

WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF WATER CONSERVATORS

RESPONSE TO THE INVITATION TO SUBMIT TO CONSULTATION BY DEFRA ON THE PROPOSED BAN ON THE MANUFACTURE, SUPPLY, AND SALE OF WET WIPES CONTAINING PLASTIC

NOVEMBER 2023

1 The Worshipful Company of Water Conservators ('WCWC'), is a City of London Livery Company, focussed on the long-term health of our water resources and the broader environment. Our members include senior professionals from water, environmental and related industries and regulators, along with others who share our concern for water and the environment. Our experience and knowledge ranges from the complexities of environmental sciences, through the application of engineering to deliver the goals identified by those sciences, and the subsequent management of the assets created. The Company's purpose is *Promoting a diverse and sustainable environment.*

2 The Company is responding to the Consultation because of its professional roles in water and climate change policy, mitigation and adaptation. It is a member of the City of London Livery Climate Action Group. It considers that the regulation of used sanitary and care products discharged into sewers is a major contribution to tackling the problem of overflowing sewers.

SUMMARY

3 The WCWC supports the ban, urges haste and suggest that this should set into a broader strategy and plan to deal with all used sanitary and care products (as suggested in response the Consultation in late 2021).

OVERVIEW

4 All the UK Governments are consulting together on the ban on the manufacture, supply and sale of wet wipes containing plastic. <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/wet-wipes-1/wet-wipes-containing-plastic/>

5 The goal is to maximise resource efficiency and minimise plastic waste, by following the principles of the waste hierarchy: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. This includes moving away from a take, make, waste model and towards a circular economy for plastic. It emphasises that this is a key measure in the UK Government's [Plan for Water](#), and forms part of the government's ongoing work to ensure there is more investment, stronger regulation and tougher enforcement across the water system, helping tackle plastic and microplastic pollution and improve water quality.

6 The Consultation states that wet wipes containing plastic break down into microplastics over time, which can be harmful to the environment and human health. Banning wet wipes containing plastic would help alleviate this issue, as well as reducing the volume of microplastics entering wastewater treatment plants when wrongly flushed.

7 The governments have consulted previously; that for Defra and England in late 2021, in a Call for Evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic items with particular focus on wet wipes. The current Consultation reports that 94% of respondents favoured a ban. The WCWC responded to this 2021 consultation and responses can be found on its website <https://www.waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/A-HOLISTIC-APPROACH-TO-SOLVING-THE-PROBLEMS-OF-SEWAGE-BORNE-LITTER.pdf> <https://www.waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/Defra-consultation-response-Feb-22.pdf>

8 These supported a ban but advocated a more holistic approach and noted that underpinning evidence had been assembled in an essay prepared within the Company to provide a more examination of the issues involved.

(https://www.linkedin.com/posts/peter-matthews043050147_sewage-borne-litter-we-need-a-national-activity-6893966060693938176-ybdV).

9 The WCWC is very much aware of water company operational costs, the ecological damage, and public angst over the presence of sewage borne litter in the environment. The WCWC, therefore, recognised in 2022 that it is time to tackle this problem in a holistic way and it proposed such an approach as part of its response, at that time, to the Defra Call for Evidence on commonly littered and problematic plastic items with particular focus on wet wipes in late 2021. The WCWC supports the Thames21 campaign to ban plastic in wet wipes and is working with the City of London in its campaign to ‘bin it, don’t block it.’

10 There is intense interest in the presence of used care products in sewage, which cause sewer blockages, and environmental litter and pollution from sewer overflows. which have been taken by the water companies so far. The underpinning essay (see para 8) looks at some of the behavioural issues which have prevented this whole topic from being confronted properly to date. Research for the essay found that the current messaging is confusing and the labelling of products is poor. Is ‘bag it and bin it’ or ‘fine to flush’ the most important message to get over to the public?

11 Very little has happened in terms of regulation since 2022, but to some wide spread dismay on progress, Defra promised further consultation in the Plan for Water and this 2023 Consultation is it. The WCWC notes that this issue binds together all of the parties in the water sector ranging from ardent critics of water services through to the providers of those services.

