Public understanding of product lifetimes and durability (2): reuse of bulky items

A research report completed for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by Brook Lyndhurst

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Public understanding of product lifetimes and durability (2): reuse of bulky items

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Executive Summary

This research report presents findings from a research project which explored motivations and barriers for disposing of bulky items for reuse, and in acquiring used bulky items rather than new alternatives. The primary objective of the research was to explore in greater detail a number of issues around reuse that arose from previous research on product lifetimes\(^1\) and to fill gaps in the evidence base on reuse attitudes and behaviours which were identified in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Waste Prevention Evidence Review (WR1204).

The research project was the second stage in a series of research looking at issues on product lifetimes and reuse.

The research followed a qualitative approach and comprised nine discussion groups with consumers. Participants were recruited according to the Defra segmentation model whilst also ensuring a good coverage of key socio-demographic variables including age, socio-economic group and gender. The research focused on a number of product types which were of particular interest to Defra. These included large items of furniture (both wooden and upholstered), large electrical white goods (particularly washing machines and fridges (including fridge freezers)) and televisions.

This summary sets out findings on:

- The main drivers and barriers to disposal of items for reuse;
- The main drivers and barriers to acquiring used items;
- Expectations for used items acquired;
- Reuse channels: likes and dislikes;
- Findings by socio-demographics and Defra segment.

While the purpose of this research was not to explore policy options directly, the intention was that the insights generated could feed into Defra’s evidence base for the development of policy. As such, this summary also sets out an overview of the conclusions and implications drawn from our own interpretation of the findings.

When reading this summary it is important to bear in mind that the findings are the result of qualitative research, the primary aim of which is to investigate attitudes and behaviours in depth. Qualitative research is not, however, designed to provide a statistical measure of the incidence or significance of attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, while the findings reported here may occur more widely, they are not generalisable to the population as a whole.

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\(^1\) The initial research has been reported in a separate document: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra. It is referenced throughout this report whenever relevant and is referred to in the body of the text as ‘the first part of the product lifetimes research’.
1.1 The main drivers and barriers to the disposal of bulky items for reuse

The word ‘disposal’ is used in this report to mean ‘getting rid’ of something. This reflects participants’ own language and understanding. ‘Disposal’ is therefore used to refer to the act of ‘getting rid’ of something, regardless of whether items became waste or were reused.

Overall, we found that disposal behaviours were very mixed. However, for unbroken, ‘good enough’ bulky items, family and friends were reported by many (although not all) as the first disposal option that participants tried to use. If getting rid of items to family or friends was not successful, the ‘tip’ or ‘council collections’ were then usually seen as the next best options. This research cannot quantify the number of items that ended up in the ‘tip’, but many participants reported that they did not expend a great deal of effort on trying to give items away to family and friends, and their success rates in so doing appeared patchy and seemed to vary considerably by person and product.

For other participants ‘the tip’ was the first and preferred disposal option, even if items were ‘good enough’ to be reused. ‘The tip’ was mentioned as a first option for disposal most frequently in the Reading, Milton Keynes and Manchester groups, but was mentioned less often in discussions in London and Hove. Collections were also a preferred option in some locations, particularly Milton Keynes. Variations in service provision from location to location were apparent, and factors such as whether a charge was made for council collections and how well-known and well-liked local Furniture Reuse Organisations and charities were, both featured prominently in many of the discussions around preferred disposal options. Having access to a large vehicle suitable for transporting bulky items was also mentioned by participants in those locations where ‘the tip’ was a preferred option.

There were also other participants who reported preferring a number of other channels for getting rid of bulky items, the most popular of which was eBay/Gumtree followed by Furniture Reuse Organisations/charity shops. There was noticeable variation in the reported use of these other channels by person, product and place.

For broken items, or items that were not considered ‘good enough’ to use again, reuse options were only very rarely considered. It is important to note that what was deemed to be ‘good enough’ reflected participants’ own complex and subjective assessments. The idea of what was ‘good enough’ related not only to the physical properties of the product being disposed of, but also to who was going to get it and what (it was imagined) that recipient was prepared to accept. This meant that the idea of what was ‘good enough’ may or may not have corresponded to whether the item was actually, genuinely reusable in practice. A ‘practice’ which in any case varied from place to place, channel to channel and over time.
Psychological factors connected to personal values around wastefulness, attitudes towards risk and responsibility and issues of self-identity and social context all appeared to play some role in disposal behaviours, and were more important for some participants than others.

However, for those items that were deemed ‘good enough’, participants suggested that the key drivers and barriers to disposing of them for reuse were practical. Given that strong psychological motivations for product reuse were not generally revealed during group discussions, the amount of effort required to reuse items and the inconvenience represented by reuse channels were usually the most fundamental barriers noted.

Environmental factors were not cited as motivations for participants’ decisions on how to get rid of their unwanted bulky household items.

1.2 The main drivers and barriers to acquiring bulky used items

Participants’ ability to afford new meant that they felt they did not ‘have’ to consider used items. Buying new was clearly the norm for many.

That said all participants had had at least some experience of acquiring used bulky items, although the extent of acquisition appeared fairly limited for many. Overall acquisition of used items appeared more usual for participants:

- who had been given items by family and friends;
- at certain lifestages – particularly those setting up home;
- in lower socio-economic groups;
- who enjoyed bargain-hunting or thrift.

Unlike disposal, psychological issues around self identity, social context, trust, risk and disgust/fear of contamination were fundamental barriers to some participants’ willingness to even consider acquiring used items.

Practical barriers were also important, particularly the low price of new products. Another practical issue that came up repeatedly related to concerns over the reliability of used white goods and the inconvenience they would cause if they broke. This echoes the findings in the first part of the product lifetimes research, which identified the importance of the reliability of new white goods and the many and strong barriers to having such items repaired.²

Saving money was reported as the main driver for those who had acquired second-hand items. However, money-saving appeared to be driven in turn by a number of motivations.

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² The initial research has been reported in a separate document: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra. It is referenced throughout this report whenever relevant and is referred to in the body of the text as ‘the first part of the product lifetimes research’.
ranging from financial need at one end of the spectrum, through financial prudence, to the desire to have fun and pick up a bargain at the other.

The strong influence of psychological motivations meant that for many participants, where a product ‘had come from’ and what that product was, were key in determining whether products were considered suitable to acquire second hand.

1.3 Expectations for used items acquired

Used items were commonly seen by participants as stop gaps until something new could be afforded. Depending upon what they were, they were also often seen as being disposable and of low worth. The one major exception to this was ‘quality’ used furniture.

As such, used products could be viewed as following the pattern of ‘product churn’ that epitomises mainstream consumer culture. The extent to which used products provide or could provide an alternative to mainstream consumption patterns, one that would contribute significantly to extending the lifetime of products in use, would benefit from further research and understanding.

1.4 Reuse channels: likes and dislikes

Participants’ experience of reuse channels varied greatly, with the one exception of family and friends.

- **Family and friends** were the preferred channel for many people when it came to both disposing of and acquiring bulky items. Participants found it easy to try and dispose of items this way (although how often they were successful was less clear) and also found it acceptable to acquire items in this way. Knowing and trusting the person, and by extension the product, were very important drivers to acquiring used items from family and friends.

- **eBay** and **Gumtree** followed, at some distance, behind family and friends as the next most commonly mentioned reuse channel. They seemed to be well-used and well-liked by many, particularly younger participants. However, some of those who had not used them occasionally reported fear of strangers and lack of trust in buyers, sellers and the used products they were offering.

- **Furniture Reuse Organisations** and **charity shops** were particularly popular in one location (Hove), but less so in other places, for disposing of items and occasionally for acquiring items. Various issues relating to poor consumer experiences with these channels were brought up in every group. Particularly important was the problem of ‘knock-backs’, where participants’ donations had been turned away. The experience of
having a donation knocked-back created bad feeling and sometimes led to participants reporting that they would not use that channel again.

- Without exception, only a couple of participants in every group had experience of using Freecycle and only a couple more in each group had heard of it. Those same barriers as expressed for eBay and Gumtree relating to trust, risk and fear were also expressed by a few of those who had not experienced Freecycle, although it generally generated interest and positive responses in group discussions.

An extensive (perhaps exhaustive) range of other reuse channels were discussed. Out of these other channels, second-hand shops had been experienced by a few participants, but for acquiring used items only and not for the disposal of unwanted items. Experience by participants of using reuse channels other than those set out above, was low.

In terms of non-reuse channels, the tip (household waste recycling centre), council collections (with the exception of London) and retailer take back were all liked for their convenience.

Greater visibility of material separation at household waste recycling centres may have had some impact on participants’ perceptions of how bulky waste is treated. The requirement to separate out waste was generally seen as a good thing and led to the ‘hope’ or ‘belief’ that the council were ‘recycling’ items. Where, in two locations, a ‘tip shop’ was mentioned, it led to the further belief that some items were being reused.

Consistent with other findings on the barriers to people using reuse channels, this research found the major barriers amongst participants to be:

- **cost** – a particular issue for acquisition. The low cost of new items provided little incentive for many participants to acquire used;
- **information** – participants were often uncertain of what channels existed, where they were, what they would accept/sell and what the quality, reliability, lifetime (and hence value) of the items being sold was;
- **co-ordination** – a particular issue for disposal. Participants had to contact different places to dispose of different types of bulky items for reuse. This represented an inconvenience to them, was perceived as time consuming and a hassle to organise;
- **consistency** – another particular issue for disposal (and linked to both information and co-ordination). Participants gave the impression of not having the appropriate knowledge to reuse items successfully and also implied that they had been receiving mixed messages about which channels would take which items and what condition they needed to be in to be suitable for reuse. As a result participants reported receiving ‘knock backs’ when they tried to dispose of items for reuse, which was described as demotivating by some and unlikely to encourage future attempts at reuse.
1.5 Findings by socio-demographics and Defra segments

Some potential indications of differences by either age or socio-economic group emerged from the focus groups. These should be treated only as exploratory and as potentially indicative, as the purpose of qualitative research is not to quantify the incidence of behaviours within population groups; that is something which would need to be done with quantitative research.

**Age/lifestage**

Links were apparent between lifestage and reuse activity. In particular, younger participants setting up home were the most vocal about their experience of acquiring used items. Older participants who might no longer acquire used items could often recall when they had been setting up home and had ‘had’ to have used items. Overall (with some exceptions) participants expected to move (or had moved) out of this lifestage and into a stage where they could afford to buy new.

**Socio-economic group**

There were clear links between the rejection of used items and the stigma of neediness amongst a number of participants who were, or who had previously been, in lower socio-economic groups. This applied strongly to acquiring used items, but could also influence feelings about disposal and wanting to avoid implying that others might be needy by offering items for reuse.

**Defra segment**

We noticed very little difference by Defra segment, with one minor exception: ‘Waste watchers’ were noticeably distinct in every group, particularly around their commitment to disposing of bulky items for reuse.

1.6 Conclusions and implications

Overall, our research found that participants’ views on reuse were informed by a complex variety of psychological and practical factors that were subject to change over time and appeared to vary across an individual’s life stage and financial circumstances, as well as being affected by the product type and also the reuse channel in question. The fragmentation of the reuse ‘market’, such as it is, adds further complexity to the picture, contributing to inconsistent and unpredictable reuse behaviour.

These factors, taken together, mean that in effect there is no standard, objective measure of whether or not something can be reused.

It is little surprise then, that as far as many participants were concerned ‘reuse’ was not what they were doing at all – they were usually ‘getting rid of things’ or ‘getting new things’.
Occasionally they described what they were doing as ‘recycling’. However, not only was ‘reuse’ not a term used by participants, by and large it did not seem to be a motivation for their behaviour either, regardless of how they chose to describe that behaviour.

These conclusions suggest that it is unlikely that increases in the rate of disposal of bulky items for reuse could successfully be led by individuals on an ad hoc basis. Instead, it is possible that the provision of a more consistent and better understood ‘reuse service’ that could mirror the success of the ‘recycling service’ already provided by local authorities across the country, could be a promising way forward.

Responses other from the participants indicated that having access to a ‘one-stop-shop’ for reuse services may be one way of achieving a much-needed consistency in approach. For example, this could involve a single, local responsible body being the one point of contact by the public for the disposal of all bulky items, regardless of their condition. That organisation could then coordinate the sorting and distribution of the items to the appropriate channels, according to their potential for reuse.

From the point of view of disposal, it is clear from this research that any reuse service needs to consider how to address the barriers to reuse. Participants in this research clearly wanted a service that was fast, convenient and free at the point of use, regardless of the type of item and the condition it was in.

From the point of view of acquisition, our findings revealed that few participants were attracted to buying used bulky products at all, given the affordability of new products, the pleasure taken in buying things that are “new and shiny” and the fact that new products are seen to be, if not particularly reliable and durable, then at least more of a known quantity than used items.

However, in our view, there may be some scope for increasing the market share of used products, particularly if the shopping experience was made more akin to the experience of shopping for new items, and also if some indication could be given of the history and quality of used items and their remaining expected lifetime.

Finally, but very importantly, even if the actual experience of reuse is improved, communicating messages aimed at improving the image of reuse may also be needed to help the reuse of bulky products become a more widespread and ‘normal’ behaviour.

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3 In London, an initiative of this kind is already underway, with the London Community Resource Network having received £8million funding to run the ‘London Reuse Network’ which will offer a service that aims to “pick up, recycle and sell furniture, white goods, wood, bikes, toys and textiles and be contactable via one ‘reuse hotline’.”  http://www.socialenterpriselive.com/section/news/green/20100712/worlds-largest-reuse-network-launches-%C2%A38m-funding

4 Woman, group 2, London
2 Introduction

Following the completion of Brook Lyndhurst’s initial research into people’s attitudes towards product durability and lifetimes, this second phase of research has been undertaken on behalf of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to explore attitudes and experiences relating to the reuse of bulky household items.\(^5\)

2.1 Research aims and objectives

The primary objectives of the research are to follow up in greater detail a number of insights around reuse that arose from the first phase of the product lifetimes research and to fill gaps in the evidence base on reuse attitudes and behaviours which were identified in Defra’s Household Waste Prevention Evidence Review (WR1204).

The new research explored motivations and barriers for disposing of bulky items for reuse, and in acquiring used bulky items rather than new alternatives. A number of product types were of particular interest to Defra; these included large items of furniture (both wooden and upholstered), large white goods (particularly washing machines and fridges (including fridge freezers)) and televisions.

2.2 Summary overview of findings from the literature

A rapid, scene-setting and non-systematic literature review was carried out at the start of the first part of the product lifetimes research, with the main aim of informing the design of the primary research. For ease of reference, and to provide a background context for this second part of the research, a brief and therefore limited summary of the relevant findings on product reuse follows below. Overall, the review found limited evidence on consumer attitudes and behaviour relating to the reuse of bulky items. This is particularly true of the acquisition of used bulky items.

Unless otherwise stated, the references for the findings in this summary of the literature are to be found in Brook Lyndhurst (2009b) Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP. A copy of the literature review and a full bibliography can be found in the annexes to the first product lifetimes report.

\(^5\) The initial research has been reported in a separate document: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra. It is referenced throughout this report whenever relevant and is referred to in the body of the text as ‘the first part of the product lifetimes research’.
2.2.1. How are bulky items disposed of?

There are no definitive estimates of household bulky waste in England, though several studies (including WRAP, unpublished 2010) have attempted to size and characterise the sector.

One study found that in terms of overall reuse behaviours, giving items to friends and family was the most common reuse behaviour (82% of respondents (Association of Charity Shops, 2006)), though another study estimated that this type of behaviour was less common when only bulky waste was asked about (20% of respondents (Curran et al, 2007)).

In terms of formal reuse channels, rates have been found to vary substantially by channel:

- charity shops (LCRN, 2008) and charity collections (Curran & Williams, 2007) may achieve 80% - 85% reuse;
- local authorities’ bulky waste collections achieve only 2% on average (Curran & Williams, 2007);
- and household waste recycling centres 3% (Curran & Williams, 2007).

Curran & Williams (2007, cited in WR1204) estimated total bulky waste (excluding textiles) at 269,000 tonnes. Most bulky waste is managed by local authorities but civil society organisations make a significant contribution to reuse: around 90,000 tonnes is collected through Furniture Reuse Organisations (Furniture Reuse Organisations) (FRN, undated).

Examples exist of higher rates of reuse through local authority channels where the service infrastructure is well integrated (for example, in some UK local authority/civil society arrangements or in other countries such as Flanders – see WR1204 L2-m4).

2.2.2. Why were participants motivated to reuse?

Two principal motivations for both disposal and acquisition have been found by previous research:

- to support charity;
- to make or save money.

There were reports of some participants buying new items as an alternative to mainstream consumerism, but no strong link between reuse behaviours and positive environmental attitudes has been found in the literature reviewed.

