The Rag Trade: Where Do Our Clothes Really Go?

Research Scope

- General research into the re-use of clothing/textiles – how is it collected, sorted, distributed?
- Figures for UK/Europe/global generation
- How does it work in Cornwall?
- Challenges and solutions
- Environmental impact (Circular Economy)

Where Do Our Clothes Really Go?

In the UK there are numerous ways in which consumers can pass on their clothes for re-use. Many consumers already engage in the re-use and recycling of their clothes; the most popular route is to take them to charity shops (39%), while charity bags (18%) and bring banks (13%) remain important, whilst re-sale accounts for 7% of unwanted second-hand clothes (Fig.1). In a circular economy context, the re-use of clothing/textiles is the ideal option for garments that have come to their end-of-use life in the eyes of the primary owner. However, a significant proportion of clothing still ends up in landfill, representing a loss in both resources and potential revenue to the economy; even clothing that is deemed unwearable will still have a value and can be repurposed in some way.

In the UK there are three main routes for collecting and donating textiles:

1. **Kerbside Collection Services** – whereby households gather textiles for re-use and leave them for collection at the kerbside. These services are run either by a local authority – as part of their overall kerbside recycling service –, charities or commercial collectors.

2. **Textile Banks** – these are often situated in public spaces such as car parks (typically near village halls or community centres) or household waste recycling centres (HWRC). These are provided either by the local authority itself, charity or community organisations or commercial collectors.

3. **Community Re-Use Initiatives** – this stream covers a wide range of ways in which textiles can

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Collected textiles are manually sorted and graded, according to their condition and the types of fibres used; the industry sorts and distributes used textiles into some 140 different grades, but these can be broadly split into two categories: wearable and unwearable textiles\(^3\). Items considered to be wearable are often re-sold through charities in the UK, whilst those considered unsuitable are exported wholesale to other markets (mostly countries in Europe and Africa, detailed in the following section), recycled or, if contaminated, disposed of.

Following its acquisition of Kettering Textiles in 2013, the Salvation Army became the UK’s largest seller of rag in the charity sector, earning £31million from sales in the same year\(^4\).

**Headline Facts: Clothing in the UK\(^5\)**
- The average UK household owns around £4,000 worth of clothes.
- Around 30\% of clothing in wardrobes has not been worn for at least a year.
- The cost of this unused clothing in the wardrobe is estimated to be around £30 billion.
- It is estimated that £140 million worth (around 350,000 tonnes) of used clothing goes to landfill in the UK every year.
- Two-thirds of UK consumers buy or receive pre-owned (or second-hand) clothes, and there is a willingness to wear more, especially if a better range were available.
- At HWRCs nearly 30\% of non-clothing textiles were estimated to be re-usable.

**The UK Export Market**

Andrew Brookes, author of *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes*, estimates that only 10-30\% of what is given to UK charities overall actually ends up being sold through their retail channels (largely in-store but many charities also have an online offering too)\(^6\). The recent Environmental Audit Committee report on UK fashion also stated that only 30\% of collected textiles were then re-sold in the UK, with much of the remainder being exported for re-use\(^7\). A 2015 news article reported that of the 11,000 tonnes of clothing donated annually to Oxfam, 3,000 tonnes (27\%) is sold in its shops, 1,000 tonnes are disposed of, and 5,600 tonnes are exported to Eastern Europe and East and West Africa\(^8\).

The UK exports collected used textiles for re-use and recycling in overseas markets, and in 2016 was the single largest exporter to several countries in Europe (including Poland, Hungary and Ukraine) and Africa (Benin). The majority of exported used UK textiles are exported to sub-Saharan Africa, the European Union (mainly Poland and Hungary), Asia (mostly Pakistan) and non-EU Eastern European countries (mostly Ukraine)\(^9\). The market for used textiles is significant, with 4.2million tonnes traded globally in 2014 to a value of $4.4billion; the UK’s share of this amounted to 352,000 tonnes, worth £342million\(^10\).

**Collected Textiles in Cornwall**

Cornwall Council states that textiles collected via HWRCs are sent to the West Midlands to be sorted, either for reuse in developing countries or shredded to make items such as cleaning cloths or felt materials used in automotive soundproofing\(^11\). There is no information given for the receiving sorter, nor the exact overseas destinations, though it can be presumed these will be similar to the aforementioned countries typically importing used textiles from the

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\(^3\) WRAP (2019) Textiles: Overview
\(^6\) BBC News (2015)
\(^8\) Ibid.
UK. There are no figures readily available for the volume or value of used textiles collected by the council, or donated to charities in Cornwall, that are then sold on.

