

BEST PRACTICE REUSABLE SANITARY
AND INCONTINENCE AID PROGRAM:
FEASIBILITY STUDY AND PROGRAM
MODEL RECOMMENDATION
Executive Summary

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**Best Practice Reusable Sanitary and Incontinence Aid Program:
Feasibility Study and Program Model Recommendation
Executive Summary**

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Introduction

Knox City Council (the lead council), together with Stonnington City Council, Whitehorse City Council, Hume City Council, Maroondah City Council, Maribyrnong City Council and Yarra Ranges Shire Council (partnership councils), were awarded a grant from Sustainability Victoria to conduct a study into the feasibility of reducing the contribution plastic associated with single-use menstrual and continence products (the products¹) makes to landfill.

The *Best Practice Reusable Sanitary and Incontinence Aid Program: Feasibility Study and Program Model Recommendation* (the feasibility study) involved a literature review, environmental scan and stakeholder engagement and community consultation process.

Project context

The need to reduce waste generated by plastics is embedded in the Commonwealth, Victorian and local government strategic framework. Single-use menstrual and continence products generate waste and plastics that are diverted to landfill and cause pollution. A circular economy is an important part of slowing climate change as it reduces waste by keeping materials, products and services in circulation for as long as possible. There was almost unanimous consensus among the survey respondents that more environmentally sustainable behaviours and practices are important contributions to combat climate change, and actions such as minimising the use of single-use plastics play a role in achieving this.

The roles and responsibility for managing waste are shared by all three tiers of government, business and the broader community.

Being the closest tier of government to the community, local governments play several roles in safeguarding the health and wellbeing of their community by facilitating environmentally sustainable behaviours. These roles can be strengthened by providing local communities with information and tools needed to reduce waste by reusing and recycling products, including products used by people who menstruate or who suffer from incontinence. Councils are not responsible for the manufacture, distribution, supply or marketing of these products.

Strategies and actions currently being implemented by the State government, and several local governments in Victoria to reduce waste generated by single use menstrual and continence products focus on providing rebates to households which reimburse a proportion of the costs of purchasing the products.

¹ While the title of the feasibility study refers to 'sanitary' and 'incontinence' products, feedback gathered during the stakeholder engagement and community consultation process indicates the terms 'menstrual' and 'continence' are more appropriate. These terms will therefore be used throughout this report.

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Current use of reusable menstrual and continence products

More than two thirds of survey respondents are currently using reusable menstrual and/or continence products, of which more than two thirds have been using them for more than a year. Just under three quarters of survey respondents used reusable products for themselves. The products most commonly used were period and leak-proof underwear, menstrual cups and cloth/bamboo pads and liners.

The main reasons survey respondents and workshop participants cited for using reusable menstrual and continence products were that they are environmentally friendly, are cost effective in the long term and work well. People using reusable products mostly felt they are more comfortable, discreet, convenient and effective to use than single-use products. Some people felt they were ineffective, unhygienic and uncomfortable.

Awareness of reusable menstrual products was mostly gained from advertisements, peers, personal research online and exposure in retail stores.

There is general consensus regarding a collective responsibility for addressing climate change.

Feasibility of successful behaviour change

In general, the use of reusable menstrual products, by both those using them and not using them, is not considered 'yuck'. There was a general 'feel good' sentiment and very little stigma associated with using reusable menstrual and continence products. There is also a sentiment amongst those not currently using reusable menstrual and continence products that they don't want to be 'guilted' into using them. Some of those both currently using and not using reusable menstrual and continence products feared these products would not be effective.

The majority of people not currently using reusable menstrual and continence products indicated they did not find the idea of switching to reusable products too difficult to think about.

The main barriers to increased uptake of both reusable menstrual and continence products were outlay costs, lack of information on where to purchase them and how to use and maintain them, and challenges changing, washing and storing them when 'out and about'.

Increasing the use of reusable menstrual products, and those used for light, temporary or intermittent incontinence is more feasible than reusable continence products used for permanent and/or double incontinence. This is because, in general, products used for menstrual and light, temporary or intermittent incontinence are used for personal reasons and are used for shorter time periods than continence products used for permanent and/or double incontinence.

Reusable continence products used for permanent and/or double incontinence typically have more of a 'yuck' factor as they are used on behalf of someone else and are associated with greater quantities of organic waste. Service providers indicated other barriers to using reusable continence products were the occupational health and safety and acceptance by the client and/or their families.

The following principles underpin a successful behaviour change process:

- Normalise the product to be used.
- Build the community's capacity to make the change by increasing the product's accessibility and affordability.
- Behaviour change can be reinforced through rewards and punishments. The driver for behaviour change should be for positive gain rather than the loss of a negative.
- Behavioural changes are more likely to be effective when undertaken at a time when there are already significant life changes occurring.

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- In order for the behaviour change process to be successful the goals must be specific and be in the immediate rather than the distant future.
- Well considered information and awareness campaigns are effective in initiating and maintaining behaviour change.