2.2.3. What are the barriers to donating items for reuse?

The literature review identified numerous and diverse barriers to the donation of items for reuse:

- Reuse does not have a distinct meaning for consumers;
- Reuse channels are not visible or well-known;
• Lack of knowledge that items can be donated for reuse;
• Not ‘caring’ about what happens to unwanted products;
• Inconvenience of donating, including not being able to make time and effort to make donations;
• Lack of trust, both in the reuse channel and the products for sale;
• Not knowing what is acceptable to give away, which either deters donation or leads to rejections and subsequent consumer confusion;
• Service dissatisfaction – being put off by bulky reuse collection arrangements, for example:
  o the waiting time between asking for a pick up and when collection occurs
  o bookable collection slots that are whole days rather than given times
  o the charge made for collection
• Perceived deterioration in the quality and durability of products, which limits items’ reusability and value. For bulky items, this related to flat pack furniture in particular;
• Hoarding items until they either become technically obsolete or age/depreciate to the extent that no-one else would want to accept or buy them.

2.2.4. What are the barriers to purchasing used items?

The literature review suggested that the principal barriers to second hand purchase are the desire for new goods (or ‘virginity value’ (Brook Lyndhurst, 2007, WR0104)) and a general dislike or stigma attached to used goods. Perceptions which underpin that stigma include:
• the perception that used goods will be unattractive or old fashioned;
• the rejection of a ‘needy’ self-identity and embarrassment at seeming needy;
• fear of ‘contamination’ by others where the item has been intimate contact with a donor (in terms of bulky items, mattresses in particular were mentioned);
• lack of warranty on re-sold or refurbished products.

2.3 Method

This research was designed to explore issues around reuse in more detail, as significant gaps in the evidence base exist on the understanding of attitudes and behaviours relating to product reuse. These gaps were identified in Defra’s Household Waste Prevention Evidence Review and were also highlighted in the first part of this research, which focussed on public understanding of product lifetimes and durability in general.

This research project is the second part of a suite of research into product lifetimes, and it focuses specifically upon the reuse of bulky household items. Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative methodology was chosen as the most suitable approach.

The research was conducted with 86 participants in nine focus groups around the country. A focus group methodology was adopted because it allows the interactive patterns amongst group members to be observed, making it an excellent method for researching group norms
and the communication and construction of knowledge in a social setting. As such, focus group discussions can provide insights into the ways in which product reuse and waste are socially constructed and acted upon by participants. For this reason, findings from focus groups are also particularly useful for understanding the potential for, and influences on, behaviour change.

As part of the qualitative methodology used, the sample was purposefully selected to reflect the issues of importance to the research and “to represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences rather than to replicate their frequency in the wider population.” On this basis, participants were recruited according to the Defra segmentation model whilst also ensuring a good coverage of key socio-demographic variables including age, socio-economic group and gender. Groups were held in London, Milton Keynes, Hove, Reading and Manchester.

The primary framework for sampling was drawn from the Defra segmentation model for the following reasons:

- given our understanding of the literature on this topic, we hypothesised that there could be attitudinal and behavioural differences by Defra segment which it would be useful to explore further;
- to help limit the ‘embarrassment factor’ that could well stifle open and honest debate about reuse by grouping people with similar outlooks together.

Nine groups were considered sufficient to give a good spread of participants and discussions. We grouped particular well-matched segments together and planned to conduct three groups of each of the following mix of segments:

- Positive Greens and Concerned Consumers;
- Waste Watchers with Sideline Supporters and Cautious Participants;
- Stalled Starters and Honestly Disengaged.

Although we had previously grouped these segments together in other focus group research for Defra and had found them to work well, in this instance after the first six groups had been conducted, we felt that the ‘waste watchers’ were distinctly different in their attitudes towards reuse when compared with the ‘sideline supporters’ and ‘cautious participants’. Feeling that ‘waste watchers’ had more in common with ‘positive greens’ and ‘concerned consumers’, we moved them into that group for the final three discussions.

Participants were also screened for previous reuse behaviour to ensure that at least five participants in each group had actual experience of either acquiring used bulky items or disposing of such items for reuse. This strategy was adopted in order to avoid potentially abstract discussions that could have run the risk of adding little to what is already known about reuse behaviour.

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7 Ibid, p36
8 Evidence (Brook Lyndhurst (2009b) Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP WR1204) shows that bulky reuse behaviours through formal channels are not widespread.
However, despite our concerns, it transpired that recruiting participants with at least some experience of bulky item reuse was not a challenge. In fact every single participant had some experience of either acquiring used items or disposing of them for reuse, and nearly all had experience of both acquisition and disposal reuse behaviours and no potential participants had to be turned away on the basis of their lack of experience of reusing bulky items.9

The discussion groups lasted approximately one and half hours. Audio recordings and full transcriptions were made of the group discussions. As a ‘thank you’ for participating (and to reimburse attendees for travel and their time), an incentive of £40 was given to each respondent.

2.3.1. The discussion groups

The group discussions were facilitated according to a topic guide agreed with Defra. In designing the topic guide, the research team took into account the literature summarised above and any apparent evidence gaps. The table below sets out the key themes covered by the topic guide.

![Figure 1: Key themes of the topic guide for the discussion groups](image)

9 Reuse behaviours that were included for the purposes of recruitment included both informal and formal channels. The ease with which people with experience of this kind of reuse behaviour were recruited may indicate that informal reuse of bulky items, unlike the more formal behaviours previously researched, is actually fairly widespread, although this would need to be researched further using a quantitative methodology.
2.3.2. Interpretation and limitations of the research findings

The qualitative nature of the research method
Qualitative methods are designed to investigate attitudes and behaviours in depth rather than to provide a statistical measure of the incidence or significance of either. This means that findings from qualitative research are not generalisable to the population as a whole. Therefore, for example, where we have reported that ‘all’ or ‘many’ participants did or thought something, this does not mean that all or many people in the wider population could be expected to act or think in this way.

It is also important to note that focus groups are intended to be semi-structured and fluid discussions. Although a topic guide is used, groups need to be skilfully moderated so that participants have the opportunity to interact with and to probe one another, and to develop avenues of discussion of relevance to them. It is therefore not possible or desirable to count up responses and describe the number of people who answered a particular question in a particular way. Instead, this qualitative method produces findings on issues of consensus and disagreement, understanding and confusion, feeling and values, as drawn out during the focus group discussions with and between participants.

Although the large number of groups undertaken in this project may mean that general insights deduced from the discussions could apply more widely, to legitimately make robust generalisations to the wider population, quantitative research (such as survey work) would need to be carried out. Qualitative work is therefore sometimes used as a precursor to the use of quantitative methods, to generate the understanding upon which survey questions are then based. Where this research has indicated that there could usefully be further research undertaken, we have raised this in the report.

The location of the focus groups
Focus groups were held in London, Milton Keynes, Hove, Reading and Manchester. This ensured a good geographic spread of locations, but was never intended to be ‘representative’ of different regions or areas, merely to minimise the potential for any regional bias of the results. Nor were the locations chosen for any particular analytical purpose (such as differences in bulky waste/reuse service infrastructure). However, despite this, and although the number of groups was not large enough to allow for systematic analysis of the findings by area, some very interesting indicative differences by location emerged which are discussed in sections 4 and 5.

In selecting the locations of the groups we were also guided by the areas in which our recruitment consultants, Criteria, had particularly strong recruiters. This helped to ensure good participant turnout and good recruitment to our sampling specifications.
The use of quotes
Quotes have been used in the report with the aim of providing evidence, showing language and behaviour, or sometimes to make the reported findings more vivid. The quotes therefore provide readers with the ability to hear some of the evidence almost at first hand, to consider their own reactions to it, to see for themselves how participants use language to convey meaning and behaviour, and to reflect upon the way in which the evidence has been interpreted.

Great care has been taken in the use of quotes to ensure that they give a fair impression of the point being made and that they have been used in the correct context given the overall sense of the group discussion on that point. We have also taken care to present evidence that addresses the range of observations made by participants, including contradictory evidence and cases negative to the overarching point being made.

The possibility of social desirability responses
In general we sought to reduce social desirability responses through careful structuring of the group discussion. Despite this, there remains the possibility that our questioning and/or the group dynamics encouraged participants to put forward opinions that they felt ‘fitted’ or ‘sounded good’ within the general context. Where we strongly suspect that this might have happened, we present the findings with an appropriate note of caution.

The use of brand names
Brand names are inevitably mentioned in this report as part of the research findings. Where they are mentioned, they are contained in the reported speech of the participants and are only representative of the opinions of those participants and should not be given any wider significance. Any opinion expressed on named brands by the participants quoted in this report should not therefore be taken as the opinion of either Brook Lyndhurst or of Defra.

2.4 Outline of contents
This report presents the findings from the group discussions and the analysis of those findings, including a discussion of their potential implications for policy.

This report covers:
- Research findings
  - Disposal
    - Experience
    - Drivers and barriers
    - Perceived benefits
    - Channels

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10 Boeijj, H. Ibid pp200-202
○ Acquisition
  ▪ Experience
  ▪ Drivers and barriers
  ▪ Perceived benefits
  ▪ Expectations for the lifetime of used products
  ▪ Feelings towards used products compared with new
  ▪ Channels

• Conclusions
• Reflections on the implications for policy
3 Research Findings: overview

Overall, discussions were lively and participants were engaged and enthusiastic about the subject-matter. However, the following general points are worth bearing in mind before the findings are reported in any further detail.

‘Reuse’ was not a term used by participants, nor was it a motivation for their behaviour
Participants talked in terms of either ‘getting rid’ of things or ‘getting’ or ‘buying’ things. The term, if any, that participants used to describe reuse behaviours was ‘recycling’. However, when deciding which disposal or acquisition option to choose, participants appeared to be driven by a range of psychological and practical motivations that largely excluded a desire to ‘reuse’ or even to ‘recycle’ products. These motivations are explored in more detail below in sections 4.2 and 5.3.11 For an impressionistic ‘snapshot’ of participants’ language during the group discussions, see the word cloud12 at Annex 2.

There is no standard, objective measure of whether or not something can be reused
It became clear during the course of the discussions that not only did individual participants have very diverse ideas in their own minds when they made a judgement on whether an item was good enough to reuse, but also that they were being given mixed messages from the different providers of reuse channels as to what was or was not acceptable for reuse. This in turn appeared to be a result of the highly variable provision of reuse services where ‘rules’ about what was accepted for reuse could change from provider to provider within the same area, within the same provider over time, as well as from area to area.

Participants were more reluctant to discuss acquisition than disposal
This reflected both the seemingly low incidence of ownership of used bulky items (at least relative to the ownership of new items) and also the stigma that appeared to attach to the acquisition of used items. In other words, it may have been socially undesirable to admit to owning used bulky household items.

To address this, we used our initial analysis from the first six groups to make changes to the topic guide in order tease out issues around acquisition and ownership of used items further in the final three groups.

There was a divide in both disposal and acquisition between family and friends on the one hand and all other channels on the other
This was particularly the case for acquisition, but it also applied to disposal. Family and friends were the only reuse channels that a number of participants would even consider at all. Everything else was simply no-go. The importance of family and friend networks to

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11 This echoes findings from other research Brook Lyndhurst (2009b) Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP
12 Created using wordle.net
reuse attitudes and behaviours has been found elsewhere.\textsuperscript{13} This research underscores the importance of those findings.

**There are indications of potential differences in attitudes and behaviours towards reuse by age and socio economic group**

This research recruited primarily to Defra segments, however, we did pick up on differences within the groups that may be reflective of differences by age or lifestage and socio-economic group. Since this research is qualitative, it is not possible to make generalisations about the wider population along socio-demographic lines. However, where indications of potential differences by either age or socio economic group have been identified, this has been noted.\textsuperscript{14}

**There are indications of potential differences in attitudes and behaviours towards reuse by location**

Disposal behaviours in particular appeared to vary by location, seeming to reflect the different options available for getting rid of bulky items in each of the areas where groups were held. There was also a noticeable difference in the level of awareness of where used bulky items could be bought in Hove, relative to the other locations. Hove appeared to be different in that it had a number of very well-known charities collecting and selling used bulky products.

\textsuperscript{13} Lane, R, Horne, R and Bicknell, J, Australian Geographer vol 40 (2), *Routes of Reuse of Second-Hand Goods in Melbourne Households*, Routledge. This study of 306 households in Melbourne, Australia showed the importance of informal exchange in the reuse of bulky items.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. The Australian study showed that “Socio-demographic characteristics such as household composition, employment status, education level and country of birth, along with infrastructure issues, such as dwelling types and residential tenures, are significant predictors of the use of various second-hand channels.” We are not aware of any such comparable study in the UK.
4 Research findings: disposal

This section sets out the findings for each of the following research questions:

- Did participants dispose of bulky items for reuse?
- What were the drivers and barriers to disposing of items for reuse?
- What were the perceived benefits of disposing of items for reuse?
- Which reuse channels did participants use to dispose of unwanted items and why?
- Which other channels did participants use to dispose of their unwanted bulky items and why?

4.1 Did participants dispose of bulky items for reuse?

This research cannot quantify the proportion of bulky items participants either reused or did not reuse. However, it can provide a general context for understanding participants’ interest in and practice of reuse.

It is important to note that the word ‘disposal’ is used in this report to mean ‘getting rid’ of something. This reflects participants’ own language and understanding. ‘Disposal’ is therefore used to refer to the act of ‘getting rid’ of something, regardless of whether items became waste or were reused. Overall, we found that:

- Disposal behaviours were very mixed.
- For unbroken, ‘good enough’15 bulky items, family and friends were reported by many (although not all) as the first disposal option that participants tried to use. If disposing of items to family or friends was not successful, the ‘tip’ or ‘council collections’ were then seen as the next best option.16
- For other participants ‘the tip’ and council collections were the first and preferred disposal option, even if items were ‘good enough’ to be reused. Participants choosing the tip as a first option were less common in London and Hove, but appeared to be more prevalent in the other locations (Reading, Milton Keynes and Manchester).
- Some participants did report using a range of other channels for getting rid of bulky items, the most popular of which was eBay/Gumtree followed by Furniture Reuse Organisations/charity shops. There was noticeable variation in the reported use of these other channels by person, product and place.
- For broken items, or items that were not considered ‘good enough’ to use again, reuse options were only very rarely considered.

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15 What is ‘good enough’ to give away is of crucial importance for reuse behaviour. See below for a full discussion of this point.
16 How much effort people were prepared to go to before they opted for ‘the tip’ varied, but was generally low. See below for a full discussion of this point.
These findings support the findings from the first part of the product lifetimes research, which suggested that ‘workhorse products’ (products that were relied upon for their functionality, which included white goods) and ‘investment products’ (products with higher than normal monetary and emotional value, which tended to include large items of furniture) were often kept until they either broke down or wore out.\(^\text{17}\)

4.2 What were the drivers and barriers to disposing of items for reuse?

The group discussions presented a mixed picture of the motivational drivers and barriers for bulky product reuse. Different participants within the groups clearly felt very differently about why they would or would not try to reuse bulky items and very rarely did a whole group consensus emerge on any issue. The key motivating factors that emerged were both psychological and practical. Each is addressed in turn below.

4.2.1. Psychological factors

The findings present a number of complicated psychological factors that appeared, at least in part, to drive reuse behaviours. This section considers each of the following psychological factors in turn:

- Self-identity and social context;
- Personal values: dislike of wastefulness;
- Attitudes towards risk and responsibility.

Self-identity and social context

It was clear that participants held diverse understandings of what was, or was not, ‘good enough’ to give away. This appeared to have a significant impact on participants’ reported behaviour, with some being willing to give away almost anything and others being willing to give away nothing at all.

Self-identity and social context appeared to be particularly important:

- To those who associated used items with ‘neediness’ and who reported that they would not accept used items themselves. Such participants were worried about either

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\(^{17}\) Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
being ‘embarrassed’, ‘mortified’ or ‘offended’, if the item they were offering was rejected. They also expressed the concern that they might cause offence to others when offering items because this might imply that others were needy. The impression was given that reusing unwanted items was something that some participants, their family and their friends did not do. The participants holding this view tended to be (or gave the impression that they had been in the past) from lower socio-economic groups.

W: I don’t know whether it is snobbery, but you know, you don’t want to palm rubbish off on to people do you? I mean the cooker I got rid of was actually, I cleaned it before taking it to the skip, only because I didn’t want, you know, anything left on it.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

- To those who were very active reusers – both in terms of acquisition and disposal - and appeared to be part of an informal reuse network. Such networks could be made up of family and friends or operate through mechanisms such as Freecycle, and seemed to foster the idea that most things were capable of being reused. Belonging to such a network did not appear to be linked to socio-economic group, but it was something raised almost exclusively by women.

As the quote below illustrates, these networks were not just practical mechanisms for exchange, although as section 4.4.1 below sets out, the practical convenience of informal exchange appealed to many, they could also be experienced as part of a person’s ‘social capital’. The idea of social capital suggests that networks are more than just the sum of their parts and that, very importantly, they have ‘emergent properties’ such as trust, reciprocity and co-operation.18 The role of these emergent properties in informal reuse networks may be particularly important to their success because of the peculiarly personal nature of reuse, both in terms of the products having been used by someone else and the site of exchange being in people’s own homes.