**HWRCs Accepting Clothing and Textiles (Cornwall)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>ADDRESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodmin</td>
<td>Wheal Prosper, Lanivet PL30 5HB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bude</td>
<td>Tiscott Wood, Bude EX23 9AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor Bridge</td>
<td>East Taphouse, Liskeard PL14 4NP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falmouth and Penryn</td>
<td>Curvet Farm, Nr Mabe Burnthouse, Falmouth, Cornwall TR10 9DH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helston</td>
<td>Gays Hill, Helston TR13 0QA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launceston</td>
<td>Pennygillam Industrial Estate, Launceston PL15 7PH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newquay</td>
<td>Trevenson Road, Newquay TR7 3BW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Redruth (Pool)</td>
<td>Dudnance Lane, Pool, Redruth TR15 3QT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saltash</td>
<td>Plot 2, Tamar View Industrial Estate, Saltash PL12 6UA</td>
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<td>St Austell</td>
<td>Meaner Road, St Austell PL25 3TD</td>
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<td>St Day</td>
<td>United Downs, St Day, Redruth TR16 5HU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Erth</td>
<td>Treloweth Lane, St Erth, Hayle TR27 6JP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tintagel</td>
<td>Bowithick, Camelford PL34 0HH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truro</td>
<td>Tregurra Park, Newquay Road, Truro TR1 1RH</td>
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**Challenges and Solutions**

There are numerous challenges and solutions associated with the re-use of clothing, including the increasing fast-fashion market with its lower-grade quality items and short in-use lifespan presenting a multitude of environmental, social and economic impacts. The following table lists some of the barriers and opportunities presented by the re-use of clothing and textiles sold in the UK or exported overseas.

**Summary of Textile Re-use Barriers and Opportunities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
<th>BARRIERS</th>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RE-USE (UK)</td>
<td>General negative perception of reused clothing</td>
<td>Eco- and thrift image among certain customer market segments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low pricing of budget retailers</td>
<td>Internet-based sale / donation / swapping</td>
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<td>Greater doorstep collection possible via Local Authorities</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Favourable economics due to low prices</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE-USE (OVERSEAS)</td>
<td>Perceptions of damage to indigenous textile industries</td>
<td>Large markets with current strong demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recycling rate and eventual fates of textiles not well know</td>
<td>Favourable economics for sorting and sale</td>
</tr>
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**Solution: Greater Collection by Local Authorities**

WRAP estimates that a third of all clothing bought in the UK ends up in landfill, equating to around 350,000 tonnes of textiles (worth approximately £140million) being disposed of in this way every year[^13]. However, it is worth noting that such material is vulnerable to water damage and contamination by being left outside so appropriate infrastructure needs to be considered when implementing such collections.

**Challenge: Perceptions of Damage to Indigenous Textile Industries**

It has been acknowledged by the Environmental Audit Committee that the oversupply of used textiles has led to an increase in clothing waste exports to developing nations[^14]. Brookes argues that the increasing intake of Western clothing to countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria (and Sub-Saharan Africa in general) has had a negative effect on local textiles industries, citing how textiles and clothing employment in Ghana fell by 80% between 1975 and 2000, how Nigeria’s one 200,000-strong textile workforce has nearly disappeared, and how in 2015 second-hand

[^14]: Environmental Audit Committee (2019)
garments accounted for 81% of all clothing purchases in Uganda\textsuperscript{15}. Second-hand garment importers have little influence over what clothes they receive for re-sale, since they are usually unsorted or partially sorted, and sold by the tonne\textsuperscript{16}. The negative impacts of this export trade include the fact that the used clothes traded are often in bad condition – making them difficult to sell – and there is a cultural impact in that Western clothes are designed in a way that doesn’t match local fashions or body shapes\textsuperscript{17}.

Environmental Impact

Re-using clothes by selling them via online trading sites, donating them to charity shops, or passing them on to friends all have the environmental benefit of extending the life of the garments. A second-hand sale returns some value to the original owner or provides a charity retailer with revenue, which is better than storing it and no longer using it. Provided that the purchase of a second-hand garment displaces that of a new item, then significant environmental savings are made from avoiding production, processing, and disposal. Value is also retained in the economy through this circular way of doing business. These savings are the reason why extending product lifetimes is the first preference when it comes to actions to improve clothing’s sustainability. Figure 11 (p34) sets out how frequently, and from where, most clothing is acquired. Providing re-use or resale opportunities at the places where most new sales take place can make it easy for customers to extend the life of their own unwanted garments.

Useful Texts and Links

Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes

Andrew Brooks shows how recycled clothes are traded across continents, uncovers how retailers and international charities are embroiled in commodity chains which perpetuate poverty, and exposes the hidden trade networks which transect the globe. Published by Zed Books: London (2015). Excerpts available through Google Books (link here).

Textile Recycling Association

The UK’s trade association for collectors, sorters, processors and exporters of used clothing and textiles – one of their main objectives being to ‘strengthen the economic opportunities for all our members by promoting all forms of textile recycling and the second-hand clothing/shoe recycling industry.’

http://www.textile-recycling.org.uk/

\textsuperscript{15} BBC News (2015)