Cost benefit analysis

The qualitative cost benefit analysis found there are social, economic/financial and environmental costs and benefits associated with the use of reusable menstrual and continence products for personal use and for use in an institutional setting. The main benefits are the opportunity to contribute to efforts addressing climate change (social), long term cost savings (economic/financial) and the reduction in plastics ending up in landfill (environmental). The main costs are stigma and guilt (social), financial implications of upfront purchase and care (economic) and the natural resource implications associated with caring for them (environmental). Specific costs for use in an institutional setting are the potential OH&S implications, the quantity of products that would need to be purchased and cared for and the potential reluctance of the client's family to switch to reusables.

Implications for councils

There was general support for councils to take strong leadership in facilitating the switch from single-use to reusable menstrual and continence products.

Direct financial costs to councils include those associated with a rebate or trial kit. Indirect costs to Councils include officers' time associated with preparing information and awareness campaigns, collaborating with partners, administering the programs and implementing the actions.

One of the key risks to councils is the potential to be seen as coercing the community into switching to reusable products. Any action should therefore focus on encouraging changes in behaviour rather than 'punishing' those who, for various reasons, are unable or unwilling to use reusable products. These programs should be seen as unbiased and transparent, ensuring there is no potential for brand or product type bias.

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Programs, behaviour change models and Action Plan

Behaviour change can be achieved through two models, namely an incentive model which encourages the greater use of reusable menstrual and continence products and a disincentive model which discourages the use of single-use menstrual and single use products.

These models can be implemented simultaneously.

The Action Plan responds to the project rationale which is “To reduce waste associated with single-use menstrual and continence products.”

The three priorities and their associated strategies are:

Priority	Strategies
1. Information and awareness:	1.1 Raise awareness of reusable menstrual and continence products. 1.2 Provide appropriate information to support the ongoing use of reusable products
2. Accessibility:	2.1 Enhance the affordability of reusable menstrual and continence products. 2.2 Increase the convenience of using reusable menstrual and continence products.
3. Leadership	3.1 Reduce waste generated by single use menstrual and continence products through regulation. 3.2 Embed behaviour change policies and processes in the strategic framework. 3.3 Advocate for greater support for the uptake of reusable menstrual and continence products.

Conclusion

The Feasibility Study found there is support and enthusiasm for increased use of reusable menstrual and continence products among those who participated in the social research. The Study therefore proposes two behaviour change models and a series of strategies and actions which will encourage the greater use of reusable menstrual and continence products.

In the short term, behaviour change is most likely to be successful for menstrual products, particularly among young people who have just started menstruating, and people experiencing mild or intermittent incontinence. While feedback from the service providers indicates there are several challenges associated with the use of reusable continence products, there was general ‘in principle’ support for their use in circumstances where these challenges may be overcome.

Despite the likely success of behaviour change models, there was strong sentiment among some people who do not currently use reusable products that they do not wish to be ‘guilted’ as a result of their decisions. This suggests any successful behaviour change process should focus on incentivising people rather than ‘punishing’ them for their choices.

Behaviour change is a process that takes time and requires support and political will. Given changing attitudes is often the precursor to changing behaviour, it will be necessary to adopt a range of concurrent strategies which are appropriate to the socio-economic and cultural context of each partnership council. It will also require a long-term commitment on the part of councils, the

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community, carers and service providers to make both monetary and non-monetary investments which facilitate the switch from single-use to reusable products.

Councils play an important role in promoting environmentally sustainable behaviours and reducing the volume and quantity of plastics diverted to landfill. The scope of councils' influence is however limited to strategies and actions that build the community's capacity to increase their use of reusable menstrual and continence products, rather than those involving manufacture, distribution, supply and marketing of these products.

Some people are reluctant to use reusable products and others prefer to use a hybrid of reusable and single-use products. It is therefore unlikely the reusable menstrual and continence products programs would result in the complete elimination of single-use products in the community. Nevertheless, the programs and behaviour change models are likely to achieve the intent of the project, which is to reduce, and not necessarily to avoid, the use of single-use products, as has been done elsewhere in Australia and internationally.

While the feasibility of reusable nappy programs and programs addressing menstrual stigma and period poverty is outside the scope of this Feasibility Study, the research identified the potential to use the success of these programs as leverage for the increased use of reusable menstrual and continence products.

Recommendations

The following next steps are recommended:

Implementation

1. Partnership councils implement, monitor and evaluate programs and actions that align with their strategic priorities and resources.

Information dissemination

2. Partnership councils disseminate the findings from the feasibility study through their marketing and information dissemination channels.
3. The lead council contact survey respondents and stakeholders indicating where the findings of the feasibility study are available.

Stakeholder engagement

4. Partnership councils continue to engage with 'hard to reach' cohorts such as CALD and gender diverse communities to identify opportunities to engage with them further.

Collaborations

5. Continue to collaborate with partnership councils to share knowledge and experiences, prepare information dissemination and marketing materials.
6. Collaborate with partnership councils during the monitoring and review phases.