W: You feel good when you donate, give it to someone else.
   Even if they are not poor. My friend, I have got some extra and she needs it and I don’t want it, for me it is pointless to keep it. I give to friends and I take from them if they have got extra. We do that, yes, and neighbours as well.

M: That is what I call love.

Group 2, London

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18 For a review of social capital theories and research see Office for National Statistics (2001), Social Capital: A review of the literature. Social analysis and reporting division
Even if participants did not express strong feelings either way, their understanding of what was acceptable to give away still appeared to be linked to some extent to self-identity and social context.

This was most apparent in participants’ judgement of what was ‘good enough’ to give away. Many participants claimed that something was only ‘good enough’ to give away if they themselves would want it. At first glance, this explanation sounds questionable because the very fact that people were getting rid of something seems to suggest that they felt it was no longer good enough for them.

However, on closer examination of the discussions, what participants tended to be saying was that it would have to be good enough for them, *if they were in someone else’s position* – generally someone more needy or less fussy than themselves. These ‘others’ that participants had in mind could be family and friends, but discussions on the topic of what was good enough often led participants to talk about certain types of people more generally: people starting out, single parents, ex-prisoners and the homeless were all mentioned in this context.

Therefore the idea of what was ‘good enough’ related not only to the physical properties of the product being disposed of, but also to who was going to get it and what (it was imagined) that recipient was prepared to accept. The phrase ‘one man’s junk is another man’s treasure’ was used in four of the groups to describe this phenomenon and its entirely relative nature.

All this meant that the idea of what was ‘good enough’ may or may not have corresponded to whether the item was actually, genuinely reusable in practice. A ‘practice’ which in any case appeared to vary from place to place, channel to channel and over time.

This in turn often led onto discussions where participants expressed frustration, even outrage that their used items had been (or might be) turned down for reuse – an issue that will be explored in greater detail in section 4.4.

*W:*  *With the best will in the world, you could have something practically brand new and ring the council and say, ‘listen you know, you must have lots of single mothers, you must have lots of guys coming, women coming out of prison, whatever, whatever’. No.*

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Group 2, London

There were also discussions in every group about product durability that flowed spontaneously from general discussions around the condition of used items (either for disposal or acquisition). Exactly the same sentiments were expressed as those found in the first part of the product lifetimes research: participants did not think that things were built
to last (these days); it was not their ‘fault’ that things were not good enough to reuse, but the ‘fault’ of manufacturers, retailers or government; products were no longer worth repairing; products tended to break the day after their guarantee had run out.\(^\text{19}\)

\[M:\text{I think it is bang out of order, this. It is pretty well known that a lot of these electrical appliances and stuff have like little circuits in that go wrong after so many years.}\]

\[M:\text{Yes.}\]

\[M:\text{And I can’t believe there is not a law against that to be honest, I really can’t.}\]

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Group 5, Hove

The diagram below illustrates how some of those ideas about what was ‘good enough’ were expressed by group participants. Although the diagram only gives a qualitative impression of the overall reactions amongst group participants and although it is not exhaustive, it does give an indication of the very personal nature of participants’ decisions to dispose of items for reuse and also of the importance of the recipient’s (imagined) reaction to the item being offered. This finding is of particular importance for thinking about where responsibility lies, and ideally should lie, for deciding whether an item is ‘good enough’ to be reused. It is an issue which is revisited in the section on implications (7) below.

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\(^{19}\text{Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra}\)
Personal values - dislike of wastefulness

Just like the participants from the first part of the product lifetimes research, participants in this research generally did not like the idea of wasting something when ‘there was nothing wrong with it’. This was very closely linked to the idea that it was ‘good enough’ for someone else to use, which, as set out above, was not necessarily related to the whether the item was technically ‘reusable’ or technically ‘waste’.

This reported dislike of waste meant that many participants claimed to make at least some effort to try and give such items a new home. This ranged from allowing a few days up to several weeks, and varied from making a few calls to family and friends, to trying to...

20 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
advertise the item for sale, to researching charitable donation options. Whether or not a product was ultimately reused appeared to depend upon a combination of psychological factors, the type of product in question, and the various practical factors set out in section 4.2.2 below.

**Risk, responsibility and trust**

These factors affected the acquisition of used items in particular, but they were also noticeable features of people’s disposal decisions.

Some participants were concerned that their own used items might break or even turn out to be dangerous once they had given them away or sold them. They were concerned that:

- they might anger, disappoint or even endanger family and friends;
- they might damage their reputation with work colleagues;
- they might experience ‘come back’ from more arms length transactions (including online and leaving items on the street). The possibility of being sued was even discussed on several occasions;
- the recipient might dispose of the item irresponsibly and it would be traced back to them, the original owner.

Finding the ‘right’ channel from a safety perspective was therefore reported as being important for many participants. This was particularly the case for electrical items, with some stating that they would only give such items to the council (collection or ‘tip’) to make sure they were ‘properly’ disposed of.

Conversely, others held the view that once they had disposed of an item then it was no longer their responsibility. However, this was usually with reference to furniture rather than electrical goods. Across the discussion groups there were several occasions where participants voiced disapproval of the rejection of items of furniture by charitable organisations because they did not display the requisite ‘fire retardant’ label, seen as a health and safety issue by many and described as ‘health and safety gone mad’ by one woman.21

Also connected to attitudes towards risk was participants’ willingness to deal with strangers, and in particular their willingness to invite them into their homes to view and collect items. Several participants in every group reacted negatively to this idea and consequently to the idea of using online disposal options and local adverts. The quote below related specifically to the idea of Freecycle. It demonstrates the role of trust in shaping people’s perceptions of risk and supports the point made above about the importance of participants’ networks and the properties that emerge from those networks (in other words participants’ social capital) in giving people the confidence to pass on items for reuse.

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21 Reading, group 7
4.2.2. Practical factors

A number of important practical drivers of reuse behaviour emerged from the research. This section considers each of the following practical factors in turn:

- effort and convenience (including access to storage space; locally available channels; awareness and experience of those channels; access to transport and labour)
- raising and money

Effort and convenience

The convenience of disposal options on offer was expressed as a very strong motivating factor for many participants.

The idea of ‘wanting rid’ of unwanted bulky items as quickly and as conveniently as possible was expressed strongly in every group, and often appeared to be at the root of whether or not something ultimately ended up being disposed of for reuse. Many participants described the issue of timing as key. They felt as though they either needed the bulky item in question to be gone before the new replacement arrived or at the very least, shortly afterwards.

W: Are they genuine, like you say? Are they just trying to nick things? You don’t know what you are dealing with, do you?

Group 1, London

W: I must admit by the time you have loaded it up, and then I have got to wait. When I want to get rid of something it is gone as quickly as possible. So if I have got somebody who wants it then great, otherwise I chuck it. I have taken a few bits and pieces to charity and they have said ‘We have too much stuff’ or something like that, and I just think I can’t be dealing with this, so I would rather just chuck it and it is gone.

Group 8, Reading

The diagram below illustrates how a number of different participants described, in their own words, the impetus to ‘get rid’ of unwanted items. The diagram only gives a qualitative impression of the overall reactions amongst group participants and is not exhaustive. However, it is particularly interesting to note that all of the quotes are couched in terms of ‘you’ and not ‘I’. This suggests that participants were describing their behaviour as ‘normal’ and ‘obvious’ – not just something that ‘I’ do, but that ‘you’ do, that everybody does.
The practical factors below were important in helping to determine whether or not that desire to ‘get rid’ led to disposal for reuse or for waste.

- **Access to storage space** – particularly an issue for those living in flats with limited space and lack of garaging. Participants in this situation were less able to hold on to bulky items until a new owner could be found. However, even for participants with some available storage space, very large items such as sofas generally had to be disposed of before or when the new item arrived. The co-ordination of the delivery of the new item with the removal of the old was one of the key attractions of retailer take-back.

The constraints imposed by limited storage space meant that for many (although not all) participants in the groups, the hoarding of bulky items was not acting as a barrier to disposal for reuse. This sets bulky items apart from other household and clothing items as being relatively unaffected by the impulse to hoard.22

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22 See Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra and Brook Lyndhurst (2009b), WR1204, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP
Local provision of disposal channels for bulky items – each of the areas (Milton Keynes, Hove, London, Reading and Manchester) all had different options available for local residents. This included differences in local authority services (such as charging or not charging for collections) and whether household waste recycling centres were perceived as ‘recycling’ centres rather than ‘tips’, as well as the differing presence of charitable organisations for furniture and electrical product donations. These differences materially altered participants’ views on which option was the most convenient for disposing of bulky items from location to location. The extent of the differences reported by location suggests that this may almost have amounted to the existence of different local norms for the disposal of bulky items.

W: I mean it’s not like a tip. I recently went to my dad’s who lives down in Swindon and helped them get rid of a mattress and you literally drive to a tip and chuck everything in what looks like a big landfill. But our dumps aren’t like that around here, it’s all organised, it’s all recycled.

W: Yes.
M: Yes.
W: They’re really quite strict here.

Group 4, Milton Keynes

The above quote illustrates the importance of local infrastructure provision in shaping participants’ perceptions of ‘waste’ and the perceived value of their unwanted items. One participant from Hove referred to the household waste recycling centre as the ‘recycling tip’ and gave the impression that it provided an additional service over and above the ‘tip’, by explaining that “they recycle for you”. This is an important point that is explored in more detail in section 4.5 below.

Awareness and experience of channels - some reuse channels were not widely recognised or used across the groups (see channels section below). Perceptions of the amount of ‘hassle’ involved in different options appeared to be related to how much participants knew about that option and also whether they had experienced it. Variable knowledge about service provision across the groups also suggests inconsistencies in information provision by channel providers. This may have resulted in mixed messages and default assumptions about the kind of products that channels would or would not accept, leading to some options being rejected out of hand as unviable. This affected both electrical items and items of furniture.

Access to transportation and labour - inability to move heavy, bulky items from the home was a potential barrier for any disposal option that did not involve collection by a third party. Online options such as eBay and Freecycle as well as furniture collections by
reuse organisations were all liked for this reason – as were council collections and retailer take back.

**Raising money**

Several, usually younger, participants in each group appeared to be motivated to dispose of bulky items through sites such as eBay in order to raise money. They expressed the view that items that were in good enough condition would be sold and items in poorer condition would be given away (usually on sites such as Gumtree or Freecycle). There were occasionally, usually older, participants who also raised money by selling items through local ads or ‘cash convertors’.

### 4.3 What were the perceived benefits of disposing of items for reuse?

After questioning participants about their experiences of disposal options and the reasons for choosing those options, we then asked them what they thought the benefits of reuse options might be when compared with the alternative. A specific prompt was introduced for environmental factors, but only after participants had exhausted discussion of their own spontaneous suggestions. The factors listed below did not appear to arise as primary motivations for participants’ behaviour, but perhaps were rather more likely to have been ways of rationalising choices after they had been made.

**Philanthropy**

Overwhelmingly, the social aspects of helping those in need and fostering reciprocity amongst friends and family and the local community were widely cited by participants as the most important benefit of disposing of bulky items for reuse. Participants noted not only the benefits to others, but also to themselves because of the ‘feel good factor’ that they felt when donating something to someone who was in need.

*M: Sometimes you feel good in yourself if you give it to someone, just leaving it out for someone, you know they will really appreciate it.*

Group 1, London

**Environment**

Participants struggled to link reuse behaviours to environmental issues. Environmental benefits were rarely raised spontaneously, and when prompted the issue was usually greeted with a few seconds of stunned silence, suggesting participants had never thought about it. Once discussions began, knowledge of potential environmental benefits seemed limited. This finding is consistent with findings from other research on waste
behaviours. The following issues were raised only after specific prompting on the potential environmental benefits of reuse, and even then by only one or two participants in each group:

- **Resource reuse was raised in most groups by one or two individuals.** This point was made in relation to the economic value of metals contained in electrical goods, which in turn appeared to be prompted by local scrap metal collectors raising awareness.

- **Many participants also spoke about the need to reduce waste through reuse, thus helping to reduce waste to landfill, but this was rarely linked to wider environmental consequences other than pollution leaching out from landfill sites.**

- **Reducing product churn was suggested in some groups as a benefit of reusing products rather than disposing of them before the end of their useful lives.** No one expressed an awareness of embodied carbon in products as a reason for needing to reduce product churn.

- **However, this argument was countered in all instances by those who felt that product churn was necessary for economic prosperity and job creation.** In some groups others then went on to speculate as to whether ‘recycling’ might also be good for the economy.

  
  M: And if they are not buying a new TV you are doing someone out of a job, you know, someone’s job creating a TV and selling the TV.
  
  M: Yes.
  
  W: I suppose we have all got to recycle - less that goes in the ground.
  
  M: I think you are right, the downside is you may put somebody out of work, simply because you are recycling...I wonder how people like the Chinese have got this wonderful system of recycling and making things out of it....Presumably we don't because we just export the rubbish...But they have got a manufacturing thing that makes things out of our rubbish.

  Group 4, Milton Keynes

This line of reasoning was also occasionally connected to getting products repaired and to the potential benefits to the British economy and to British jobs of having a domestic repair industry which might reduce the import of new goods manufactured abroad. This mirrors the nature of some of the debates between participants in the first part of the product lifetimes research.

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23 Brook Lyndhurst (2009b), WR1204, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP

24 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
4.4 Which reuse channels did participants use to dispose of unwanted items and why?

Bearing in mind what has been said above about the limitations in the extent of interest in reuse options compared with other disposal options, the following list sets out, roughly in order of frequency of mention of experience, which reuse channels were used by participants to dispose of unwanted bulky items. This does not represent a strict measurement of popularity, rather it is our judgment gained from the analysis of the group discussions. The options have been split into two broad groups: family and friends on the one hand and all other options on the other. This reflects the clear distinction that was drawn within the groups between the importance of family and friends as the first port of call when trying to reuse an unwanted item.

4.4.1. Family and friends

Giving unwanted bulky items to family and friends was by far the most popularly reported experience of reusing all kinds of bulky items. Participants reported liking ‘looking after’ family and friends by giving them items, particularly if they knew someone was in need of a particular product.

\[ W: \text{ Friends or family first, because you look after your own. After that, yes it is probably the council.} \]

Group 4, Milton Keynes

However, not all participants who gave items to family and friends necessarily couched their behaviour in such altruistic terms. Participants in several groups referred to ‘palming off’ unwanted items, particularly on family members.

\[ M: \text{ It depends, there is a distinction to be made between friends and family. Family I would possibly palm off anything that I could get rid of.} \]

\[ M: \text{ Yes.} \]

Group 3, Milton Keynes

This reveals the way in which, by giving unwanted items to family and friends, participants were able to tick several boxes at once, for example: convenience; helping others out; and avoiding waste. However, convenience may have been the strongest motivation given that a few quick calls to family and friends was seen as an acceptable level of effort to expend on trying to give the unwanted item away. Often this was as far as many participants would go in trying to reuse items, reflecting the strong motivation of ‘getting rid’ of things as quickly and conveniently as possible. This tended to mean that if family and friends did not take the item, then the ‘tip’ or council collection would be used. This does raise the question of how often participants’ attempts at giving to family and friends were successful, and how
often something would end up in the tip instead – a question that this research can only note, but not answer.\textsuperscript{25}

Apart from talking about ‘family’ and ‘friends’ generally, ‘mum’ was given a specific mention by many participants (it was one of the most commonly used words across all the group discussions and appears in the word cloud\textsuperscript{26} at Annex 2). This is important to note from the perspective of thinking about communications in general and targeting communications in particular. It may also be a useful insight into the way in which informal reuse networks operate and who the key players in those networks might be.

4.4.2. All other reuse options

Following on from family and friends, in approximately the order of how commonly participants reported having experience of using them, were:

- eBay and Gumtree
- Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity shops
- Leaving items on street (excluding skips)
- Freecycle
- Small ads

This list does not represent a strict measurement of the popularity of other reuse options, rather it is our judgment gained from the analysis of the group discussions.

In addition to options listed above, the ‘tip shop’, pawn shops, second hand shops, auction houses and car boot sales were all reportedly experienced by only a very few participants as ways of getting rid of unwanted bulky items for reuse.

The barriers and drivers to using all of these options listed above are reported in more detail below. However, before that is done, it is worth noting that there was a large amount of uncertainty expressed by participants over what the various channels would accept. This echoes findings from other research.\textsuperscript{27} This was not, however, the same as the judgments made by participants about what they themselves thought was ‘good enough’ (for which see above), but instead reflected judgments made by participants about what a reuse channel would think was ‘good enough’.

Participants were often uncertain about the available disposal and reuse channels for bulky items. Words such as ‘probably’, ‘maybe’ and ‘might’ featured strongly. It was also common for participants to report hearsay and to remark that they had ‘heard’ or ‘believed’ that a certain channel either did or did not take particular products. Furthermore, participants used the group discussions as an opportunity to share knowledge about the location of local

\textsuperscript{25} Quantitative, survey work would be needed to explore this question further.
\textsuperscript{26} Created at wordle.net
\textsuperscript{27} Brook Lyndhurst (2009b) Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP
disposal options, because it became clear that many participants did not know about the options available to them in their area and were keen to find out more.