12 The whole matter has been given even prominence by the much greater attention to CSOs since early 2022. And media images often focus on used sanitary products as iconic disgust symbols of the impact of the discharges. There is a ‘yuck factor’ about this in the public’s view (see an article in the Institute of Water Summer edition of its magazine ([MYEBOOK - Summer 2023](#)). There is a hierarchy of disgust and several products, not just wet wipes need regulation. The current Consultation still fails to address the total problem of used care products in sewage. A wider strategy which will apply to all used sanitary and care products is required into which this proposed ban is fitted.

CHANGE IN APPROACH

13 This reiterates to the response to the 2021 Consultation. There is a need to get away from the mind-set of ‘out of sight out of mind’, whether it is for toilet, or even bin, disposal. The

WCWC suggests that there is a need to change the current attitudes of throwing waste into sewers and leaving the authorities (water companies and environmental regulators) to deal with it. There is a need to stop thinking that a water company has to take whatever society flushes and then blame it for anything which goes wrong. A sewer is a transit system and useful analogy is of the philosophy of restrictions on what can be posted in the mail system to protect public safety.

14 Solving the problem is not just the responsibility of the water companies, they are facilitators. In a tenuous analogy, there is need for a set of policies and practices, which mirror, but not mimic, the controls exercised for trade effluents; to use a medical analogy, an approach is needed in which a symptom (wet wipe pollution) is dealt with not in isolation, but as a visible part of a condition (a lack of integrated management of used care products). In fact, the approach should sit in a much bigger picture of sustainable water management.

RE-ITERATED SUGGESTION FOR A NATIONAL STRATEGY ON USED SANITARY AND CARE PRODUCTS

15 A national problem needs a national solution involving everyone in the process, including bathroom and toilet product suppliers and designers to accommodate more acceptable approaches to bagging and binning. Whilst wet wipes contribute substantially to problems in sewage, other products, such as sanitary towels, incontinence pads, condoms, cause probably more public reaction in a hierarchy of disgust. So wider action is needed. It must be based on personal responsibility but cannot be based on personal liability

It is suggested that there needs to be a national strategy for dealing these used products:

- Driven by a national consensus group with a wider range of parties than just the water and woven fabric industries. It must include behavioural scientists.
- The solution to the problem must be recognised as being not just the responsibility of the water industry. The national attitude must change from ‘out of sight out of mind’ and it must be accepted that controls must be exercised over what is put into the sewerage system.
- The principle must be to make it easy to product users to do the right thing and be aware of the consequences of not doing so.
- All used care products must be disposed by bagging and binning. Designated products must still meet standards of degradability and biodegradability. This recognises that used products will still be flushed away from time to time. As back up, to minimise the problems arising as sewage borne litter, products must meet these standards, which will also be relevant to ultimate disposal of the solid waste by incineration and landfill. This builds on the principles laid down in the Water UK report of 2017 and follows the advocacy of City to Sea.
- Some products will be exempted, temporarily, from the standards, because of the lack of alternative materials, e.g., condoms. Research should be directed at removal of products from the exempted list.
- Designated product standards will be regulated using a recognised system drawing on the experiences of REACH, possibly using a BSI Standard kitemark.

- All products will be labelled very clearly ‘bag and bin’ under the appropriate regulations to help consumers.
- Monitoring compliance would probably lay with Trading Standards.
- The strategy will build on the foundations laid by Water UK, but the terms ‘flushability’ and ‘fine to flush’ should be dropped.
- The object of ‘nudging’ will be to encourage ‘bag and bin’ all used products.
- Consideration should be given as to how biodegradable disposal bags can be made very accessible, including their inclusion with the retail products, or even with water bills. Bathroom and toilet designers and product suppliers should be involved to ensure that facilities embrace the need for used care products to be disposed properly.
- Consideration needs to be given to good practice on toilet and bathroom facilities outside of homes.
- Messaging must be handled centrally by an agency of government and will be very important and could include regular communications on social and print media on current issues.

16 It is obvious from the regulatory angst created in dealing with such wet wipes that such a big tranche of change in one go might be unachievable, but the WCWC suggests very strongly that the ban on wet wipes as proposed should be just the first step in a more strategic approach. In its previous submission the WCWC advocated a need for better labelling. So, as part of the mosaic of actions, the WCWC was pleased to see that some attention was being given in May 2023 to labelling, although still restricted to wet wipes. Government said that it had stepped up action to tackle harmful plastics and clean up our waterways by challenging producers of wet wipes to address concerns over how they label their products. Environment Secretary Thérèse Coffey wrote to wet wipes producers setting out her concerns about the number of wet wipes that are flushed down UK toilets - between 2.1 - 2.9 billion each year – and has asked them to reconsider the use of the word ‘flushable’ on packaging to help prevent sewer blockages and water pollution.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/producers-urged-to-address-flushable-wet-wipes-labelling>

