign to get the message across. You know, with loads of nappies in the back garden, something really shocking." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Shocking images work - look at Jamie Oliver and the chickens, and now everyone is eating organic." (Low SEG)

'Costs'

- 7.3.3 Some participants, especially those in the Birmingham groups, felt that raising awareness of the costs of fixing blocked and flooded drains would be the biggest trigger to changing people's behaviour, amongst property owners.

"If it hits their pocket they become even quicker educated." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"The cost will impact on people most." (Tenant/low SEG)

"The cost of getting someone out to unblock it." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 7.3.4 However others, particularly the Birmingham private-owning/high SEG group felt that cost should not be the main trigger to behaviour change. Many of the participants in this group felt disgruntled at the number of leaflets they receive regarding insurance of pipes and felt they were being blackmailed into taking out insurance. They felt a campaign on inappropriate flushing should distance itself from these insurance adverts.

"I don't think you need to rely on that [cost, to educate people], as most of us are reasonable people and just knowing the reasons why we shouldn't are enough to make us change." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I don't think they should come at it as a financial thing, it should be environmental." (Private-owning/high SEG)

7.4 Impact on local water-ways and the environment

- 7.4.1 Some participants felt that reminders/greater consideration that flushing inappropriate items affects Britain's rivers and beaches might help encourage people to change their behaviour. There was some concern though that this might be less effective in urban areas by people who rarely visit the coast or countryside.

"Show people what our beaches would look like in 20 years time." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I think for anybody who has got an interest in nature and wildlife and things like that, I think certainly would take notice." (Low SEG)

"But you have so many urban people who don't go out to sea." (Tenants)

- 7.4.2 However, others did not think that focusing on impacts on Britain's rivers and coastal waters would have as much impact on people as showing images of blocked drains and sewer flooding in people's gardens and homes.

7.5 Recollection of the 'Bag it and bin it' and 'Think before you flush' campaigns

- 7.5.1 In general, none of the participants could remember the 'Bag it and bin it' and 'Think before you flush' campaigns, but some had recollection of the phrases.

"Rings a bell, the 'bag it and bin it', but can't remember anything about it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I seem to remember something about it a long time ago." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I vaguely remember the words, but not the content." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I remember the saying 'bag it and bin it', can't remember it though." (Low SEG)

"'Bag it and bin it', put it in a bag and put it in the bin?" (Tenants)

- 7.5.2 A small minority thought it might be linked to the bagging and binning of dog mess.

7.6 Changing their behaviour

- 7.6.1 Finally, those participants who had previously said that they were flushing items that should not be disposed of in the toilet, were asked whether they would change their behaviour in light of the discussion. Encouragingly, most indicated that they would now dispose of the items in other ways after learning of the problems associated with inappropriate flushing.

"I won't flush the wipes down now, as they are not even that dirty." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I won't put wipes down there now you have said that." (Tenant/low SEG)

"This has really educated me tonight." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 7.6.2 Some participants felt that there were some items that they would continue to flush away, especially sanitary items such as tampons.

"I won't stop flushing tampons no matter what anyone says, I just wouldn't do it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I won't stop putting my tampons down, it's just like yuck not to. But yeah I guess I would stop putting baby wipes and things down." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I'd still put Tampax down. I just don't want it in my bin. Maybe if they had little bags with the Tampax when you got them, then maybe I'd bin them." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"I still would for hygiene reasons, like if there is sick on something." (Tenant/low SEG)

- 7.6.3 Some participants believed that there was no current alternative to flushing for disposing of items that are smelly or messy, and that something should be developed for these things in order to change people's behaviour.

"But I think that nothing caters for getting rid of smelly and horrible items." (Private-owning/high SEG)

"Something to keep it fresh. There needs to be an alternative way to dispose of these things for me to change." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 7.6.4 Examples of ways in which people adapted their disposal habits when given the means to, were highlighted.