**eBay and Gumtree**

Awareness of eBay and Gumtree was high amongst participants. They were used as a way of raising cash, particularly by younger participants. They were seen as low hassle to advertise items and liked because the buyers came to collect bulky items. The Gumtree Freebies service was used by those wanting hassle-free, local disposal of bulky items that were perhaps not considered good enough to sell. However, a number of participants reported experiencing ‘time wasters’ on Gumtree and had experienced occasional disappointment with the prices that some of their items had sold for on eBay.

Younger participants trying to raise cash represented the main exception to the general ‘family and friends’ first rule described above. In this case, family and friends might only have been asked if an item had not sold successfully. Alternatively, family and friends might have been offered first refusal on the sale, rather than the item simply being given away to them for free.

Awareness of eBay was universal, although Gumtree was slightly less well known. However, amongst those who did not use these online options, there were barriers around fear of strangers and personal safety, perceptions of the process being a hassle and not worth the effort, not knowing how to use the sites (or indeed how to use a computer at all, for one older participant), and also of not having access to a computer.

**Furniture Reuse Organisations and Charity shops**

Use of this channel varied greatly by area. It was used by many in Hove, but only by a few participants in other locations. Participants who had experience of Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity shops liked the collection service offered, but disliked the perceived ‘fussiness’ of the staff; the limitations to the size of furniture that could be taken; being told that they had ‘enough’ of that type of product already and did not want another; the reported refusal to remove anything from higher than the first storey of a building and refusal to take items of furniture without the requisite fire safety label. Having an offer of furniture knocked back sometimes meant that participants reported that they would not use that Furniture Reuse Organisation or charity shop in future.
W: I gave the sofas to Martlets because I thought they would be useful for them and I was quite put off by their attitude...Perfectly good sofas that probably could have gone on another 20 years, really comfortable, spotlessly clean, but it was a few scratch marks down the side...I thought you know, somebody would be grateful for them.

W: You try and do something for good and they...

W: Throw it back in your face. Yes, I agree.

Group 5, Hove

Amongst those who had not experienced disposing of items through Furniture Reuse Organisations, awareness of what they were, was low (again, with the exception of Hove). The awareness issue for charity shops was slightly different: often participants would have heard of them by name, because they may have been well-known ‘brands’, but they would then not have been aware that they collected furniture or whether or not they took electrical items.

**Leaving items on street (excluding in skips)**
This was used by some participants in each group. It was liked as a quick and convenient way of getting rid of items, with participants often reporting that products were removed by others almost immediately, or at the latest ‘by the next morning.’

However, this activity was not liked by all participants and appeared to be seen as particularly unacceptable by participants from lower socio-economic groups who saw it as a ‘health hazard’ or an ‘eye sore’, with bulky items being regularly left out for prolonged periods. The exchange quoted below also shows that even some of those who did leave items out on the street may have felt that others did not approve and so ‘felt bad’ for doing it.

W: I think I done it [put my sofa out on the street] that evening and thought, well overnight no one is going to really notice it. But the next morning it had gone. And in some respects I thought, oh that’s really good because then someone else has used that again. But I did feel really bad for doing that...

W: There’s a family a few doors up from us and they put everything outside. So it could be a mirror, so then when the kids or the grownups come out of the pub on a Friday night the mirror will then get smashed, so you’ve then got the glass all over the pavement. Then a few weeks later it will be a cooker or something. Then it will be a table, then it will be a chest of drawers and you’re like, oh, they put

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28 Martlets is a Hospice charity with a furniture showroom see http://www.themartlets.org.uk/get_involved/retail/
everything outside and it is then a health hazard to the rest of us.
W: I feel bad now [about leaving my sofa out on the street].
W: Don’t feel bad. It sounded lovely and I’m really glad it found a nice, new home.

Freecycle
Freecycle was used by one or two participants in each group to dispose of any kind of bulky item. It was widely liked by those who had experience of it, with the sole exception of the large volume of email alerts and responses that members received. It was recognised by slightly more than the one or two who had experience of using it. A number of participants in every group who had not heard about it before reacted very positively to the idea of it and were keen to find out more.

Q: So those of you who have just heard about it this evening, what do you think to the idea of Freecycle?
W: I think it is brilliant.
M: It is brilliant.

Newspaper ads and ads in local shops
These were used occasionally to dispose of items of furniture, generally by older participants. They were sometimes raised spontaneously by participants, but otherwise had to be prompted. The reported barrier of fear of strangers was also mentioned with this option.

‘The tip shop’
This was the term used to describe the shops reportedly cited at tips in two of the locations visited (Milton Keynes and Hove). Participants told us that such shops took items from the tip that were good enough to be sold on. In Milton Keynes it was reported as being something that participants perceived existed rather than something that they had experience of donating directly to. This is probably explained by the fact that none of our participants in Milton Keynes could have had recent experience of using ‘the tip shop’ there, because if they had, they would have found out that it no longer exists.

In Hove, however, the ‘tip shop’ was also a charity shop (YMCA) and seemed to be both more widely recognised and more widely used.
W: The Hove tip has got a tip shop hasn’t it?
M: Yes.
Q: What’s that exactly?
W: For all the bits that are worth selling.
W: Yes salvaging the good stuff.
M: They salvage stuff.
W: I took a computer table down there and they took it to the shop. They said we have it for the shop and I said yes.
W: They’ve got this shed thing and all the stuff that’s in a decent enough condition goes there.
M: You do get some good stuff.
W: Yes I’ve been in that shop.

Group 4, Hove

There is further discussion of people’s impression of the ‘tip shop’ as part of the more general discussion on council services in the section that follows below.

Pawn shops
These were only mentioned by a few participants and then almost exclusively for the disposal of CRT televisions. Sometimes they were raised spontaneously and sometimes they had to be prompted. The key barrier to using pawn shops for large televisions was having to deliver them to the shop, but a key driver was that participants would be paid for the televisions. It was widely agreed that there were very few other ways of getting rid of CRT televisions and options for being paid were thought to be very limited indeed. This echoes the findings from the first part of the product lifetimes research.29

Second hand shops
These were rarely used for the disposal of bulky items and rarely raised without prompting. Second hand shops seemed either to have a poor reputation amongst participants, or were not known about in the local area. For those who had had experience, they were seen to offer bad value and were thought to be looking to make big mark-ups. It was also reported that second hand shops were only interested in taking a number of items (e.g. from house clearances) and that they would not collect single items.

Auction houses
These were never raised without prompting and experience of using them appeared to be low. In those instances where participants had had experience of them they were used exclusively for furniture. The biggest reported barrier appeared to be a fear of being ripped off or of not knowing of one locally, although some also raised the issue of commission charges acting as a barrier.

29 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
Car boot sales
Although these were used occasionally to dispose of smaller items of furniture, they were generally thought of as unsuitable for electrical products or very large items of furniture, and were only discussed when prompted. There was generally thought to be no market for electrical products at a car boot sale, due to buyers having safety concerns (although very occasionally some participants did report having successfully sold white goods at a car boot sale before, so this may have been more of a perception than a fact). The size and amount of room bulky items would take up were generally thought to prohibitive because they would severely restrict the amount of boot space available to transport other goods that could be sold to make money.

Summary: reasons for using reuse channels
The more convenient the channel, the more popular it appeared to be with participants. The perceived convenience of the channel appeared to vary depending upon a number of different factors such as:

- personal circumstances, especially family and friend networks, the use of a car, household finances and familiarity with online options;
- the type and reputation of service provision in the local area and participant knowledge and experience of those services;
- psychological factors, in particular fear of strangers, levels of trust and dislike of waste;
- the type, size and perceived value of the product in question and whether it was thought to be accepted by and was ‘good enough’ for the channels known to participants.

4.5 Which non-reuse channels did participants use to dispose of their unwanted bulky products and why?
As set out above, some participants either chose non-reuse options to dispose of their products as a first preference or else they resorted to them as default options if reuse channels had been tried and failed. However, by describing the channels in this section as ‘non-reuse’ we are not implying that the channels were not or could not be used for reuse (for example, some councils do divert collected items for reuse). It is more the case that participants who used these options appeared to do it because they only wanted to get rid of items without any other significant motivation for choosing the method of disposal being apparent.

Council collections
There was widespread recognition and use of council collections in Milton Keynes in particular, but they were somewhat less well-used in other locations and had to be prompted in London. They were seen as especially suitable for white goods that needed
disposing of ‘properly’ or broken, tatty or otherwise ‘useless’ bulky items. When participants were asked what they thought happened to the items that councils collected, no one really seemed sure. Many participants talked about what they ‘hoped’ or ‘believed’ the council did.

In some groups the ‘tip shop’ was mentioned as ‘proof’ that the council was putting unwanted items to good use. The power of the ‘tip shop’ as a signifier of the council as a ‘good’ choice for disposal is shown in the quote below, in which a participant equates donating to the tip shop with charitable giving. However, what the quote below reveals more than anything else, as did many other similar discussions in most of the groups, is that participants really did not have any idea of what happened to the items collected by the council: misinformation, high levels of supposition, and possibly elements of wishful thinking were all apparent.

W: With our tips they have got shops and they resell whatever they think they can resell anyway, so in some ways, doing just the same as taking it to a charity shop, without giving money to charity. Saves you the hassle.
Q: And so when the council comes and collects it, what do you think happens to those things then?
W: Probably the same thing, because the tips are council run anyway.
W: I think it depends how nice it is after being out there for nine to 10 days.
W: You have stuck it on your lawn and it has peed it down for a week, then whatever it is, is ruined.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

Despite the long collection window, and uncertainty over what happened to the products collected, the service in Milton Keynes was generally more popular than elsewhere because it was free. Charges in other areas were widely disliked and appeared to act as a significant barrier to using the service.30

**Household waste recycling centres**

Household waste recycling centres were most commonly called the ‘tip’ or occasionally the ‘dump’ by participants. The ‘tip’ was widely recognised and used, often as the default option for convenience or because items were perceived to be ‘useless’ - white goods, sofas, mattresses and broken furniture were often reportedly taken to the tip. The biggest reported advantage of the tip was that participants felt they were in total control of when the item left their home.

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30 Waiting time was identified as a key barrier in a number of sources included in the WR1204 review.
When participants were asked what they thought happened to the items they took to the ‘tip’, the kind of discussion in the quote below was commonplace across each of the groups. The level of uncertainty reported around what happened to items disposed of via council collections was repeated in discussions about items sent to the ‘tip’. It highlights that participants often thought (or wanted to think) that the council ‘must’ be ‘recycling’ things because items now had to be separated. Participants tended to compare the way ‘tips’ were, with either the way ‘tips’ used to be in their area or they way ‘tips’ still were in other areas they were familiar with. The importance of the ideas expressed in the quote below about the council ‘doing their bit’ and ‘being responsible’ are ideas that are picked up on again in the implications section (7) below.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that for everyone the ‘tip’ was the favoured option. For some, the requirement to separate out items acted as a disincentive to use the tip – as the quote below illustrates. Additionally, not all participants found going to the tip convenient, mainly due to experiences of queuing and difficulty in transporting bulky items. For those without cars/vans, or without large cars, it was ruled out as a means of disposing of unwanted bulky household products.

Group 6, Hove

\[ \text{M: I think the tip is the easy option.} \]
\[ \text{M: A lot easier.} \]
\[ \text{M: It's an easy option I think because you're not relying on third parties.} \]
\[ \text{W: Nothing else is instant.} \]

\[ \text{Group 8, Reading} \]

\[ \text{M: I think at Reading tip anyway they are making a serious effort now to recycle things. It is very well organised now.} \]
\[ \text{M: It is all separated into different products.} \]
\[ \text{M: Yes, you get the impression that not everything is going into landfill any more. The council is doing their bit as far as being responsible for what they are putting in the ground and what they are recycling.} \]

\[ \text{Q: Does that make them a good option? Does that make it a reason to use them as opposed to using another option?} \]
\[ \text{M: I think it is a better option than it was. I am not suggesting it is the right option, but it is better than it was.} \]

\[ \text{Group 8, Reading} \]

\[ \text{W: I have gone up there, parked my car, and I need something that is in the bin down there, or something that is in the bin down there, and I'm here and I'm walking backwards and forwards and I'm thinking, yes OK then, I should have stayed at home and burnt it. I can't be doing with that.} \]

\[ \text{Group 7, Reading} \]
Retailer collection service
Many participants were aware of these services and several reported using them as part of the service of buying replacement white goods or televisions. The convenience of the service, tying in as it did with the delivery of the new item, was widely liked by those who had used it, although charging was usually very unpopular when encountered.
5 Research findings: acquisition

This section sets out the findings for each of the following questions:

- Did participants acquire used bulky items?
- What generic terms did people give to items that were not new?
- What were the drivers and barriers to acquiring used bulky items?
- What were the perceived benefits of acquiring used bulky items?
- Which products would or wouldn’t participants be willing to acquire used?
- What expectations did participants have for used products?
- Which reuse channels did participants use to acquire used bulky items and why?

5.1 Did participants acquire used bulky items?

Many participants in the groups reported that they would rather buy new items than buy or receive used items, with some expressing that view particularly forcefully.

\textit{W: I hate old stuff. I like new stuff.}

Group 3, Milton Keynes

However, that said, all participants had had at least some experience of acquiring used bulky items, although for many the extent of acquisition appeared fairly limited, or was something that had only happened some time ago.

Overall acquisition of used items appeared more usual for participants:

- who had been given items by family and friends;
- at certain lifestages – particularly those setting up home;
- in lower socio-economic groups;
- who enjoyed bargain-hunting or thrift.

There was also some mention by participants living in private rented accommodation of landlords routinely purchasing used items, particularly white goods, for the tenants’ use.

However, this may not reflect actual acquisition patterns of used items across all participants because some clearly felt uncomfortable discussing this topic. This was truer in some groups than in others, depending upon the particular group dynamics:

- in the most easy-going group discussions participants felt able to challenge each others’ perceptions and behaviours in a friendly, good-humoured and sensitive way and to discuss the acquisition of used items fairly openly;
- in groups where participants were more cautious about saying the ‘wrong’ thing, some participants were only prepared to go as far as expressing an interest and
curiosity in browsing used items, although they were careful to distance themselves from the act of acquisition if they thought that the group broadly rejected the idea;

- in other groups where very vocal participants were adamant that they would never acquire used items, this made open discussions about reuse initially quite difficult. However, even in groups such as these, as the discussions unfolded there were often hints that the acquisition of used items was not as uncommon as first claimed. Under such circumstances it was particularly helpful to ask participants to recall when they had first been setting up home and to think of any used items that they may have had then, as a way of helping to ‘normalise’ the behaviour.

5.2 What generic terms did participants give to items that were not new?

In facilitating the focus group discussions, we were careful in our choice of words when introducing the topic of acquisition. We generally referred to reused products as being ‘not bought from new’ in order to try and avoid leading the discussion with terms that may have had loaded or negative meanings to participants. However, participants themselves did not adopt our language and quickly settled on “second hand” or “old”, although the word “used” was also fairly commonplace.

Participants occasionally asked for permission to include “antiques” within the discussion of used items because they clearly realised that although they were not new, antiques were so different to many people’s understanding of “used” or “second hand” that they might have been irrelevant to the topic under discussion.

Words with more positive connotations than “used” or “second hand” came up occasionally in the groups: “shabby chic” “vintage”, “retro” and “cool” all came up. However, these terms were only used infrequently and then by only a small number of participants in some, not all, groups. The most commonly used positive terms across all the groups were “bargain” and “quality”. “Quality” in particular was often used by participants when it came to discussing older, reused furniture.

In every group participants used the word “amazing”, both in the context of it being “amazing” what some people throw out and also in the context of it being “amazing” what can be found second hand.

As the discussion on drivers and barriers below reveals, participants undoubtedly conveyed an image problem with used items that is reflected by the connotations of the words “used” and “second hand” and to some extent the word “old” (although the connotations of this word are far more likely to be dependent upon the context in which it is used). This is an important consideration for any communications relating to reuse.
5.3 What were the drivers and barriers to acquiring used bulky items?

Participants in all groups were asked to draw on their own experiences as much as possible to discuss the reasons why they would or would not acquire used bulky items over new. A range of psychological and practical factors emerged, these are set out in turn below.

5.3.1. Psychological motivations

Self identity and social context

Self identity and social context appeared to be particularly important barriers to acquiring used items. Unlike attitudes towards disposal, these issues were absolutely key in determining whether participants would even consider acquiring used items (or perhaps to admit to acquiring them). The following set of issues emerged as particularly important barriers in relation to identity and social context and echoes findings from earlier research:

- social stigma was seen to attach to the acquisition of used items;
- material wealth was seen to represent social standing and affluence by some, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups;
- ownership of new products was linked to pride and avoidance of being seen as needy;
- emotions reported by participants in relation to buying used items included: “belittling”, “embarrassed”, “shame”, and “stigma”.