17 However, no mention seems to be made to this in the latest Consultation and that signals a fragmented approach which would be overcome if the strategy suggested by the WCWC is adopted. More ‘joined up’ government is needed. The WCWC suggest that the changes to labelling should be made mandatory, be clear to read and understand and not encourage flushing with the label ‘fit to flush’.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

QA The likely impact of the proposed ban on the businesses who manufacture, supply or sell wet wipes containing plastic;

18 Whilst this is important, the needs of the environment must come first and such a ban has been a long time in gestation, so businesses should have prepared for this outcome.

QB The likely impact of the proposed ban for consumers, particularly for those with protected characteristics, e.g., disabled people;

19 The WCWC has no competence to comment on this but modern technology should be able to develop equally useful products.

QC Any wider impacts of keeping plastic containing wet wipes in circulation;

20 In theory, even if the admonition of ‘bag it, don’t flush it’ works, it would still mean that the used products will biodegrade less easily in landfill and would not be compostable. Experience shows that keeping wet wipes containing plastic will continue to cause problems in sewers.

QD Any wider impacts of wipes marketed as alternative or plastic-free;

21 In fact this should be widely endorsed by all sectors. But as the WCWC have outlined even plastic free wet wipes can still cause problems; so, the marketing must not be ‘fit to flush’, but rather rendering the ‘bagged’ wastes as better for the environment in disposal, and never in a sewer

QE The composition of alternative wet wipes;

22 The WCWC submits that future wet wipes must degrade and biodegrade easily according to defined standards. It cannot endorse any products, but draws that attention of Defra to some types available already:

- [Bamboo dry wipes that can be moistened with water](#)
- [Reusable bamboo towels or cloths that can be washed and reused](#)
- [Bidet seat or attachment that can spray water to clean your bottom](#)
- [Reusable pads that can remove makeup with water](#)
- [Washable kits that can be used for baby care or personal hygiene](#)

[Best wet wipe alternatives: Top biodegradable and sustainable options | Evening Standard](#) (17 Feb 2023)

<https://www.countryliving.com/uk/news/g28096327/wet-wipe-alternatives/?slide=8>

QF If any exemptions are needed for wet wipes containing plastic;

23 The WCWC has not identified any.

QG The proposed timeframe for the commencement of the ban.

24 As fast as practicable in view of the widespread public disgust of all used sanitary and care products in sewer overflows, even those made not illegally. There is widespread demand for action

25 There are two sets of dates which might help. It took exactly two years to go from proposing a ban on plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds in 2028 to the ban in 2020. It would have been possible, in theory, to ban of wet wipes containing plastic in this December. But this will not happen, however, it does seem possible that with this prior warning it should be possible to bring a ban into effect before October 2025

26 The WCWC has suggested very strongly that this ban should be part of a wider strategy including the introduction of mandatory labelling. At the very least the regulations banning the use of plastic in wet wipes could also include the changes to labelling of alternative products either in one set of regulations or in parallel regulations

27 The wider strategy advocated by the WCWC should have compliance dates which mirror those in the Storm Overflows Reduction Plan, a key initial date for change being 2035. All the changes suggested by the WCWC should be implemented well before then, which provides a reasonable timescale for serial actions. The WCWC suggests that this strategic long term approach would be welcomed widely. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6511674abf7c1a0011bb465f/Revised_Storm_Overflows_Discharge_Reduction_Plan.pdf

28 As a further observation the WCWC have always advocated cross- sectoral management and the consequences of the proposals must be understood for waste management and recycling. But the recycling of used sanitary products is difficult (<https://recycleright.org.uk/item/sanitary-product>) and hence used products are likely to finish up in incinerators or landfill and should be plastic free and meet the relevant standards as set out in para 15.

29 As a footnote the WCWC has been made aware very recently of the campaign by Prostate Cancer UK , ‘Boys Need Bins’ [Prostate Cancer UK | Prostate Cancer UK](#). This advocates a national conversation about incontinence, and recognition that men (and women) wear pads, pouches, catheters, and stoma/colostomy/ileostomy bags, and the impact this has. This harmonises with the broader approach to sanitary litter suggested by the WCWC.