"We recycle 'cause they provide the things for us to do it." (Tenant/low SEG)

"I wouldn't do it though [recycle] if they didn't give us the boxes." (Tenant/low SEG)

"Overseas in the places you can't flush tissue, their refuse collection is twice a week, so they recognise these things. That's the problem here." (Private-owning/high SEG)

- 7.6.5 Therefore, the water industry could look to the effective advertising and educational campaigning strategy adopted by local and national government to encourage improved recycling, for inspiration.

8 Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

- 8.1.1 This chapter provides our conclusions of the research and makes recommendations of possible ways forward for CCWater and the water industry generally.

8.2 What is happening now?

- 8.2.1 People are unaware of the risks they are taking when flushing away inappropriate items. The view amongst participants is that **if** people knew of the risk then they would change their behaviour because the cost and sheer unpleasantness of a blocked drain was a very effective deterrent. Common sense prevails with large, bulky items, or products made from clearly non-dissolvable materials such as plastic. It is the smaller items that are perceived to have the same texture as toilet paper and where, perhaps, particular attention is needed.
- 8.2.2 People consider inappropriate flushing to be socially acceptable and clearly this needs to change. Currently, people inappropriately flush items, as they do not know any better (as explained above) but there are also plenty of examples where people flush items that they know to be inappropriate – purely because flushing is perceived to be convenient, more hygienic, or more discrete.
- 8.2.3 In general, people do not associate a blocked drain with an inappropriately flushed item – instead they assume that the problem is old, poorly maintained infrastructure. If the link was made then it may become less acceptable, or indeed instinctive, to flush items away.
- 8.2.4 This research suggests that, fortunately, the situation is **not** likely to get worse if refuse collection continues to reduce in frequency, or if charges are introduced.
- 8.2.5 This research has also shown that people will, where there is a reasonable cost difference, choose a product that they understand can flush away with no adverse effects, over one that will not. This means that there is potential for positively influencing people's behaviour - but only **if** manufacturers stop being allowed to use misleading packaging.

8.3 Moving forward

- 8.3.1 To change people's behaviour, there must be, therefore:

- greater public awareness of the risk of sewer blockage;
- better education of the public in terms of what can, and what should not, be flushed away;
- better signage in public spaces/areas to continue to spread the message(s), and help make inappropriate disposal socially unacceptable; and
- an end to misleading manufacturer labelling.

- 8.3.2 At the heart of proposed change should be an advertising and educational campaign. This should target all sections of society, including children. To achieve the necessarily wide audience, and to ensure visual impact, the campaign should be predominantly a television campaign (building upon the effectiveness of certain TV programmes that have changed people's attitudes and behaviour). Messages on water bills, and via leaflets will complement the TV campaign, and help to maintain an on-going message.
- 8.3.3 The most effective messages will be those with a 'shock' factor. Images of sewer flooding in someone's living room, for example, would give the advert the necessary impact. Images of inappropriate items in our local waterways causing a danger to wildlife and an eye-sore to the public, was also encouraged.
- 8.3.4 We recommend that CCWater works with industry to pilot the effects of an 'information and shock tactics' campaign in specific hot-spots, such as estates where blocked drains are very frequent. If successful then industry may be prepared to support, and indeed finance, wider information campaigns.
- 8.3.5 The water industry should consider the possibility of linking into, or copying, the recycling campaigns adopted by local and national government that have proved so effective.
- 8.3.6 In parallel, the water industry should be encouraged to take action to ensure that manufacturers do not continue to mislead the public with their labelling. Therefore, there is a good reason why manufacturers might wish to promote this quality. Specific wording concerning sewer blockage (in association with an industry-approved toilet symbol) – such as 'can be flushed with NO risk of drain blocking', would be sufficient in their view. Manufacturers who persisted in labelling unsuitable items as flushable could possibly be taken to task under the Sale of Goods Act for misleading descriptions.

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