In the groups which developed a good dynamic, participants felt able to express these potentially awkward and deeply held feelings and were willing to explain to the others why they felt so strongly.

W: I would never buy second hand. I think it was probably my upbringing, because I was brought up in the North East from a big family and everything was recycled, and I think it is bothering me. Do you know what I mean? It is like, no I am not going to go down that road, I can afford it, I work hard, so I am going to have these things. I will provide for myself and I will buy nice things.

Group 1, London

At the opposite end of the spectrum, others actively sought out used items in order to help build ‘alternative’ identities. This was a relatively important factor amongst a small number of women in nearly all groups, where language such as, “shabby chic”, “vintage” and “retro” was used. For such participants the shopping or acquisition process was also described in positive terms like “fun and cool” and “an adventure” or “exciting”, giving the impression of acquisition as a leisure pursuit and one that, as far as they were concerned, had more to offer than mainstream consumer culture.

31 Brook Lyndhurst, 2009b, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP
Sometimes when participants talked in these terms others gave the impression that they liked the sound of what was being said, but that they themselves did not have the confidence to go out and buy used, particularly vintage or antique items, because they did not know what they were looking for.

Some participants also reported that they tried to achieve value through bargain hunting and trading-up to better quality or more functional used products (e.g. by buying a more expensive brand second hand than could have been ‘afforded’ new). Some of those discussions around what could be ‘afforded’ included a rejection of buying things on credit and the need to be prudent under the current difficult economic circumstances. It did not, however, imply an absolute neediness, but more of a lifestyle choice.

However, for many participants the acquisition of used items did not appear to be as strongly driven by self-identity. Instead people’s ability to afford new meant that they did not ‘have’ to consider used items. This is picked up in more detail in the section that follows below on practical motivations.

**Trust**
Trust was important with respect to both the product itself and where it came from. Levels of trust appeared to vary greatly between individuals and seemed to be based upon a combination of experience and perception.

**Trust in the product**
A small number of participants actively sought out used products (particularly furniture) on the basis of their perceived superior quality and value. These good experiences with used items were often greeted positively by a number of others in the group, who may not have had direct experience themselves, but liked the sound of what the others were telling them.

However, not everyone reacted positively, with some saying that they would always prefer a new alternative, sometimes based on their own previous bad experiences of used items, but more generally as a result of simply rejecting the idea of buying used items out of hand. The notion that used products did not come with a ‘service history’ – that participants could not tell how they had been treated or how reliable they might be - was also raised as a barrier to acquisition, particularly for white goods. This point is expanded on in the products section below.

**M:** I just bought a second hand car and I know what I went through just to get it, because most of the time when you got you find it, you have the MOT, the mileage and things. But you know they have this DVLA website, once you can type in the number and the MOT test, it shows you the history of the car and everything, all the services. Say if they
had something like that for washing machines, where there is that site where you could...

Group 1, London

Trust in the channel
Those who were familiar with online acquisition, and in particular those who were members of Freecycle, reported trusting others who were selling or giving items away. Some who had not heard of or used such sites were immediately sceptical about the motivations of those donating or selling and the quality of the items on offer.

For many, the only people they would trust sufficiently to acquire used items from were family and friends. This mirrored the findings set out above in the disposal section which also set family and friends apart as the only option that many participants would consider.

W: Family is different, but not a shop.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

Risk
Attitudes towards risk appeared to be of crucial importance in determining whether or not participants were willing to consider acquiring used items. The exchange below illustrates how participants’ differing levels of risk aversion could shape their willingness to acquire a used product and revealed differences in attitudes towards risk that were apparent in every group.

W: Taking a chance aren’t you.
Q: Taking a chance?
W: But you could be lucky and it could be fine.
W: Yes, oh god, yes.
W: It could last you two years and you are laughing.
M: Or you could be lumbered with a headache.
W: I think you could tell from the house it came from whether or not...
W: Oh no I wouldn’t, I would never presume.

Group 5, Hove

We found in the first part of the product lifetimes research that buying new products was often seen as something of a gamble, because of their uncertain reliability and durability. However, when set against the comparison of used products, many participants clearly felt that a new product was a much safer bet and that the ‘unknown’ history of many used products (particularly those that were not from family or friends) gave them an added element of risk.

32 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
The degree to which participants were willing to take risks with a used product was also related to how much they relied on that product and therefore how much inconvenience it would cause if it broke. There are further parallels here with the first part of the product lifetimes research which stressed the importance of ‘workhorse’ products, such as white goods, being reliable. However, even with such relied upon products, there was still a wide range of willingness to take risks – particularly if products were cheap enough.

W: I bought my tumble dryer from a car boot sale for a tenner.
Q: And what did you think about that, were you expecting it to work?
W: I wasn’t expecting, well they promised me it worked and it looked old and a bit knackered, but I thought, well I really need a tumble dryer. And they promised me it worked and for a tenner you can’t go wrong really. I mean it is old, don’t get me wrong, it is old, could do with a new one, but it works. And while it still works I am not getting rid of it.
Q: Would anyone else consider buying white goods or electrical items from a car boot if you saw them?
M: No.
W: No, never.
Q: Why not?
W: They are just dodgy.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

As the above quote also hints, safety concerns were important for some, particularly in relation to electrical goods and televisions. The PAT test (Portable Appliance Test) was mentioned in several groups as a sign of safety for white goods, although some participants suggested that they did not “trust” in that and would not risk buying anything electrical second hand regardless of whether or not it had been tested. Several participants recounted “horror stories” of their own or friends’ used electrical products “exploding” or “catching fire”. This raises the issue of whether a guarantee and/or some kind of quality mark on a used electrical item would ever be enough to convince some very risk-averse people of its safety. There is further discussion on the findings around quality marks in the section on products below.

Disgust and aversion
This was a really important issue for many and was referenced in every group. Overall, some used products were seen as more ‘disgusting’ than others. More detail on variation by product is set out in the product-specific discussion that follows in the section below.

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33 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
Generally speaking, however, the aversion was usually to an imagined contaminant resulting from lack of knowledge about how a product had been used by its previous owner. This meant that, as with all the other psychological factors discussed in this section, where a product had come from was particularly important.

Although the ‘contamination’ in question was usually psychological (that is, it had simply been used by unknown others with unknown habits), there were a number of physical contaminants that participants were afraid of bringing into their homes and of coming into close contact with. These included “bed bugs”, “wood worm”, “fleas”, “germs”, “crumbs”, “hair”, “cigarette smoke”, “skin”, “urine” and “vomit”. However, these contaminants were still couched in terms of possible threats, and were largely imagined to exist, with no one ever admitting to having acquired a used item that was contaminated with any of the above substances or infestations. However, despite that, the mere possibility put many participants off to the extent that they would dismiss most used items out of hand – particularly if they did not know where they had come from.

Some participants referred to the used products they had acquired or might acquire as “spotlessly clean”, “looked clean”, “nice and clean”, “really clean” and “fresh and clean”. However, we were not able to explore in any detail how clean, ‘clean enough’ would be and whether concerns over cleanliness could have been satisfied by the professional cleaning of products. From what we did glean, however, for some, used products could never be ‘clean enough’, as the quote below illustrates.

Q: How do you judge whether a product that isn’t new, is clean enough?
W: You can’t.

Group 2, London

5.3.2. Practical motivations

As discussed above, although there was evidence of acquisition of items from family and friends, many participants simply did not entertain the idea of buying used bulky items – they just bought new. As well as the psychological barriers set out above, there appeared to be a number of important practical reasons as to why this might be the case.

Cost

For those who did not consider used alternatives, the relatively low price of brand new goods was highlighted as a reason why they would not have to resort to used alternatives. It did not seem to matter how much cheaper used products were, because new products were seen not only as better, but also as better value.

M: These days you know, if you look in the Argos catalogue and some of these other small stores now, you can get a really good quality fridge for an extra maybe £50 or what it is in a
For those who did consider used items, cost was the key practical motivation. In some cases the driver to acquire used items appeared to be based on genuine need. Where this was the case, the reportedly low prices of used items made them much more affordable than a new alternative.

In other cases where participants reported acquiring used items, the incentive of low prices may not have been an entirely straightforwardly practical issue. In these cases it may have been more a reflection of thriftiness than need. This thriftiness might have included the desire to avoid personal debt, to trade up to ‘better’ products, or the pragmatic use of temporary products until the time was right to purchase something new, all factors with strong psychological influences, as discussed above.

Inconvenience of unreliable products
Although perceptions of ‘quality’ used wooden furniture were not uncommon, perceptions that reliable, used white goods could be bought, were rarer. Actual experience of buying used white goods was low and mixed. The inconvenience represented by white goods breaking down was seen as a major barrier to acquiring them used, because they were so relied upon. Specific product examples are considered in more detail in the section on products which follows below.

However, not everyone took this approach to used white goods. Some were perfectly happy to take a “gamble” on white goods – provided the price was low enough, as the following quote illustrates.

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**W:**  Because you have started getting more quality for your money. If you are buying something new it feels like you are automatically going to get a better quality item.

**M:**  You don’t expect to take it home and it doesn’t work.

**M:**  Yes.

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Group 4, Milton Keynes

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Group 3, Milton Keynes
The point mentioned in the quote about guarantees, reflects the arguments made by participants in the first part of the product lifetimes research over the wisdom or otherwise of purchasing extended warranties. In that research, extended warranties were seen by many as being of questionable value and participants often reported that they preferred to take their chances without one.\(^{34}\)

### Inconvenience of the shopping experience

Some participants who had experienced trying to buy used products had found that they could buy exactly what they wanted when they wanted, and their experience was largely positive. This was particularly true for some participants who needed to replace functional items at short notice and who did not have sufficient savings to cover the cost of the unexpected purchase of a new item. A few others in some groups reacted positively to hearing about this experience, even though they may have had no experience of buying second hand items themselves. Whether this was because they were being polite and sensitive to the experiences of others, or whether this indicated a genuine receptivity to the idea of acquiring used items, is unclear.

However, there were also participants who had had negative experiences of shopping for things in the second-hand market and who reported that it took too much time and was too much hassle compared with buying new. Again, this point was agreed with by a number of others holding negative perceptions about used items, but who did not have actual experience of buying used items themselves. Their negative preconceptions of acquiring used items were clearly being confirmed. In contrast to the process of looking for used items, these participants felt they knew exactly where to go when they shopped for new items, what to expect to pay and to be able to have a full range of product options available to them.

> W:  It is the availability as well isn’t it? I mean if your washing machine breaks, do you really want the hassle of going round different second hand shops or wherever to find one, when you can just go straight to Comet and buy one?

Group 3, Milton Keynes

### 5.4 What were the perceived benefits of acquiring used items?

Participants generally found it hard to think of wider, non-personal benefits to acquiring used items. They rarely had anything to say when directly asked and only twice were the benefits of acquisition seen as part of the same issue as disposal – where benefits had earlier been discussed.

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\(^{34}\) Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
M: The environment, it would probably be more to do with disposing of the stuff than buying stuff.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

This appears to add further evidence to the idea that ‘reuse’ is not conceived of as a single issue, or even as an issue at all, in the way that policy-makers and practitioners tend to frame it. So despite the fact that a desire to ‘reuse’ did not appear to be a coherent motivating factor for acquisition and disposal decisions alike, in the case of disposal some participants were able to see a link between reuse, waste and the environment (specifically landfill). However, overwhelmingly, participants did not seem to link consumption to the environment at all: ideas such as materials’ scarcity and embodied carbon were simply not raised.

There was no perceptible difference by Defra segment in participants’ (lack of) understanding of potential environmental benefits in acquiring used items. In fact the only two groups to make the link between acquiring used items and wider environmental benefits, without specific prompting on the environment, were the groups in Manchester (Positive Greens, Waste Watchers and Concerned Consumers) and Hove (Honestly Disengaged and Stalled Starters). In Manchester, the issue of emissions during the production of new electrical products was raised by one participant, although this was quickly countered by others in the group who thought that older electrical items would most likely be less efficient in use. In Hove the point that had been made about keeping products out of landfill was made in relation to purchasing reused items as well as disposing of items for reuse. When this point was made in Hove it was met with agreement and understanding by several others in the group.

5.5 Which products would or wouldn’t participants be willing to acquire used?

There was a clear spectrum of acceptability of acquiring used products, by product type. However, the findings might also be described as showing a clear spectrum of what it was acceptable to admit to acquiring, as the discussions may have been particularly susceptible to social desirability responses, given the stigma that seemed to attach to acquiring some of these products second hand.

**Mattresses**

Mattresses received a resounding ‘no-go’ due to fear of contamination. Participants disliked the idea that the product had been in intimate contact with others and rejected the idea of a used mattress even if it was not actually, physically ‘contaminated’. In other words, this kind of contamination fear was psychological and as such was something that cleaning would not have been able to fix.
Only one person admitted to receiving a second hand mattress from a family member and only one admitted to buying a second hand mattress (and this was said to be for a guest room only and was reported as being “actually immaculate” (group 4, Hove)).

Participants’ feelings about used mattresses were not, however, entirely consistent. This inconsistency was spotted by a number of participants and was raised spontaneously by participants in several different groups. For example, there were participants in every group who were renting fully furnished flats and participants in most groups who also pointed out that they were quite happy to sleep on mattresses in hotels that had been used by other people.

Sofas
The idea of acquiring a used sofa received a mixed reception in every group. However, some in each group reported having experience of acquiring them second hand, either through friends and family or from eBay. These experiences were largely positive.

Cleanliness, levels of wear and tear and the provenance of the item were all considered important factors both to those with and without experience of acquiring sofas second hand. Concerns over cleanliness meant that leather was considered by some to be more acceptable than fabric covers for a used sofa.

For those without experience, fear of imagined contamination, similar to fears around mattresses represented a significant barrier.

Wooden furniture
Attitudes were generally positive towards the acquisition of used wooden furniture. Items were seen to be easier to clean to eliminate hygiene/contamination issues. Older items were also commonly associated with quality and character, particularly in comparison with flat-packed furniture.

W: I want some bedside cabinets at the moment and I won’t buy new ones, because I have had new ones from Argos and they fell to bits. So I want decent ones, so I have had a look in the charity shops, I have had a look round.

Q: So quality, that is a reason for buying these items, is it?

W: Yes. And they weren’t cheap, the ones I got from Argos, but I pulled the drawer out and they all collapsed. So I want decent ones, something like that at half the price. And I am sure if I go to a second-hand shop I might find them. Apart from people chop them up and take them to the tip.

Group 9, Manchester
Issues around reliability, safety and lifetime were not important barriers. However, some still dismissed them for style reasons or simply wanting new. This was especially the case in Milton Keynes, where ‘modern’ houses were not seen as compatible with old furniture. It was also the case that some participants were not confident about buying old furniture because they felt that they did not know what they were looking for.

**Televisions**

Views on the acceptability of used televisions were mixed within the groups. Acceptability of acquiring a used television appeared connected to some extent to how up-to-date the item was, and particularly whether it was CRT or flat screen. For some, they were acceptable as a cheaper alternative, or to use as a stop-gap.

However, for others, provenance was important due to concerns over reliability and safety. For the more fashion/technology-conscious, a used television was seen as less acceptable because they were interested in their product being as up to date as possible. The digital switch-over, levels of energy efficiency and safety concerns were all mentioned as barriers to acquiring televisions second hand.

These findings tie in with the finding from the first part of the product lifetimes research and the increasingly ‘up-to-date’ rather than ‘workhorse’ nature of televisions. They also echo the reported difficulties that participants in the first part of the research had in trying to dispose of their ‘perfectly good’ CRT televisions.

**Washing machines**

The idea of acquiring used washing machines was met with a mixed, but broadly negative, reception. Few had experience of buying used machines (or were prepared to admit it), but out of those actual experiences, none were negative. However, amongst those without experience, few seemed open-minded about the possibility of acquiring a used machine, although it may have made a difference if participants knew where the machine had come from.

Issues about cleanliness/hygiene, reliability and safety were important in shaping negative reactions, particularly amongst those who had never acquired a used washing machine. Another, although less significant, barrier mentioned in several groups was the inefficiency of older machines, in terms of spin speed, water use and energy rating.

The most important barrier, however, appeared to be ‘how much life’ a used machine might have left in it due to its moving parts and the effects of wear and tear and hard water on those parts over time. For some, this issue presented an insurmountable barrier to buying a used machine, particularly because of the hassle, expense and inconvenience of having to replace the machine if it did not end up lasting long.

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35 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
When asked whether extended guarantees, or quality marks would make a difference to the acceptability of a used machine, the response initially tended to be positive, particularly amongst those who had never bought a used machine before. But as the discussions unfolded, participants, especially those with experience of buying second hand washing machines, were generally able to come up with a number of negatives as well, which often seemed to swing participants in favour of a tentative rejection of the idea.

Participants were either sceptical about the value of such measures, or else they pointed out that this would raise the price of the machines and therefore provide less of an incentive to buying used as opposed to new. In the context of very inexpensive used white goods (for example a used tumble drier that cost £10 was mentioned by one participant), the additional cost of a guarantee is likely to be higher than the original price of the item in question. The exchange quoted below is typical of the kind of debates that took place in many of the groups.

M: Well, a quality mark is like a guarantee isn’t it?
M: Yes.
M: You know, so if somebody could produce a quality mark that was recognised, I think it would work well for second hand appliances.
M: Last for a year, yes. If that had a similar sort of thing to it then maybe you would think ‘yes’ about it.
W: Yes, that is a really good idea.
M: I suppose if they could, if it was brought out that they legally had to give a year’s guarantee, then I suppose more people would use it, yes. If there was some sort of body that brought it out and that.
M: That depends on the condition of the machine, and if they had to give a year’s guarantee the price would go up.
M: Yes, that’s a point.
M: You know, so you won’t be spending much less than a new washing machine, so you might as well just go and buy a new washing machine.

Another negative issue emerged around the use of guarantees on used washing machines, which linked very much to the negative issues around guarantees that came out of the first part of the product lifetimes research. In that first part of the research, we found that guarantees generally only helped to inspire confidence in products if they were for substantially longer than the one year statutory protection that participants understood as the bare minimum. This was related to high levels of scepticism in product durability which

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36 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
was, in part, embodied in the idea that the day after the guarantee ran out, the product would break down.

In this part of the research, participants with experience of buying second-hand washing machines reported that a guarantee of around three to six months was usually the best that could be expected. Bringing the guarantee up to the one year norm for new products was therefore a typical suggestion. However, given the high levels of scepticism about guarantees encountered in the first part of the product lifetimes research, longer guarantees may not on their own be enough to give most consumers sufficient confidence to buy a used rather than new washing machine. General dislike of second-hand products may simply translate into them having even lower expectations of the used products outlasting the guarantee period than they may already have for new products.

The idea of both longer guarantees and quality marks would need testing further with consumers to develop more robust evidence of their potential impact on consumer confidence. Any such tests would need to be product-specific, given the wide-ranging extent of acceptability of different kinds of used products found by this research.

Another potential idea to test further could be that of a ‘service history’ for washing machines. Every group mentioned the importance of knowing the machines’ histories and in particular knowing how much wear and tear they might have been subject to. In some groups direct parallels were drawn between used cars and used washing machines, with cars being given as an example of how a the second hand market operates successfully.

*W: It is like a car, you want to know the history of where it has been. If it has been looked after.*

**Group 9, Manchester**

There was not much discussion about who might or should oversee any kind of service history or quality mark scheme, although as the quote from Milton Keynes above sets out, participants did seem to expect it to be overseen by “some sort of body”. However, in one group (London, group 1) an explicit suggestion was made that “manufacturers get together” in a voluntary capacity rather than implementing a scheme that was “government accredited”.

**Fridges/freezers**

As with washing machines, fridges received a mixed, but broadly negative, reception. Issues about reliability and safety were paramount in shaping negative reactions. There were also some concerns over cleanliness, but this was less pronounced than it was for washing machines. Unlike washing machines, fridges were not thought to have parts that could not be cleaned (such as pipes and seals).
Also unlike washing machines, the actual experience of owning used fridges appeared to be largely negative. Reports of used fridges leaking, frosting up or just breaking down were mentioned in several groups. In two different groups, participants with experience of owning used fridges exhorted the others ‘never’ to buy one.

\[
W: \textit{Never buy a second hand fridge. I did, never again.}
\]

Group 1, London

Amongst those without actual experience, some were open-minded about the possibility of acquiring a used fridge/freezer – perhaps more so than a used washing machine, although it may have made a difference if participants knew where the machine had come from and/or if the price was low and one was needed at short notice, possibly as a stop-gap.

The issue of a ‘service history;’ on used fridges did not appear to have been as important as for washing machines because the absence of moving parts negated concerns over wear and tear. However, the ‘quality mark’ idea might have helped with concerns over safety, although, as explained above, it is unclear whether this would have been sufficient to convince the most risk-averse participants that used fridges were indeed safe.

**Summary of the acceptability of different used products**

The diagram below lists, roughly, the degree of acceptability of acquiring a range of used bulky products that were discussed in the groups. This does not represent a strict measurement of acceptability, rather it is our judgment gained from the analysis of the group discussions.
5.6 Which reuse channels did participants use to acquire used bulky items and why?

In the context of overall low levels of experience of acquiring used items, the following list sets out, roughly in order of most experience to least, which channels participants used to acquire used bulky items and why.

5.6.1. Friends and family

Products were thought to be acceptable across the board from this channel. It was always raised without prompting in every group. In fact friends and family stood apart for many as being the only option that they would consider acquiring used products from. Knowing the person donating the item tended to allay fears of contamination and other general concerns around safety and reliability that may have been an issue for some participants when it came to acquiring from other reuse channels. Receiving items from family and friends was reportedly more common when setting up home and was often recalled as a ‘past’ experience by older participants in the groups.

Reusing through friends and family also allowed people to take opportunities as they presented themselves. Participants described how they might either offer something to someone who they thought might want it, or ask for something from someone if they knew they were getting rid of it. This relates closely to the point made about the convenience of giving things away to family and friends in the section on disposal above. There was a sense
that the meeting of supply and demand within networks of families and friends was mutually convenient for both the person donating and the person acquiring.

W: We are at the point where we have got two small kids still, you know, still sort of getting there. But I am quite happy because if everybody palms their stuff off on me I know where it has come from, generally and, you know...
W: Give it a good home.
W: Yes exactly, I am more than willing to. Certainly you know the last big few things that we have had, it would have crippled us.

Group 3, Hove

5.6.2. All other channels for acquiring used products

As explained above, acquiring used bulky products from channels other than family and friends was not reported as a widespread or frequent behaviour. The next most commonly experienced channel for acquisition appeared to be eBay/Gumtree followed by second-hand shops, Furniture Reuse Organisations/charity shops and Freecycle. The following paragraphs set out in rough order of most experience to least, those other channels for acquiring used items.

EBay and Gumtree

These channels were popular with some, mainly younger participants and they were raised spontaneously in every group. Again, their use appeared to be connected to life stage (specifically setting up home) and not just with age. Sofas and other items of furniture in particular were reported to have been sourced in this way, although white goods were also mentioned occasionally.

Low prices were seen as a key advantage to buying items from this source. However, eBay and Gumtree were rejected by others as a suitable channel due to lack of trust in unknown vendors and in unseen and untried products. The inconvenience of having to pick products up was also seen as a barrier to acquiring items in this way.

Second-hand shops

These were reportedly used only very occasionally to buy small items of furniture and sometimes white goods, although there was a sense that some participants who may have had experience of this channel were reluctant to talk about it. Participants often talked about things they had heard rather than experienced, and some seemed particularly keen to distance themselves from any suggestion that they might have first-hand knowledge of second-hand shops. The quote below illustrates this point in relation to a discussion participants were having about the length of guarantees on washing machines from second-hand shops.
Q: And do you know how long the warranty was?
W: I am not sure how long it was, but it did have a warranty.
W: It is usually, I think, I don’t know why, but I think it is six months, I remember somebody saying that to me. You don’t get a year, you get about six months.

Group 3, Milton Keynes

Those who were willing to talk about buying from second hand shops were often starting out or were in financially difficult circumstances, and sometimes prefaced their contributions by explaining that they did not have much money (for example, because they had small children or were single parents). Again, this was something that older participants may have had experience of in the past, but did not currently consider using. The reputation of the vendor appeared key, particularly for white goods. The perception of unscrupulous vendors was a significant barrier to using this channel, as was lack of knowledge of the whereabouts of local shops. Overall, however, acquiring from second-hand shops seemed to have been a more common experience that disposing of products to second-hand shops (for more on which see the section on second-hand shops in 4.4.2 above).

Charity shops and Furniture Reuse Organisations
There was generally very low knowledge of where the local charity shops or Furniture Reuse Organisations were that sold bulky items, or even that such a thing existed (with the one main exception of Hove). However, a few participants in most groups did know about them and out of those few, some had also used them. They were perceived as a more trusted source for electrical goods than either private (excluding family and friends) or commercial options, and were said to offer guarantees.

M: I think I trust even more the charity shop selling a washing machine than the second hand shop. Because a charity shop I know, probably, I am assuming, they must have probably tested it before. Whereas the shop I know it is just probably there for a profit.

Group 1, London

However, there were negative comments in many of the groups about the relatively high prices being charged “these days” by charity shops and also the perceived low quality of the furniture on offer from Furniture Reuse Organisations. This perception of poor value and choice was sometimes directly made with reference to bulky items, but it was also picked up by others without experience of acquiring used bulky items in this way, and seemed to stem from more general experience of charity shops that sold clothes and bric-a-brac.

Freecycle
This was seen as a very good way of acquiring any kind of good quality used item by many of those who had experience of using the channel. However, both recognition and experience were low and some participants were clearly averse to the idea of going into a stranger’s
home to pick up an item of uncertain quality. Some also said that they would be too polite to say no when they came face to face with the person donating the item, even if it did not turn out to be what they were looking for.

**Found on street (excluding skips)**

A few participants ‘admitted’ to picking up items this way, particularly once it had been prompted. Items of wooden furniture were most commonly mentioned. Participants who had experience of this channel clearly enjoyed having found good items for free. However, there appeared to be a certain amount of stigma attached to acquiring items in this way amongst a few participants in each group, which also seemed to be closely related to disapproval of people leaving things out (see the disposal section above for a fuller discussion of this point).

**Auction houses**

These were predominantly unused by participants because of lack of knowledge about where auction houses were and how they worked. This fed a perceived fear of being ripped off. However, those few participants who had used auction houses reported doing so to find antique and/or high quality items of furniture. Some participants reported going along to look just for fun, but not actually buying anything.

Participants reported either extremely low or no experience of using the following channels to acquire bulky items:

- **Car boot sales.** Although there were a few reports of participants buying bulky items from car boot sales, many participants said that it was something they would never do, particularly when it came to electrical items. Many participants did not seem to trust car boot vendors and this made the acquisition of electrical items especially problematic because such items could not be seen to be in working order, might be dangerous, and there would not necessarily be any chance of a refund.

- **‘The tip shop’.** There were a few reports of participants looking in these shops, but not any of people actually buying from them. There also seemed to be the suggestion of stigma being attached to buying things from the tip shop, particularly from some participants in Milton Keynes. If stigma does attach to purchases from shops located at ‘tips’ in the population more widely (and this would require further research before any conclusions were reached), then in our view the potential of ‘tip shops’ may be limited to their consumer messaging function and that the real business of making serious attempts to sell used products needs to happen elsewhere – specifically in more mainstream shopping areas and away from ‘the tip’. Suggestions for changes in the way in which used bulky products are sold have been made in the past, pointing to the success of ‘supersheds’ in New Zealand as an example of what could be done.\(^{37}\) There

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may also be lessons to learn from other international experiences of selling used bulky products.  

- **Skips.** This option appeared to have the highest level of stigma attached to it. However, a number of non-household, outdoor items (e.g. some wood, a gate, a micro-scooter) were reportedly acquired by several participants in this way. These kinds of items were seen as generally ‘acceptable’ to acquire from skips by the rest of the group, but there was a sense that many participants would not feel comfortable taking items from skips.

There were some mentions of the possibility of it amounting to theft, which set it apart from acquiring items that had been left out on street where the implication was that the person leaving it there intended it to be taken. There was some sense that it was perhaps an invasion of someone’s privacy to look through their skip. Some suggested that it would more acceptable if you were to ask permission to take something first.

### 5.7 What expectations did participants have for the lifetimes of their used products?

Opinion was divided over the expected lifetimes of used products, between those who saw them as relatively disposable and those who expected them to last as long as, if not longer than new products. Each response is explored in turn below.

#### 5.7.1. Treating used products as disposable or temporary

The short-term ownership of many used items appeared to be related to a number of factors including people’s changing lifestage and financial circumstances, their changing ideas of what was ‘acceptable’ to have in their homes and their enjoyment of shopping, redecorating and replacing products.

This may go some way to explaining why those participants who were prepared to take the ‘risk’ of acquiring used items were not necessarily that concerned about the items’ expected lifetimes: low or uncertain product lifetime expectations may not have been a problem if ownership needs were only temporary.

**Replacing products when something new could be afforded**

This was discussed in many groups, particularly by slightly older participants looking back on what had happened to those used items they had acquired when they were first starting out. As people became more financially secure over the course of their lives, and as the relative cost of consumer durables fell, they often reported having updated their old, used items with new replacements.

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38 See for example: [http://www.seattlegoodwill.org/](http://www.seattlegoodwill.org/) [http://www.thesharehouse.org/about.htm](http://www.thesharehouse.org/about.htm)
M: I would have had [used items] in my younger days, but now it is brand spanking new. So when I first moved out there would have been bits and pieces donated to me by my parents. I think they gave me a wardrobe they were using, but they gave it to me when I moved out. But at the moment everything in the house is brand new. Nothing second hand at all.

W: I don’t buy things that aren’t new. I used to, you know when I first got my house and that and then you know, it was whatever you could get from anywhere. But as time goes on I have bought it, because it is my money and I want my things.

W: You replace it don’t you?

W: Yes.

M: Yes.

W: We have just decorated the whole house and we replaced stuff that we had with new. I think you just do nowadays, because you can get things for next to nothing.

Group 4, Milton Keynes

Needing temporary solutions to temporary needs

There were various reports of participants acquiring used items to meet very specific, short term needs. This could have been linked to a number of different events or situations including needing a replacement item at short notice because a relied-upon product had broken down; it could have been due to participants living highly mobile lives and frequently moving accommodation; or it could have even been due to needing items for a one-off event (the example of needing extra chairs for a party was given in this context by one participant).

M: I actually got given a Smeg fridge freezer, really nice thing, but again we only needed it for a year, so at the end of the year I put it on eBay.

Group 8, Reading

Trading up to a better used item

Another kind of behaviour with high levels of product churn was evident amongst those who seemed to enjoy bargain hunting and treated the acquisition of used items as something of a past-time.

The quote below illustrates just how similar to the mainstream shopping experience the used shopping experience was for some participants, with its elements of window shopping, ‘temptation’ and the desire to replace items that did not ‘need’ replacing but ‘looked nicer’.

July 2011
There is a shop, domestic appliances in Warburton, it is on the main road as you go through down towards Stony, and I was walking past it today and I was actually really tempted to go and buy this washing machine because (a) it looked nicer than mine, and (b) it looked brand new and was only £60 and it was all reconditioned and sparkly.

Group 4, Milton Keynes

These findings suggest that it may be worth exploring the levels of product ‘churn’ of used products in comparison with the level of churn of new products to develop a better understanding of the potential of used products to bring environmental benefits.

If, for example, a genuinely ‘alternative consumer culture’ was found to exist which involved the re-circulation of used goods, then apart from the impacts of moving the items from place to place, the negative environmental impacts from this kind of product churn are likely to be low. However, if used products are seen by some as worthless and so are more likely to be disposed of into the waste stream after one short reuse, the resource efficiency benefits from this kind of reuse behaviour would appear to be more limited. This, however, is an issue that was not explored by this research and is something that would need to be tested further before any conclusions could be drawn.

5.7.2. “Don’t throw away the old for the new”

Although, as set out above, many participants who reported owning used items gave the overall impression that they were not expecting to keep most of them for long, some participants were and did, particularly when it came to good quality items of furniture.

There were a number of participants who either expected to or who had kept furniture for at least as long as they would have expected to keep a new item, if not longer. Some older participants even reported that they still had some of the items that they had first been ‘handed down’ when they were setting up home. However, such items rarely appeared to have any sentimental value. They were seen more in practical terms as functioning, good quality products.

There was also the sense that some participants valued all products more than others did - regardless of whether they were new or used. Some participants said that they were not prepared to ‘update’ working products or to treat them as disposable, regardless of whether they were used. This tendency was noted in the first part of the product lifetimes research. It appears to be related to particular psychological factors such as a dislike of wastefulness, a prudent approach to the household finances and a disregard for fashion.

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39 Man, Group 2, London
40 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
Factors such as these also seemed to have a bearing on how used products were treated, as discussed in the section that follows below.

5.8 How did participants treat their used products?

When we asked participants whether or not it made a difference to how they treated a product, knowing that it was used rather than new, responses were mixed.

Some participants said that they were more likely to take care of new products, seeing them as more valuable, personal and meaningful to them. However others were adamant that it made no difference and that they had certain standards for the treatment of all products, regardless of whether they were used or not. This could reflect a number of other factors including:

- the difference in the opinions expressed above between those who tended to see used products as temporary stop-gaps and those who saw value in them;
- what the product in question was, its quality and its value. These concepts are to be understood as relative to the circumstances of the person in question. For example, differing financial circumstances may have meant that someone buying a used, designer sofa might have viewed that with just as much of an ‘investment’ mindset as someone who had bought one new;\(^{41}\)
- where the product had come from, in particular whether it was a ‘hand-me-down’ or had been chosen and bought. With the exception of treasured family possessions or heirlooms, feelings of ownership and attachment to used products appeared to be lower if they were ‘hand-me-downs’. This is illustrated in the following quote from Manchester, involving two participants who appeared to be at similar life stages (just starting out), but who had very different attitudes to the used items in their homes as a result of how they had come by them.

W:  I have never bought anything for my house myself. I think like if you have bought it with your own money you have a lot more respect for it and look after it. Not that I don’t look after it.

Q:  Does anyone disagree with that?

M:  No, I bought a suite, a sofa, Lazyboys, off my sister’s friend and it was a really, really nice couch. And as I got round there I liked it straightaway and the people that were selling it had a young daughter and she is bouncing up and down on the couch and I am thinking, get off my couch.

Group 9, Manchester

\(^{41}\) See Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra for a detail on the ‘investment mindset’ which included higher than usual levels of care for products.
There were also various accounts in many of the groups of participants renovating furniture themselves or having friends who renovated furniture, showing that some people were willing to invest time and effort in used products. These accounts were often met with approval by others who liked the sound of furniture renovation and who claimed that they would do it themselves if only they had the skills and/or time, giving the impression that this was seen as a desirable lifestyle choice by some.

*W*: I have got a friend she goes round car boots and she looks for items that she can buy really cheap, or charity shops, and she can do them herself. She is very arty crafty and she likes creating. So if she can sand something down and give it a lick of paint, she is very into all that kind of thing.

*W*: Oh, that would be nice though, wouldn’t it?

*W*: Yes, I mean I haven’t got, I am no good at anything like that, but yes.

*W*: Yes, I have done that actually, taken old things, not as clever as that but yes, revamp it.

Participants appeared to gain considerable satisfaction from ‘doing up’ furniture and took evident pride in their achievements. Again, the difference between wooden furniture and other products was noticeable. Many more participants reported having the skills to “paint”, “varnish” or “sand down” items of furniture than had the skills to reupholster fabric or to repair electrical items. In fact, it was specifically mentioned on several occasions in this part of the research, and repeatedly in the first part of the product lifetimes research, that electrical goods were perceived by participants to be no longer amenable to home repair and were not worth having repaired professionally.  

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42 Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability (1), for Defra
6 Summary and conclusions

This section highlights the key themes to emerge from the research and presents brief summaries of the main findings.

6.1 Disposal

The present research echoes findings from earlier work which shows that consumers rarely appear to have a desire to reuse as the primary motivating factor in their disposal decisions. Instead, this research has found that participants were, on the whole, primarily motivated by a desire to get rid of unwanted bulky items as quickly and as conveniently as possible. Participants often liked it if, in the process, that avoided waste and/or helped others out, but the limited amount of effort they were often told us they were prepared to go to, to make sure waste was avoided or others helped out, suggested that these factors were likely to be mainly of secondary importance.

Whether or not a given item was ultimately disposed of for reuse appeared to depend upon a complex mixture of deeply held psychological factors and a diverse, geographically uneven and product-specific range of practical factors.

The figure below contains a summary of the key findings that related to attitudes and behaviours around disposing of bulky household items for reuse.

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43 Brook Lyndhurst (2009b), WR1204, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP and unpublished work for WRAP
Figure 5 Summary of findings on disposing of bulky items for reuse

| Items generally only disposed of for reuse if: | • unbroken and ‘good enough’  
• easy to get rid of (i.e. little effort required) |
| In practical terms, what was ‘easy’ and ‘good enough’ was related to: | • informal networks (belonging, size and composition)  
• local disposal channels (existence and awareness)  
• previous (good or bad) experience of channel  
• transport and labour/collection  
• storage space  
• raising cash  
• the product in question |
| In psychological terms, what was ‘easy’ and ‘good enough’ was related to: | • self-identity, social context and trust  
• attitudes towards risk and responsibility  
• attitudes towards wastefulness  
• thrift and financial prudence |
| The perceived benefits of disposing of items for reuse were: | • in helping others  
• but were not related to the environment |

It is important to note, first of all, that reuse discussions centred on unbroken and ‘good enough’ items. Participants in all nine groups realised that the potential to reuse was constrained by these factors and that this in turn was influenced by product reliability, durability and repairability.44

Furthermore, high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability pervaded most discussions about how to dispose of bulky items. This uncertainty and unpredictability appeared to be a direct result of the interaction of the complex web of practical and psychological factors set out above. There was no ‘typical’ or ‘obvious’ response to getting rid of unwanted bulky items from place to place; instead, a seemingly large number of variables had to align in order for reuse to occur.

These findings underscore the importance of the need for effective communications around reuse, particularly around which products are accepted by which channels and what condition those products have to be in in order to be ‘good enough’ to be reused.

44 This was also found in the first part of the product lifetimes research: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability, for Defra
Finally, it is worth highlighting that although this is qualitative research and as such cannot comment conclusively on the frequency of behaviour or volumes of products dealt with through the behaviours under consideration, there appears to be further scope for investigating the occurrence of all reuse behaviours to include reuse through informal channels. Previous quantitative research on the subject has suggested that the incidence of reuse behaviours in low (Curran and Williams, 2007; WRAP 2010 (unpublished) cited in Defra WR1204)). However, with the exception of research from Australia (Lane, R (2009)), all of the research of which we are aware, has excluded informal reuse channels from any estimates of volumes. Therefore, even though it might not be unreasonable to expect overall levels of reuse to be fairly low, our findings suggest that if informal channels are included, they are likely to be higher than estimates based only on items arising through formal channels. This would need to be tested quantitatively to produce more robust conclusions and in order to make any estimates as to the volumes of products reused informally.

6.2 Acquisition

Many participants reported preferring new items to used items.

Not only did participants prefer new, but by and large, they did not see why they would have to acquire used items – unless, of course, they could not afford to buy new. This meant that for many, there was no choice to be made between used and new items, as used items simply did not register on many participants’ radar.

In comparison to used items, new items were said to be ‘nice’, ‘clean’ and ‘reliable’, to be the reward for hard work, and a symbol of success.

Participants’ shopping habits also appeared strongly influential: they knew where to go shopping for new items and what to expect to find once they got there.

There were, however, exceptions to this general rule, as set out in the table below which summarises the main findings on attitudes and behaviours around the acquisition of used bulky household products.
Figure 6 Summary of findings on used items

| Buying new was the norm, but some experience of acquiring used, particularly: | • from family and friends  
• when setting up home  
• when in financial need  
• to find a bargain or an ‘alternative’ product  
• as a landlord of private, furnished, rented accommodation |
|---|---|
| A few practical barriers to acquiring used bulky items: | • low cost of new products  
• (perceived) lack of choice and inconvenience of channels  
• lack of experience of channel  
• no knowledge of where channel was located  
• questionable reliability of used items |
| Many psychological barriers to buying used bulky items: | • self-identity and social context, linked to stigma of neediness  
• trust, particularly in channel, but also in product  
• disgust/fear, mainly of psychological contamination, particularly of ‘intimate’ products  
• risk of financial loss, safety and reliability of product |
| The perceived benefits of acquiring used items were: | • very difficult for participants to identify  
• sometimes seen as part of the give and take of relationships with family and friends and occasionally charities  
• not generally seen to relate to the benefits of disposing of items for reuse  
• not related to the environment |
| Many treated used products as temporary or disposable: | • as a stop-gap to be replaced when a better new or used item could be afforded or found  
• but those who valued products, disliked waste and were resistant to updating, reported treating used items no differently to new items  
• but quality used furniture was expected to be kept for as long or longer than a new alternative |

The fact that participants felt that new items were more likely to be reliable, or at the very least less of a ‘gamble’ in terms of reliability than used items, led on to spontaneous discussions about product durability. It also led on to discussions around the importance of knowing the ‘history’ of a used product. This concept was further refined for white goods, and in particular for washing machines, into the need to have a ‘service history’ in the way that was commonplace for used cars.
Also of note, is the fact that not all used items were equal in participants’ eyes. The diagram below illustrates the range of acceptability in used products. This finding suggests that efforts to encourage the acquisition of certain used products more widely, might ultimately prove futile. It also suggests that significant and multi-faceted improvements in developing consumer confidence and interest in other used bulky items relative to new, particularly when it comes to used electrical items, would be needed if any significant change in acquisition behaviour is to be achieved.

The final finding of particular note in relation to used items relates to expectations for and treatment of used items relative to new. The indicative results from this research suggest that used items may be seen as temporary, particularly as stop gaps until something new can be afforded. Depending upon what they were, some participants also considered their used items as disposable and of low worth. “Quality” used furniture was the one major exception to this general finding. Further research on the lifetime and treatment of used items would be needed to test whether the indicative findings on this topic might apply more widely.

6.3 Channels
Participants’ experience of reuse channels varied greatly, with the one major exception of family and friends.

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45 This diagram only gives a qualitative impression of the overall reactions amongst group participants.
Family and friends were the preferred channel for many participants when it came to both disposing of and acquiring bulky items. Participants found it easy to try and dispose of items this way (although how often they were successful was less clear) and also found it acceptable to acquire items in this way. Knowing and trusting the person, and by extension the product, were very important drivers to acquiring used items from family and friends.

eBay and Gumtree followed, at some distance, behind family and friends as the next most commonly mentioned reuse channel. They seemed to be well-used and well-liked by many, particularly younger participants. However, some of those who had not used them occasionally reported fear of strangers and lack of trust in buyers, sellers and the used products they were offering.

Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity shops were particularly popular in one location (Hove), but less so in other places, for disposing of items and occasionally for acquiring items. Various issues relating to poor consumer experiences were brought up in every group. Particularly important was the problem of ‘knock-backs’, where people’s donations had been turned away. The experience of having a donation knocked-back created bad feel and sometimes led to participants reporting that they would not use that channel again.

Without exception, only a couple of participants in every group had experience of using Freecycle and only a couple more in each group had heard of it. Those same barriers as expressed for eBay and Gumtree relating to trust, risk and fear were also expressed by a few of those who had not experienced Freecycle, although it generally generated interest and positive responses in group discussions.

An extensive (perhaps exhaustive) range of other reuse channels were discussed. Out of these other channels, only a few had used second-hand shops and then only for acquisition rather than disposal. Experience of using all other reuse channels apart from those outlined above appeared to be low.

In terms of non-reuse channels, the ‘tip’, council collections (with the exception of London) and retailer take back were all liked for their convenience.

Greater visibility of material separation at household waste recycling centres may have had some impact on participants’ perceptions of how bulky waste is treated. The requirement to separate out waste was generally seen as a good thing and led to the ‘hope’ or ‘belief’ that the council were ‘recycling’ items. Where, in two locations, a ‘tip shop’ was mentioned, it led to the further belief that some items were being reused.
Consistent with other findings on the barriers to people using reuse channels, this research found the most significant barriers to be:

- **Cost** – a particular issue for acquisition. The low cost of new items provided little incentive for many participants to acquire used;
- **Information** – participants were often uncertain of what channels existed, where they were, what they would accept/sell and what the quality, reliability, lifetime (and hence value) of the items being sold was;
- **Co-ordination** – a particular issue for disposal. Participants had to contact different places to dispose of different types of bulky items for reuse. This represented an inconvenience to them, was perceived as time consuming and a hassle to organise;
- **Consistency** – another issue for disposal and linked to both information and co-ordination. Participants appeared not to have the appropriate knowledge to reuse items successfully and also appeared to have been receiving mixed messages about which channels would take which items and what condition they needed to be in to be suitable for reuse. As a result participants reported receiving ‘knock backs’ when they tried to dispose of items for reuse, which they found de-motivating and unlikely to encourage future attempts at reuse.

These barriers present a range of opportunities for improvements to people’s current experience of reuse that has the potential to lead to increases in the volume of bulky items that are reused. The opportunities we have identified are considered further in section 7.2 below.

One final point of note in respect of channels for reuse is that previous research has suggested that a distinction exists between those who donate items for reuse and those who acquire used items, with the implication that it is common for people to feel that donating for reuse is acceptable, but that acquiring used items is not. However, the findings from this research suggest that there may be a need to add more nuance to that picture.

We found that participants who had experience of neither disposal nor acquisition via a given channel perceived many more barriers (particularly around risk, trust and fear) to using that channel than participants who had at least some experience. It may therefore be that in encouraging more disposal for reuse, attitudes towards acquisition may become more open and the possibility of acquiring used items more ‘normal’.

This seems more likely for some channels than for others, for example, disposing of items via channels such as eBay, Gumtree and Freecycle to ‘people like me’ may make acquisition more of a possibility than disposing of items to Furniture Reuse Organisations or charity shops to ‘people like them’. However, even in the case of Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity shops it may be possible to make some moves towards normalising the acquisition of used items, as the findings from Hove seem to indicate. In this case, building upon the reputation of the charity or social enterprise as a trusted source may be a way forward. All
of these possibilities would require further research before any firm conclusions could be reached.
7 Insights and implications

While the purpose of this research was not to explore policy options directly, the intention was that the insights generated could feed into Defra’s evidence base for the development of policy. The following is our own interpretation of the implications of the research findings.

7.1 Strategic considerations

This section considers general strategic issues that have come out of our consideration of the research findings.

7.1.1. Fragmentation of the reuse sector and lack of a single reuse ‘market’

The research supports previous evidence of just how fragmented the reuse sector is. The following diagram illustrates the reuse ‘sector’ as experienced by households.

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*Brook Lyndhurst (2009b), WR1204, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP, particularly section 1.4.*
This fragmentation means that it will be important to be mindful of unintended consequences on different parts of the reuse ‘sector’ of different interventions to stimulate reuse. For example, if one part of the sector, such as retailer take-back is promoted, this may inadvertently reduce the opportunities for informal reuse networks and civil society organisations.

This suggests that a strategic approach may need to be adopted which considers how all the parts of the sector will work together to maximise reuse behaviours. Such an approach will require a robust evidence base. Evidence already exists in respect of bulky items channelled through MSW (Municipal Solid Waste).47 However, there appears to be a need for evidence to complement this on the type and volume of products going through informal channels so that an estimation of the relative potential of MSW channels compared with other forms of reuse can be made.

Our further observation is that there is no such thing as a single reuse ‘market’. Furthermore, we feel that the ‘markets’ that can be said to exist, can also be said to suffer from forms of ‘market failure’. Particularly important are:

- information failures, which relate both to recognition of channels and information on the quality of used products;
- externalities, which mean that the relative life-cycle environmental costs and benefits of new and used products are not reflected in their respective prices; and
- lack of access to services, or geographically uneven provision of services.

Our view is that together, the above features result in:

- ineffective price signals;
- high search costs;
- lack of visibility of services;
- lack of visibility of behaviours, which weakens the development of a social norm that reuse is the ‘expected’ thing to do with bulky household items;
- poor choices, especially around disposal, where lack of clarity over what is ‘good enough’ to reuse may either deter donation or lead to ‘knock backs’ if product quality is too low for the recipient (either an individual or organisation).48

7.1.2. The effect of (lack of) repair services on reuse

This research and the first part of the product lifetimes research both found that the perceived disappearance of a repair industry from the UK was a barrier for participants to keeping products in use, by whatever means. As regards reuse, lack of care and repair can

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47 WRAP (2010), unpublished
48 Noted in WR1204. The present research confirms that both perceptions are indeed barriers to effective reuse behaviour.
undermine the quality of an item at the point of disposal but, more importantly, it can also fuel a perception that broken items have absolutely no value.  

7.1.3. The effect of (lack of) product durability and design for repair on reuse

This was also a feature of the first part of the product lifetimes research. Low levels of product durability and products which are difficult and expensive to mend, due to both the way they have been designed and the cost of spare parts, were perceived by participants to act as barriers to reuse. This was noted by participants in terms of disposal (the point made above that broken products are perceived as worthless because the cost of repair is prohibitive) and also acquisition (low product durability means that used items may only have short remaining lives and as such were unattractive to participants).

Taken as a whole, these general, strategic observations have led us to the conclusion that there are likely to be significant potential opportunities for encouraging reuse. Our thoughts on what some of these opportunities might be are considered in the following section.

7.2 Potential opportunities for encouraging reuse

The following discussion considers the findings from this research within the context of the reuse sector as a whole to suggest potential opportunities for encouraging higher levels of household reuse of bulky products, based on our own interpretation of the findings. All the potential opportunities outlined below would require further research in order to assess their potential and cost effectiveness.

7.2.1. Opportunities for improving the reuse services offered by civil society organisations

Charities and social enterprises

Recognition and use of Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity outlets for bulky and particularly electrical products, was fairly low in most of the focus group discussions (with the notable exception of Hove). Furniture Reuse Organisations have performed a key role in the UK reuse sector in providing appliances and furniture to low income households. An important question raised by the research is the extent to which these organisations can grow beyond their current niche and what might be needed for them to do so (for example, an increase in the number of Furniture Reuse Organisations, an increase in capacity or a shift in marketing to different consumer segments).

Findings from this research suggest that if outlets in this sector were to look, feel and function more like mainstream shops, it might help them grow beyond their current niche.

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49 This was discussed in more detail in the first phase of research, which also considers Cooper’s similar findings.
50 Defra Household waste prevention evidence review WR1204.
Improving the presentation of products (to make them look ‘as new and shiny’\textsuperscript{51} as possible), providing an indication of their ‘service history’ and expected remaining lifetime, safety assurances and product specification information, as well as potentially locating outlets selling used items in mainstream shopping areas, may all help tackle some of the barriers to reuse identified in this research. International evidence from countries where Furniture Reuse Organisations and charity shops have a less stigmatised and down-at-heel image, may provide important evidence on the potential for this.\textsuperscript{52}

**Freecycle**

This was mentioned by one or two participants in every group. It was generally positively received by those participants who had not heard about it before, although some participants raised some concerns relating mainly to trust and practical aspects. Those focus group participants who were supportive of the concept of Freecycle suggested that use of Freecycle could be improved by communicating its existence more widely.

### 7.2.2. Opportunities for improving the reuse services offered by local authorities

Local authorities play a key role in providing bulky waste collection services and facilities for receiving bulky waste at local household waste recycling centres. As such, local authorities have the potential to influence how households think about reuse through the way in which bulky waste services are presented. Based on the authors’ expertise and research experience, bulky waste can often be viewed as a cost rather than an opportunity by local authorities. Some of the services on offer by local authorities may contribute to the fragmented experience that households have of trying to dispose of bulky items, and there may therefore be further potential to learn from the best examples and to roll out good practice more widely.\textsuperscript{53}

With this in mind, the following points reflect the criticisms of current services made by participants and our interpretation of the implications of that criticism in the light of wider evidence and knowledge about the reuse sector.

**‘One-stop-shops’: a partnership between local authorities and civil society organisations**

This research has found that a key barrier to donating for reuse is the fragmentation of reuse services. Previous research and commentary on the reuse sector (for example, work reviewed in WR1204) has suggested that a one-stop shop approach to collecting bulky waste has the potential to increase capture. In some examples of this model, reuse rates are enhanced by channelling all bulky disposal through one channel. An approach like this may address some of the uncertainty and inconsistency around individuals’ disposal decisions which involve highly variable understandings of what is ‘good enough’ to reuse, as expressed by participants in this project.

\textsuperscript{51} Woman, group 2, London

\textsuperscript{52} Brook Lyndhurst, 2009b, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP

\textsuperscript{53} Brook Lyndhurst (2009), WR1204, Household waste prevention evidence review, L3 m3-6, for Defra WREP
Beyond the idea of a one-stop-shop, finding ways to encourage better links between different reuse market segments (including private) could be explored more generally. For example, some local authorities in England have developed service contracts or partnerships with civil society organisations to provide a more joined-up and customer-focused service aimed at increasing rates of bulky item reuse, and there could be important lessons learnt from these examples which could be applied elsewhere.54

**Improving bulky waste collection services**

Many of the participants in this research who had used council collection services complained about the window of time for collection, which meant items had to be left outside for a number of days and were unsightly and resulted in damage (from vandalism or weathering). The condition of these items, and therefore the chance of them being suitable for reuse could be improved through offering shorter and more reliable collection windows.

Participants also disliked being charged for bulky waste collection to the point that free collections appeared to offer an incentive to use the service, while charging provided an immediate disincentive. However, it was difficult to separate out participants’ dislike of being charged from their dissatisfaction with the service they were being charged for. It may be that people would be more willing to pay for reuse services if such services were made more use-friendly. This was not, however, something we were able to research directly and further investigation of the relationship between customer satisfaction and willingness to pay in respect of reuse services would need to be undertaken before any firm conclusions could be drawn.

**7.2.3. Opportunities for improving the impact of regulation on reuse**

It became clear from the research that standards for electrical and fire safety work very well in the market for new products but may act as barriers in the second hand market. This is not to do with quality assurance to buyers of second hand goods but in terms of what can be donated for reuse, or is perceived to be ‘good enough’ to give away.

- **Electrical safety regulation** may prevent donation of items through some reuse channels and, even where these items might be accepted, there tends to be a perception they are not accepted;
- **Fire safety regulations** may prevent donation of sofas and similar soft furniture because the labels may be ‘lost’ by the time disposal occurs (and there also seemed to be little awareness amongst participants of what these labels looked like). If it is not the case already, perhaps such labels could be integrated into the manufacture of the product so that they are permanent.

Our short exploration of reactions to the idea of a **quality mark** for reuse was inconclusive. While there was certainly some expressed interest in a ‘service history’ type approach, our

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54 See for example, http://www.bulkybobs.co.uk/ and http://liverpool.gov.uk/bins-and-recycling/bulky-item-collection/
sense was that this may not be enough to overcome other reasons for resisting second hand purchase. Additionally, participants raised the point that if quality marks, guarantees or service histories had the effect of raising the price of second hand goods, then this may, perversely, create a new barrier to acquisition - cost. Testing out the effects of specific interventions on specific products with consumers would be necessary to draw any firmer conclusions.

7.2.4. Opportunities for dialogue with retailers and manufacturers

Retailer take-back and reuse
Participants liked the convenience offered by retailer take-back, in which the delivery of the new item was coordinated with the removal of the old. Whether this kind of take-back service could be extended, perhaps through voluntary agreements, to include other bulky items, particularly furniture, may be worth considering. If this were to happen, it would be important to understand (and if necessary seek to influence) how greater involvement of retailers in reuse would work alongside the activities that are already being delivered by charities and social enterprises.

It may be that retail chains could also have a further role to play in helping to improve the image of used products. For example, at least one well-known furniture retailer is now selling some of its own second-hand products in its Swedish stores.55 This may be a model that could usefully be promoted with other retailers more widely.

The design, manufacture and labelling of a ‘service history’
Parallels were drawn in almost every group between used washing machines and the second hand car market. The idea of a ‘service history’ was well rooted in participants’ expectations towards used cars and this model is perhaps transferable to other second hand goods (though would need to be researched further). The findings here suggest that there may be a desire for a standard means of assessing the expected lifetime of washing machines (the parallel being between miles on the clock and number of washes) and care during use (the parallel being between a car’s service history and servicing and maintenance history of washing machines).

We are aware that this type of idea has already been taken forward in respect of the design of toasters and may therefore have the potential to be explored with product designers and manufacturers more widely.56

7.2.5. Further opportunities for dialogue

A potentially very interesting, area emerged from the focus group discussions, around which we have not seen much prior evidence57 – namely the relationship between private renting

55 See http://inhabitat.com/ikea-now-selling-second-hand-furniture-online/
57 Though it may be an aspect that has been considered by resource networks such as FRN or by WRAP – we have not investigated further.
in the housing market and reuse activity. Several participants talked about their landlords providing second-hand replacements for broken appliances. If this is true, and is widespread, then it may bring into play another route for encouraging the purchase of reconditioned bulky goods, or even for new product service models (e.g. for carpets, TVs and major appliances\textsuperscript{58}). The buy-to-let market could be worth considering here, though the potential would need to be explored with further research.

Finally, new product service models may also be applicable for procurement in the public sector, though this would also need to be explored further.

7.2.6. Opportunities for engaging, influencing and communicating with the public

While important, improvements in reuse services and reuse markets are unlikely on their own to fully engage households in higher levels of reuse activity. This research has revealed much uncertainty and some deep psychological barriers to reuse behaviour, which is where consumer engagement and communication have a role to play as part of the overall package of interventions. Key issues worth considering included the following:

- Participants had a variable and incomplete knowledge about locally available channels. This not only prevented access to reuse at a practical level but also seemed to shape perceptions about what is possible or expected. In particular, households may be unclear about what different reuse channels will and will not accept, meaning that the ‘tip’ may often be seen as the ‘only’ option.

- Disposal for reuse was not a normalised behaviour (unlike recycling), while second hand purchase was widely discounted by participants for a variety of reasons, often related to status or identity. In this case, the research points to a need to re-position activities that lead to reuse as legitimate behaviours within the context of a society which values newness so highly.

Further quantitative research to explore some of the themes identified in this report may also make it possible to develop a ‘typology’ of attitudes and behaviours towards reuse that could then be used to identify which products/aspects of bulky reuse present the strongest opportunities and to target consumer messaging as effectively as possible. The main ‘types’ of attitudes and behaviours found in this research that would need further testing are:

- Active avoidance of reuse;
- Prioritisation of convenience;
- Pragmatic value-seeking;
- ‘Alternative’ consumption.

\textsuperscript{58} Such product service systems are included in ERM’s investigation into opportunities for extending product lifetimes, currently nearing completion for Defra.
Further detail on these ‘types’ of behaviour is included at Annex 3.

In terms of more specific suggestions for possible themes of engagement with the public on reuse, our interpretation of the findings suggests that the following may be of particular significance, although once again, further testing would be required to understand how widely generalisable these themes are to the population as a whole:

- **Build on positive feelings around informal exchange by stressing reuse as giving unwanted things ‘a good home’ or as ‘helping someone out’**. The idea of reuse triggered discussions around pro-social values in many of the focus group discussions. Some participants reported feeling very warmly about informal exchange, particularly between family and friends, which could perhaps be deployed as a positive motif in the presentation of reuse behaviours.

- **Develop trust to reduce perceptions of risk in acquiring used products**. Having trust in a channel and a product was very important to participants if they were to even consider acquiring used bulky items. There may be a role for improving trust and so reducing perceptions of risk by providing quality assurances on products. There may also be a role for civil society organisations to promote the trust that many seem to have in their ‘brands’, for example, by promoting their careful selection of products, any tests that they carry out and any guarantees that they offer.

- **Reduce the stigma attached to the acquisition of used items**. The findings from this research suggest that there may be some potential for developing the image of “alternative”, “cool” and aspirational aspects of “old”, “vintage”, “retro” or “quality” products. This is likely to apply more to the reuse of items of furniture than to bulky electrical waste.

### 7.2.7. Concluding comments

Overall, we felt that even though levels of reuse might currently be fairly low, that there were some very positive findings on reuse to come out of the focus group discussions. Whilst we judge that the issue of the price and attractiveness of new products represents a significant barrier to the purchase of used goods, the findings from this research suggest that there is much that could be done to promote greater reuse of bulky household products, particularly in terms of how people ‘get rid’ of unwanted items, but also to some, albeit smaller extent, in terms of what they buy.
Annex 1: Recruitment Criteria

Table 1 – Recruitment criteria for all nine discussion groups

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| 1   | London        | ‘Positive Greens’ and ‘Concerned Consumers’ | • X4-6 males/X4-6 females  
• At least X2 aged 20-34 years  
• At least X2 aged 35-50 years  
• At least X2 aged 51-70 years  
• At least X2 AB  
• At least X2 C1C2  
• At least X2 DE  
• A good mix of housing tenancy (owners & renters)  
• Mix of ‘Positive Greens’ & ‘Concerned Consumers’  
• Mix of reuse behaviours for bulky furniture/electrical items (max X5 with no experience of acquiring or getting rid of items through reuse options) |
| 2   | London        | ‘Waste Watchers’, ‘Sideline Supporters’ and ‘Cautious Participants’ | • X4-6 males/X4-6 females  
• At least X2 aged 20-34 years  
• At least X2 aged 35-50 years  
• At least X2 aged 51-70 years  
• At least X2 AB  
• At least X2 C1C2  
• At least X2 DE  
• A good mix of housing tenancy (owners & renters)  
• Mix of ‘Waste Watchers’, ‘Sideline Supporters’ and ‘Cautious Participants’  
• Mix of reuse behaviours for bulky furniture/electrical items (max X5 with no experience of acquiring or getting rid of items through reuse options) |
| 3   | Milton Keynes | ‘Stalled Starters’ and ‘Honestly Disengaged’ | • X4-6 males/X4-6 females  
• At least X2 aged 20-34 years  
• At least X2 aged 35-50 years  
• At least X2 aged 51-70 years  
• At least X2 AB  
• At least X2 C1C2  
• At least X2 DE  
• A good mix of housing tenancy (owners & renters)  
• Mix of ‘Stalled Starters’ and ‘Honestly Disengaged’  
• Mix of reuse behaviours for bulky furniture/electrical items (max X5 with no experience of acquiring or getting rid of items through reuse options) |
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<td>• A good mix of housing tenancy (owners &amp; renters)</td>
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<td>• Mix of ‘Stalled Starters’ and ‘Honestly Disengaged’</td>
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<td>• Mix of reuse behaviours for bulky furniture/electrical items (max X5 with no experience of acquiring or getting rid of items through reuse options)</td>
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<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>‘Sideline Supporters’ and ‘Cautious Participants’</th>
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<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>• X4-6 males/X4-6 females</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• At least X2 aged 20-34 years</td>
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<td>• At least X2 aged 51-70 years</td>
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<td>• (Remainder to fall out naturally)</td>
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<td>• X4-6 ‘Sideline Supporters’</td>
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<td>Reading</td>
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<th>9</th>
<th>Manchester</th>
<th>‘Positive Greens’, Waste Watchers and ‘Concerned Consumers’</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• X3-4 ‘Positive Greens’</td>
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<td>• X3-4 ‘Concerned Consumers’</td>
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<td>• X3-4 ‘Waste Watchers’</td>
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Annex 2: Word Cloud

This word cloud was made by entering the text from all nine discussion group transcripts (excluding the facilitator’s speech) into wordle.net. It presents an image of the words most commonly mentioned by group participants, with the words appearing in the largest text having been used most frequently during the discussions.

Certain alterations were made to the transcript text to make the end result more insightful. For example, although common words were already excluded by wordle™, a range of other commonly used words, including numbers, were also removed from the transcripts. Where verbs appeared in multiple tenses, or nouns appeared in both their singular and plural forms, these were generally amalgamated into one form. In the case of verbs, the most commonly used form was applied to all the others and in the case of nouns, the singular version was applied.
Annex 3: Typology of reuse attitudes and behaviours

Ideas for developing a typology of attitudes and behaviour around reuse, presented with supporting evidence from this research.

1. To what extent do people actively avoid reuse?

This research found that:

- Disposal for reuse was not even considered by some participants due to issues around fear of causing offence to the intended recipient or fear of embarrassment from having the item rejected;
- This was closely related to reported reasons for not acquiring used items – because it implied neediness and carried with it a social stigma. Concerns about contamination, lack of trust in those donating items and in the perceived quality of used products, further reinforced a general preference for new products amongst some participants;
- These reactions were particularly noticeable in participants who were, or who had been in the past, from lower socio-economic groups.

2. To what extent do people prioritise convenience?

This research found that:

- Disposing of items for reuse and acquiring used items was considered by some only if they represented convenient options. Family and friends may sometimes have been offered first refusal, but no significant effort would be made to see the items reused and items may generally have been viewed as unwanted and worthless. The ‘tip’ or council collection would then be chosen as the default options;
- If family and friends were not given first refusal, then participants prioritising convenience tended to send items to the tip or arrange for them to be collected by the council as a matter of preference;
- For acquisition, new items were preferred and there were low levels of experience of acquiring used items from any channel other than through family and friends. In group discussions, although there may have been polite, positive reactions to other participants’ reported experiences of acquiring used products, there were few signs, if any, that participants prioritising convenience would change their consumption patterns in favour of acquiring used items. The low cost and perceived convenience of buying new made used alternatives appear unattractive;
- These reactions were particularly noticeable in slightly older participants from higher socio-economic groups.
3. **To what extent do people pragmatically seek out value?**

This research found that:

- Some participants reported trying to sell unwanted items as a first port of call and then giving away or throwing away those items that could not be sold. Online channels and occasionally second hand or pawn shops were popular outlets for disposal, and raising cash was a strong motivating factor for product reuse;
- Similarly, some participants reported browsing online channels when acquiring bulky items in order to find products for less money than they would cost new, but without necessarily having the intention of keeping any used items bought in this way for long;
- Participants reacting in this way to the discussions around reuse tended to be younger.

4. **To what extent do people carry out ‘alternative’ consumption behaviours including extensive informal exchanges of products, bargain-hunting, making-do, and mending?**

This research found that:

- Some participants reported liking the idea of ‘recycling’ items within networks or through charities. This seemed to mean that unwanted items were often given away freely to others. ‘Recycling’ resonated with tones of sharing and community far more than it did with environmental concern. ‘Recycling’ (understood in the sense of community) appeared to be more front of mind amongst bargain hunters as a primary motivation for this kind of behaviour.
- In turn, used items were often acquired at no or little cost and pride in what had been hunted out was often expressed. There were few indications of genuine neediness amongst participants who appeared to envisage reuse in this way, but rather of a desire for thrift, to be good providers, and to avoid ‘wasting’ money or getting into debt for no good reason – used items were seen as at least as good, if not better, than new alternatives.
- Participants reacting in this way to the idea of reuse were all women, but did not come from any one Defra segment, socio-economic group or age range.
Annex 4: Bibliography


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